PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 356

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
6 November—17 November 2000

£70

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6 November 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 356**

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 6 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the Greenham and Crookham Commons Bill shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next session of Parliament, provided that notice of their intention to do so is lodged in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present session and that all fees due up to that date have been paid;

That on the fifth sitting day in the next session the bill shall be presented to the House by deposit in the Private Bill Office;

That a declaration signed by the agent shall be annexed to the bill, stating that it is the same in every respect as the bill presented in this House in the present session;

That on the next sitting day following presentation, the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay the bill on the Table of the House;

That in the next session the bill shall be deemed to have passed through every stage through which it has passed in the present session, and shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having passed those stages;

That no further fees shall be charged to such stages;

That all petitions relating to the bill which stand referred to the committee on the bill, shall stand referred to the committee on the bill in the next session;

That no petitioners shall be heard before the committee unless their petition has been presented within the time provided for petitioning or has been deposited pursuant to Private Business Standing Order 126(b);

That, in relation to the bill, Private Business Standing Order 127 shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against bill)" were omitted.—[*The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Theatres (Market Towns)

1. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What proposals he has to support theatre venues in market towns. [135336]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): This is a matter for the Arts Council of England—as the main funding body for the arts in England—in collaboration with the regional arts boards, to decide within the context of its current review of regional theatre. The Arts Council has already announced additional theatre funding from 2002-03 and decisions on how this will be distributed will be made in the near future.

Mr. Heath: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply. I am thinking of the Merlin theatre in Frome, which is excellent but which failed, unfortunately, in a recent lottery bid. Does he agree that the lottery process is not necessarily the right way of providing for capital improvements to smaller theatre venues, precisely because it is a lottery? We need a mechanism to ensure

that funds are made available not only to the big—the regionally important—venues, but to those that provide an essential service to local people.

Mr. Howarth: I would counsel the hon. Gentleman and his constituents who are involved with the Merlin theatre and arts centre not to despair of the lottery. I appreciate the disappointment felt by Merlin when it was unsuccessful in the previous lottery application to the Arts Council. I know that the South-West Arts Board tried to give helpful advice, and I understand that Merlin is putting together a new bid to South-West Arts—that organisation now has more resources to distribute under the regional arts lottery project. I wish Merlin well in that application. Of course, from 2002, the Arts Council and the regional arts boards will be able to start to use the extra £25 million revenue funding—the huge increase that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has provided for theatre.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my hon. Friend consider visiting the new theatre at Milton Keynes? Within a year of opening, it is achieving 85 per cent. occupancy and is a splendid example of the use of public money in extending regional theatre. Will he spread the lessons to be learned from the Milton Keynes theatre to other less successful regional theatre venues?

Mr. Howarth: It would give me nothing but pleasure to accept my hon. Friend's invitation. I greatly look forward to having the opportunity to visit Milton Keynes. I am sure that the lessons that can be learned from the success of that project will be eagerly followed by others elsewhere, as she suggests.

Digital Television

2. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): What action he is taking to promote the take-up of digital television. [135337]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 31 October that we have been working closely with broadcasters, manufacturers, retailers and consumer groups to ensure that viewers get accurate and sensible information. A set of clear and simple messages has been agreed and will be used to promote and encourage take-up.

Miss Begg: Does my hon. Friend agree that internet access is an important part of digital television? Hopefully, it offers a mechanism to ensure that there will be a narrowing between the information haves and have-nots. Will she ensure that internet access forms part of the standard digital package on offer to consumers?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. She will be aware that the Government are most anxious to ensure universal access to the internet and also to ensure that we do not end up with an information-rich/information-poor society. Currently, we know that one in five homes already have digital television, which, of course, gives them access to the internet. Perhaps most interestingly, 50 per cent. of homes where there are children have digital television.

However, the Government continue to monitor the situation closely. We have set up a viewers panel, which will meet for the first time at the end of November. We shall certainly take into consideration the point raised by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The hon. Lady will be aware that the United States has set an analogue switch-off date of 2006, while Italy and Germany have set a clear date of 2010. Does she agree that her conditional date for analogue switch-off will not encourage the growth of digital technology in this country? Furthermore, is she aware that the provision of internet television cannot be a reality until we have broad band throughout the United Kingdom? We certainly do not have that at present.

Janet Anderson: I hope, Mr. Speaker, that you and the House will bear with me if I set out our proposals for analogue switch-over. The matter is very important to us all.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have set out two crucial tests that must be met before the analogue signal is fully switched to digital: availability and affordability. Under the availability test, almost all viewers who can currently receive analogue television must be able to receive the main free-to-air channels digitally. Under the affordability test, consumers must not face unacceptable switching costs when converting to digital services for either their televisions or their video recorders.

As I said in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), we have set up a viewers panel constantly to review the position. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport set a target date between 2006 and 2010, and we will constantly keep it under review. However, the countries to which the hon. Gentleman referred are having second thoughts about the dates that they have set.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Rapson.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): My question has already been answered, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): That was a very rare piece of honesty.

Conservative Members will support any sensible measure to enhance the take-off of digital television, but is not the demand for news an important spur to the take-up of digital services? Has the Minister seen the article by John Kampfner, the former BBC political correspondent, in *The Guardian* today, in which he blows the whistle on the bullying tactics of Government spin doctors? I hope that the Minister will join me in condemning such tactics.

Does the Minister think that it is part of the Government's remit in the digital age to tell broadcasters how to organise their news schedules? Does giving the green light to a major hike in the BBC licence fee to pay for digital services give Ministers the right to ordain

when programmes are transmitted? We know that the Government want to dictate the content of news bulletins. Do they also want to dictate when they are scheduled?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I think that the hon. Gentleman has been on uppers again.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right.

I never cease to be amazed by the way the hon. Gentleman tries to manoeuvre his current pet subject on to the back of a question that is not really about it. I shall however try to answer his points. The Government do not think that it is part of their remit to dictate what broadcasters should put in their news bulletins. However, it is perfectly reasonable and acceptable for individuals to express their views. As to the future of public service broadcasting, he will have to wait for the White Paper that will be published at the end of the year.

Sports Coaching

3. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What steps he is taking to give schoolchildren greater access to qualified coaching in the major sports. [135338]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We announced earlier this year that we would double the funding available for the school sports co-ordinators programme. The additional £60 million that we are providing over the next three years means that the 1,000 co-ordinators whom we will have in place by 2004 will also have funding to buy in coaches and officials. High-quality coaching goes hand in hand with our desire to see more competitive sports played in schools and between schools and to give many more pupils the chance to play sport.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that, if we are to harness the talents and sporting enthusiasm of every child, we need more sports co-ordinators and fully qualified coaching staff in our schools as well as new and improved sporting facilities? Will he confirm that the money for the co-ordinators that he has just told us about will not be taken from the additional money announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for extending school sports facilities?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of ensuring that good-quality coaching is available to pupils. One of the great tragedies of school sport in this country is the decline that came about as a result of the dispute that the previous Government had with teachers in the mid-1980s. We are now in the process of putting that right.

I can indeed confirm to my hon. Friend that the revenue funding that we announced to double the schools sport co-ordinators programme is revenue from the Exchequer. It is not the same fund as the prospective lottery money that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced at the end of September. We will provide £750 million to improve school sport facilities from the new opportunities fund, and we are proud to propose today, in the consultation document that we have launched, that that money should be spent. We asked Conservative Members whether or not they would cut that money if they came into government.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Although I welcome the Secretary of State's comments about improving sports coaching in schools, does he not recognise that the biggest decline in school sports came about because, for about 30 years, Labour spokesmen and Labour activists were against all competitive sport in schools? The Government are now trying to go two steps forward when he and his predecessors took us three steps back.

Mr. Smith: No, I would not agree. The two major reasons for the decline of sport in our schools over the past 20 years are, first, the withdrawal of teachers from after-school sporting activity as a direct result of their dispute with the previous Government, and secondly, the previous Government's presiding over a bargain-basement sell-off of school playing fields.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Although the interest given to sports in schools is encouraging and, indeed, welcome, quality coaching in some sports is done away from school—I am thinking of swimming. I have constituents whose children are making a wonderful grade in swimming but need assistance. Can we have some advice on how such people can obtain specialist coaching away from school in sports that are part of the school curriculum?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which, together with Sport England, we are addressing. Swimming, along with games, gymnastics, dance, athletics and outdoor-adventure activities, is a national curriculum entitlement for school children at key stages 1 to 4. That means that those activities are a statutory part of the education of every child in this country. We must ensure that that education, training and coaching are as good as possible.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that fitter children get better examination results? If he does, does he further agree that it is unacceptable that children aged between 11 and 16 receive on average only 20 minutes' physical activity a week? If he agrees that that is so, as statistics show, will he explain how in an already overcrowded national curriculum more time will be found for children to undertake physical activity?

Mr. Smith: I certainly agree with the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question. Fitter children who engage in sport undoubtedly perform better in their academic work. That has been proved by study after study. Engaging in sport also makes children healthier and, incidentally, helps to curb anti-social behaviour. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I are determined to increase the amount of sporting activity available to children, both within the curriculum and after school and at weekends. Both are important objectives. The school sports co-ordinators programme that we are implementing will help to achieve them.

Football Supporters' Trusts

4. **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): How many mutual football supporters' trusts have been set up with the help of Supporters Direct. [135339]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Supporters Direct has assisted in the establishment of seven supporters' trusts to date, and has helped set up a further six trusts that are agreed in principle. Supporters Direct has received inquiries and requests for advice from groups representing supporters at a total of 85 football clubs in the FA premier league, in the football league and in non-league football. It is also in discussion with supporters' groups in other sports. That is not bad for two months' work.

Mr. Love: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. One of the seven trusts that he mentioned is at my local club, Enfield Town, which has also elected a supporter-director to the board. The chairman recently called the trust unrepresentative, which I believe reflects its growing influence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such a structure should be spread throughout sport? If he does, what measures will he take to publicise it further?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend rightly points to the progress at Enfield. As he points out, not only has a supporters' trust been established but a supporter-director has been elected to the board. Most football clubs at which supporter-directors have been elected and supporters' trusts have been established have warmly welcomed the formal participation of supporters in the running of the club. I certainly hope that football clubs and, indeed, clubs in other sports will recognise that the direct involvement of supporters in the running, decision making and financing of their club is only to the clubs' benefit, because, after all, supporters are the lifeblood of a great football club.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): We welcome the right hon. Gentleman's news and we wonder whether he has also sought football supporters' views regarding the European Commission's attempt to invade our pitch by ruling that the football transfer system is illegal. Does he agree that supporters' loyalty to their football team applies equally to players, that fans are unhappy when good players leave, and that fans will lose the most if their team is impoverished or ceases to exist because the current system is scrapped? Does he agree with our Football Association, football league and premier league that any new transfer and contracts system must ensure that players honour their obligations, that opportunities to break contract are strictly prescribed, and that smaller clubs are properly compensated for the transfer of talented young players to bigger clubs?

Mr. Smith: For once, I agree absolutely with everything the hon. Gentleman says. The matter is one that we have discussed with football authorities and supporters, as well as with our fellow European Governments. We believe that, although the current transfer system is by no means perfect, rewarding clubs for the investment that they make in players and ensuring that money cascades down from larger, richer clubs to smaller, less wealthy clubs are important aspects of the system and values that we should try to retain.

Millennium Dome

5. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What discussions he has had with local authorities in east London and the Greater London Authority about the future of the millennium dome. [135340]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The matter is, of course, one for the competition team. Throughout the competition process, the competition team has involved and informed east London and Thames gateway organisations, including local authorities and community groups. Frequent consultation with the London borough of Greenwich has featured throughout the competition process. Following the withdrawal of Dome Europe from the competition process on 11 September, my noble and learned Friend Lord Falconer, sole shareholder of the New Millennium Experience Company, has met representatives of the London borough of Greenwich. The Greater London Authority and the London borough of Greenwich will be fully involved in any future planning application for the dome's future use.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful for that reply. Will the hon. Lady provide an assurance that, if the dome has to have recourse to yet more public money, not only will there be full consultation with the borough of Greenwich and the Greater London Authority, but Parliament will be fully informed in advance? Will she give a further assurance that, if a wind-up takes place and more public money is needed, she will come to the House and make clear how much is required? Furthermore, will her noble and learned Friend Lord Falconer do the honourable thing and resign?

Janet Anderson: Before he made his final, cheap, point, which I shall treat in the manner it deserves, I was beginning to think that the hon. Gentleman was approaching the subject in the spirit we expect of all parties. I assure him that we shall continue to keep the House fully informed. The New Millennium Experience Company is satisfied that it has sufficient funding to carry through trading until the end of the year. He will know that we are engaged in discussions with Legacy plc about the future of the dome. I am sure that he does not expect me to predict the outcome of those negotiations; however, I can say that we hope to be able to make an announcement very soon.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives' constant attempts to make political capital out of the dome ring hollow, given their part in setting it up? Does my hon. Friend also agree that although all alternatives for the future of the dome must be considered, it is essential that the dome remain

in existence? We must find an alternative that will ensure that. Does she agree that it has already become almost an icon building, and one that should be maintained?

Janet Anderson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I remind the House that the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) who, sadly, is not in his place today, said:

> Our task is to maximise the national gain and recognise that this is a non-party-controversial issue; it is an all-party endeavour.—[*Official Report*, 28 January 1998; Vol. 305, c. 271.]

I only wish that Opposition Members would take the same view.

My hon. Friend is right. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's official spokesman confirmed today that, in his view, the dome is an important part of the regeneration of the Greenwich peninsula. *[Interruption.]* If Opposition Members will listen for a moment, they may learn something about the regenerative effect of the dome. The Government are the first to acknowledge that the dome has not been the success for which everyone hoped, although it has had more than 5 million visitors. We should not overlook what has been achieved. The dome is a vital contributor to the development of the Greenwich peninsula, and has already brought considerable regenerative benefits to Greenwich and the wider Thames gateway.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) asked earlier whether local authorities had been consulted. Greenwich council predicts that 30,000 permanent jobs will be created in the borough of Greenwich within seven years as a result of the investment in the peninsula. Perhaps Opposition Members would rather those jobs had not been created. I am sure that the electors of Greenwich will be listening carefully to them today.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): For once, I shall give the Minister some all-party support. There is no doubt that the original motivation for the dome was the regeneration of that part of the Thames, and I hope that she will continue it. I am glad that Nomura has backed out of its bid, so there are no more beer-swilling concepts of leisure developments there. Will the hon. Lady please make sure that the Legacy bid is taken seriously? It is an opportunity to build a science park there and to help smaller companies. I hope that the negotiations are progressing as well as she suggested, so that an early conclusion can be reached.

Janet Anderson: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Although I cannot predict the outcome, the Legacy bid is interesting and exciting. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need an early conclusion. I can confirm that we have been having discussions with Legacy plc, the remaining bidder from the final shortlist of two, and the competition team is currently analysing the proposal from Legacy. I cannot predict what the outcome will be, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we want an early solution and we will make an announcement shortly.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my hon. Friend congratulate the national botanic garden of Wales, which is also backed by the Millennium Commission, and has just exceeded all expectations by—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady might try to pick another question, as that does not relate to the one before us.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Will the Minister now treat the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) in the manner that it deserves, and answer it? Does she think that Lord Falconer should resign?

Janet Anderson: Lord Falconer is doing an extremely good job. The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no.

Mr. Ainsworth: We will see whether that opinion still holds on Thursday, when the National Audit Office report is published. On regeneration in east London, will the Minister confirm reports that the chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company has told Ministers that the site could be worth at least £300 million more if the dome were taken down?

The Secretary of State is the chairman of the Millennium Commission. He may be sitting there pretending that it is nothing to do with him, but surely he has a duty to salvage whatever is possible from this disastrous year? With growing doubts about the viability of the deal with Legacy, would it not be better—would it not, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), "maximise the national gain"—to invite bids for the site with or without the dome—or is £300 million a price worth paying for the sake of new Labour's vanity?

Janet Anderson: I can only say that I am not aware of any such advice from the chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company. I repeat to the hon. Member that we, in common with local authorities in the Greenwich area, consider the building very much part of the area's regeneration. That should be taken into account.

Regional Television

7. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): What plans he has to address regional anomalies in television reception where viewers cannot receive appropriate regional variations of free-to-air broadcasts. [135342]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I understand the reason for the question—my hon. Friend has a particular problem in his constituency. It is difficult to know how to resolve it, because the spectrum available for the improvement of terrestrial television services is currently limited. It is difficult to prevent regional anomalies from occurring through analogue and other terrestrial means. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I understand

the problem, which is also experienced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman). If there is any way we can resolve it, we shall try to do so.

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for the interest that she has shown in the matter, and especially for coming to my constituency, where she heard how irritating it is to be interested in the news of Norfolk but to have to watch news that is targeted at Yorkshire.

Under the previous Government, when digital services, which provide new possibilities for dealing with the problems, were introduced, my constituents were ignored. Will my hon. Friend give me a promise that I can take back to them—that they will not be ignored in the White Paper or subsequent legislation, and that every attempt will be made to ensure that seizing the opportunities of the digital era means that we can put the problem behind us?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right. I congratulate him on the tireless campaign that he has conducted in his constituency and in the House on behalf of his constituents. He is right to say that digital television uses the spectrum more efficiently and enables the number and range of services to be increased significantly.

The Government's priority is to deploy the scarce spectrum to enable the BBC and the Independent Television Commission to provide digital television services throughout the United Kingdom and to ensure, as far as possible, reception of the appropriate regional variations. I assure my hon. Friend that we will address the matter in the White Paper when it is published later this year.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the White Paper consider the fact that Yorkshire Television cannot be received everywhere in North Yorkshire?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Lady cites yet another example. I am not sure of the number of such examples, but there are several around the country. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I appreciate that people in particular areas would like to receive their own ITV regional service, especially regional news. We understand the concern that that causes. If we can do something about it, we shall.

Public Buildings

8. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): What steps he is taking to improve the architectural quality of public buildings. [135343]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): We have established the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment—CABE—to promote good architecture and design. We have published a statement of our commitment in a document entitled "Better Public Buildings", copies of which have been placed in the Library. It has been wholeheartedly endorsed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his foreword to the document.

Mr. Hope: In a recent debate that the early years network hosted in the House, the motion that public architecture is failing children was carried overwhelmingly. That is a great worry. In Corby, there is an early years excellence centre which is an example of excellent design for children in my constituency. Through sure start and the early years excellence programme, we are spending approximately £350 million on public buildings for children in the next few years. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the excellence that we have seen in Corby will encourage the rapid growth in, and injection of, capital into public architecture, to benefit children throughout the country?

Mr. Howarth: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am glad that the people of Penn Green in his constituency like the sure start building that has been built there. Large and increasing amounts of capital are spent on public buildings, but for decades, far too many were mediocre—if not downright ugly—in design, depressing for those who visited and worked in them, and unnecessarily expensive to operate and maintain.

The Government take it as axiomatic that we should design our public buildings well as a statement of civic values and our commitment to best value in every sense. My hon. Friend spoke about the importance of good quality in public buildings to which children have access. Peckham library, which won the Stirling prize at the weekend, is an example of the wonderful public design of a building that children use. I have asked CABE to work with the sure start unit to ensure that the new wave of sure start buildings enhances the quality of the environment, and lifts the spirit as well as providing first rate public services.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I recognise that the quality of architectural design is a subjective issue, and I say that with some feeling. Does the Minister agree that the lottery funding of many buildings has aroused much greater public interest in the need for quality of design? I say this diplomatically: will the hon. Gentleman put his money where his mouth is and require that when Government Departments become clients they insist on good-quality buildings—even if that means more expensive buildings? Even if they are more expensive, good-quality buildings are a much better financial, as well as environmental, investment.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman has certainly carried the flag for high-quality public architecture for many years, as I well know, and I pay tribute to him for that. From the beginning, the lottery distributors—this has been a commitment shared by Governments of both parties—have been insistent that the buildings funded from that remarkable source of capital funding should be of high quality. The Arts Council and the heritage lottery fund have done excellently in that regard.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has appointed Ministers in a range of Departments to be champions of high quality and high standards of architecture and design in and for the public sector buildings for which their Departments have responsibility. We are determined to push forward that crusade.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): May I inform the Minister that I have a rather commodious office in Portcullis House, which regrettably rather resembles a Novotel? However, the architecture of the atrium of

Portcullis House is stunning and wonderful. What will my hon. Friend do to encourage greater public access to that atrium, so that people can enjoy the architecture for which their tax has paid?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend also has long been committed to high-quality architecture. Of course, he is always a lucky fellow. I am glad that he has a commodious office. Responsibility for the construction project—that is, Portcullis House—has been a matter for the House and not for the Government. All parties have been involved in the oversight of the project. I am sure that the House authorities will wish members of the public to have the best opportunity to see the remarkable piece of architecture by Michael Hopkins and Partners, which is also a remarkable piece of structural engineering. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend, who is always the most assiduous and conscientious of parliamentarians, will be receiving many delegations who will come to wait upon him in his office.

Millennium Dome

9. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the future of the millennium dome after 31 December. [135344]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The Government are currently in discussion with Legacy plc, in relation to Legacy's proposal for a high-technology business campus at the Greenwich site. The Legacy proposal is currently being analysed by the competition team in advance of any decision on preferred bidder status. We hope to make an announcement in due course, but I can assure the House that the Government are determined to get the best possible deal to continue the regeneration of east London.

Dr. Lewis: One thing that the dome and its contents will not be doing next year is fulfilling the Prime Minister's boast that they would form the first paragraph of his general election manifesto. Is the Minister aware that last week the national health service pulled the plug on four community hospitals, including a long-awaited £22 million community hospital serving New Forest? How many more future consequences will there be for the people of this country as a result of the squandering of three quarters of a billion pounds on the millennium dome and its contents?

Janet Anderson: I do not know how the hon. Gentleman has the brass neck to ask that question. What the Government have done through the new opportunities fund has been popular. I refer him to a comment made by an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), who said that health and education are things on which lottery money should not be spent? Perhaps the Conservative party would like to tell us what it would cut, in addition to £16 billion-worth of cuts in public spending. Would the Conservatives cut sport in schools? Would they cut the green spaces initiative? Would they axe the additional equipment for cancer patients, the after-school clubs and the healthy living centres? People outside the House will want those questions answered.

Primary Schools (Sport and Art Grants)

10. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): When he expects the first grants will be made to primary schools under the space for sport and arts scheme. [135345]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): There is a two-stage application process for the space for sport and arts scheme. In the first, which is already under way, local education authorities have received the prospectus and will return outline proposal forms by the end of the year. In the second, which will run from the end of January onwards, LEAs will be invited to work up projects which have been given in-principle approval and to submit detailed applications. We hope that the first grants will be made during the summer of next year.

Dr. Palmer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that schools will not have to match the funding? We should focus on the most needy schools, but they are precisely the schools with the most claims on their resources. If we want the programme to be effective, it needs to carried out without the requirement for match funding.

Mr. Smith: I can confirm that. The principal element of funding for the space for sport and arts for schools scheme comes directly from the Exchequer as part of the capital modernisation fund. Lottery money is being provided in addition. The running costs, once the projects are up and running, will be met by the Department for Education and Employment through the normal funding arrangements.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Given that sports facilities in schools are increasingly coming under pressure, and that the time for sport in the school curriculums is already under pressure, will the Secretary of State take into account the fact that it is very important for local sporting clubs to augment the sporting facilities that are available to schoolchildren? In that context, will he consider visiting the Bowdon hockey, cricket and squash club in my constituency? By working closely with local schools, it allows schoolchildren to benefit from professional coaching and to take advantage of other opportunities that they should have but which will be affected by the proposal of the Labour-controlled local authority of Trafford to allow house building on one of its most heavily used playing fields. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could take the opportunity of a visit to say whether he shares my view, which I hope he does, that that would be an act of vandalism which should be stopped by the Government.

Mr. Smith: The activities of individual sports clubs are a matter primarily for the clubs themselves and for sports governing bodies. We will shortly announce additional funding for the national governing bodies for sport to assist them with their work. However, in relation to school sport, we have taken measures drastically to reduce the number of school playing fields that are being sold off. We have also taken measures through the new opportunities fund, and through the green spaces initiative, to create playing fields and recreation space. There is also a proposal to spend £750 million on school

sports facilities—also through the new opportunities fund. That combination of measures will help to put right the damage done by the Tories when they were in government. Once again, we have not had a clear answer from the Tories. Will they cut the new opportunities fund projects or not? Those are the projects that will put sports facilities back into schools, to the benefit of our children.

Millennium Dome

11. **Mr. David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): How much *(a)* national lottery and *(b)* Treasury money has been spent on the millennium dome. [135346]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The New Millennium Experience Company has been awarded total grant of £628 million from the Millennium Commission for the millennium experience at Greenwich and its associated national programme of events and activities. No Exchequer funds have been spent on the dome.

Mr. Tredinnick: Is the right hon. Gentleman not ashamed that so much public sector money has been used to shore up that project? Is that not in stark contrast to private sector projects such as Alton Towers, Flamingo Land and CenterParcs, which have managed to make a profit and entertain people for far less money? Is it not astonishing that, after all this time, there is still no proper funfair at the dome to entertain children? Can the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that, if the dome is knocked down at the end of the year, the ball and chain will be on the front page of the next Labour party general election manifesto?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman ignores the fact that so far 5.2 million people have visited the Dome, of whom 4.15 million have been revenue-paying visitors. In the whole of last year 2.65 million people visited Alton Towers, the other most-visited "paying" attraction. The dome has already had nearly twice as many visitors as Alton Towers. Moreover, the latest surveys show that satisfaction rates among visitors to the dome are rising: enjoyment and satisfaction levels are now at 88 per cent.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my right hon. Friend knows, attractions in other parts of the country are also funded by the Millennium Commission, and have proved extremely successful. The national botanic garden of Wales, for instance, has exceeded all expectations by attracting as many visitors in its first six months as it expected to attract in the first year. Will my right hon. Friend kindly offer his congratulations?

Mr. Smith: I am happy to congratulate all those involved with the national botanic garden of Wales, which, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, I visited shortly before it opened. It is a splendid building—a very fine dome, created by Lord Foster—and it has indeed attracted far more visitors than the number originally envisaged in the business plan. The same applies to a number of other projects funded by the Millennium Commission, from the Eden project in Cornwall to Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh. Those projects are proving remarkably successful and, indeed, profitable for the organisations concerned.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Can the Secretary of State confirm what was said earlier by the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting—that he has not been told by David James, chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company, that if the dome were demolished, the Government would receive an extra £300 million? If he can give such confirmation, will he take urgent advice, and if he finds that that is true, will he consider allowing the dome to be demolished—or must it remain as a testament to new Labour's failure?

Mr. Smith: As my hon. Friend the Minister said, we have received no such advice.

Tourism

12. **Mr. David Atkinson** (Bournemouth, East): If he will make a statement on recent trends in the tourism figures for Great Britain. [135347]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The numbers of North American and other long-haul visitors to the United Kingdom have increased by 1 per cent. and 4 per cent. respectively in the first eight months of this year compared to the corresponding period of 1999, although visits from Europe are—rather disappointingly—down by 5 per cent., and overall visits by 3 per cent.

Overall spend by overseas visitors is, however, up by 1 per cent. to £8.5 billion in the first eight months of this year compared to the equivalent period of 1999, and remains on course to be one of the highest levels on record.

Mr. Atkinson: Will the Minister confirm that last year the number of foreign visitors fell for the first time for nine years? Is she aware that the British Tourist Authority predicts a further decline this year? Does she agree that the British tourist industry needs all the help it can get, in the light of ever-increasing global competition? If so, what representations has she made to her right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the fact that the cost of petrol at the pumps in Britain is now the highest in the European Union, whereas three and a half years ago, under the last Conservative Government, it was the lowest?

Janet Anderson: That, dare I say it, is a bit rich, coming from a member of the party that cut funding for the English tourist board from about £25 million to under £10 million—its level when we came to office.

We are doing our best to reverse the declining trend in overseas visitor numbers, but we must remember that this is now a global market, and we are competing with other countries throughout the world. What will encourage people to come here is a value-for-money, good-quality product. That is why, in conjunction with the industry, we produced the first-ever Government strategy for tourism, and established the first-ever ministerial summit.

I congratulate the tourist information centre in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, which deservedly won an England For Excellence award last week.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Is the Minister not being a little complacent in failing to recognise that in the last complete year there was a deficit in tourism of £8.3 billion and that the number of British visitors who went abroad was substantially higher than the number of foreign visitors coming to this country? Is it not time that the Minister recognised that among the factors contributing to that, apart from the high level of the pound, is the extremely high level of road fuel costs compared with that in other countries? Will the Minister draw to the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer the anecdotal evidence, which is supported by statistical evidence, that prices at the pumps of over 90p per litre, which are common in the highlands of Scotland, are deterring visitors, whose number has been cut by at least a third this year?

Janet Anderson: I am afraid that I cannot agree with the right hon. Gentleman. His point about Scotland does not fall within my remit, but he may like to refer to the figures that were published some months ago, when people in Scotland expressed concern. One of the reasons identified for that was the failure of the industry in Scotland to get to grips with the opportunities presented by information technology. I hope that it will now do that.

We have provided the British Tourist Authority with an extra £5 million in grant in aid for the three years from 1999-2000 to promote Britain overseas. With the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we have set up a Britain abroad taskforce to see what we can do to improve Britain's image abroad, and we shall continue with that. All that is in stark contrast to the record of the Opposition, who consistently fail to take tourism seriously, although it contributes £64 billion a year to our economy.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Mobile Phone Masts

30. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If the Commissioners will make recommendations to parochial church councils regarding the financing of mobile phone masts on Church property. [135365]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): Welcome to your first Church Commissioners' Question Time, Mr. Speaker. It is a non-partisan Question Time, we are protected from on high, and you will enjoy it as much as we do.

The commissioners who, as the honourable Gentleman knows, are substantial property owners in their own right, are liaising on this matter with the Archbishops Council which, I am happy to say, is taking a lead on the matter. The council is working on producing national-level guidance and advice on best practice which they believe will be of benefit to the parochial church councils.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the sight of mobile phone masts in rural areas, let alone in towns, is pretty abhorrent to most people? Is he also aware that a mobile phone antenna can be inserted into the top of a steeple internally so that it is not seen from the outside and can generate over £5,000 for the church concerned? When will the hon. Gentleman make recommendations to churches that their steeples be used for mobile phone masts, to hide them from the general public and generate money for the Church, thus scoring a double whammy?

Mr. Bell: The Church will be grateful for that double whammy, which will allow it to render a public service to mobile phone operators, which need to cover 80 per cent. of the country, and perhaps also to gain revenue from that. The hon. Gentleman made the point even better than I can. The Church has taken a lead on the matter through the Archbishops Council and we are hopeful of positive results for parish churches throughout the land.

Mr. Speaker: I call Dr. Tonge.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: "Speaker!"] I am sorry, Mr. Speaker.

Will the hon. Gentleman tell us if he has any information on when the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will publish the guidelines on mobile phone masts which were promised for the end of July this year?

Mr. Bell: I am always grateful to have questions to the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions pushed on to me, and am happy to answer the hon. Lady. Eighty-seven per cent. of our country should be covered by mobile phone operators by October next year. The Church will play its part in assisting those schemes and I hope that it will do so in the interests of our people, our parishes and our churches.

Church Repairs (VAT)

31. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations the commissioners have received on the reduction of VAT on church repairs. [135366]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church continues to make representations on that issue to the Government at the highest level. A survey will shortly be published giving up-to-date figures for the total VAT burden borne by the Church, particularly in relation to the on-going repair bills payable for the maintenance of churches

Miss McIntosh: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the figure that has been put on the cost is £40 million per annum, which is £40 million more than the churches receive in grants from the Government? Is he aware that, today, *The Daily Telegraph* gave what could be the contents of the Budget statement? Is there any truth in the

story that churches will receive a reduced rate of VAT? Will the hon. Gentleman continue to support my campaign to have a lower VAT rate?

Mr. Bell: I had thought it was my campaign, but I am happy to have the hon. Lady as a joint campaigner on this issue. I have read today's newspapers and what might or might not be in the pre-Budget report of the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Wednesday. I will hold my breath on that—it is somewhat bated—as will the House. I take the opportunity to thank the hon. Lady and all right hon. and hon. Members who have supported the campaign over many years.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My hon. Friend is very persuasive and I am sure that he will have another go at the Chancellor, as we are getting to the point where small communities are expected to carry very large debts in relation to their churches. I hope that he will be able to get a response from the Government. They must be sympathetic, particularly to rural areas, which are faced with frightening debts.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. As I said, I have read the newspaper reports. The campaign has been a long one. The imposition of VAT at 17.5 per cent. on church repairs absorbs a large amount of locally raised resources—and for no local benefit. A great injustice will be righted if the Chancellor makes the statement on Wednesday that we hope he will.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some of us have been campaigning for a reduction for nearly 30 years, and Minister after Minister has given us a dusty answer? Will he try to persuade the Chancellor that he would earn well-deserved brownie points if he made the announcement that has been forecast this morning? It is a monstrous scandal that churches are paying back in VAT more than they receive in grant, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) said.

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman has been campaigning on this issue since 1972. He and I have attended Ministers of the Crown as part of delegations. I am grateful for his support. I have said that Church Commissioners questions is a non-partisan occasion, I would add that, if the Chancellor listens to us, and I think he will, he will be the first Chancellor to have done so in 30 years.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not important that the Treasury recognise that such a move would win widespread support; that churches throughout the country perform not only a religious role, but, increasingly, a community role; and that, in many parts of the country, they are an important part of the tourist industry? It is important that we get the concession—I hope, this week.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continuing support for the campaign. He makes several valid points. One is that the churches play an important role in communities in rural areas. Church repairs are to uphold and to maintain our traditions and heritage in local churches, which are a tourist attraction. I hope that those arguments alone will be sufficiently persuasive for the Chancellor on Wednesday.

Clergy Pensions

32. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of clergy pensions. [135367]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The formula for determining the full basic rate of clergy pension is two thirds of the previous year's national minimum stipend for incumbents. In addition, a lump sum of three times the pension is payable on retirement. As housing is provided while clergy are working, the formula recognises that clergy in retirement need to meet the cost of housing.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that considered reply. Given that since 1998 pensions on service have been funded by parishes themselves and that large numbers of parishes have been forced against their will to lose the services of sound and able-bodied clergymen for no other or better reason than that they have reached the age of 70, does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it would make financial sense and strike a blow against the evil of ageism if clergymen were able to continue beyond the age of 70—or, indeed, for as long as their parishioners wanted them?

Mr. Bell: I certainly appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point about ageism. All the points that the hon. Gentleman has made will be taken into account by the Archbishops Council—which has started a review of clergy stipends and is consulting widely within the Church as a part of that process. I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's remarks are incorporated in that review.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): In improving the clergy's conditions of service, will my hon. Friend consider allowing them to go to an industrial tribunal if they are unfairly dismissed?

Mr. Bell: Yes. For the past three years, since my hon. Friend was first elected to the House, that point has been raised on the Floor of the House, and many hon. Members have supported that position. The point is being taken into account by various bodies within the Church, and I am hopeful that, over a longer period, we shall have the result that my hon. Friend would like.

Flooding and Flood Defence

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the serious flooding that has occurred in England. I start by expressing the Government's heartfelt sympathy to all those who have been affected. Some houses have been flooded several times in the past few weeks. The whole House can only appreciate the desperation of all the householders who have been affected.

We do not need to be reminded of the extraordinarily heavy rains that have fallen in recent weeks—and that are still falling even as I speak. It is an extreme situation: the land is saturated and water is running straight off into already swollen rivers.

Floods on this scale are rare. River levels in York, for example, are the highest that they have been for 400 years. The 1947 flood was the most recent event on a comparable scale. It was caused by a combination of heavy rain and melting snow and resulted in significant economic damage. Direct comparisons, however, are difficult, as there has been much subsequent development on the flood plain and our defences are much better.

Happily, and most importantly, we have no reports of people losing their lives in the floods. Of the approximately 1.8 million properties at risk of flooding, fewer than 4,000 have flooded. Much of the extensive flooding has been of agricultural land. I believe that most flood defences for urban areas—including York, which is being severely tested—have operated to their design standard or better, demonstrating the justification for significant Government expenditure over the years.

As the House will be aware, further rain is to come and the prospect of more flooding cannot be ruled out. I shall return to the issue of funding flood defences in a moment. I have to emphasise, however, that we cannot stop all flooding, but can only reduce its risk. The recent floods have overwhelmed some defences. It would not have been practicable to have stopped them, as that would have required massive walls which, even if they could have been afforded and constructed, would be unlikely to be acceptable visually or environmentally. A few years ago, Shrewsbury turned down a flood defence scheme on those very grounds.

Having set out what has happened, I want to say what is being done in response. First, however, I pay tribute to the way in which the Environment Agency, emergency services, local authorities, voluntary services and the armed forces have responded to the flooding. They have been working around the clock to ensure that warnings are issued and acted upon, to evacuate people and to shore up defences. I also thank the local media, including local radio, for their contribution in ensuring that information has been made widely and quickly available. At the weekend, we saw on television the massive efforts being made to combat the floods in York. Similar efforts are being made across the country.

The Government's impression is that those partnerships have worked well and that flood warning arrangements have also been effective. As the House knows, when the immediate work has been completed, I shall be asking the Environment Agency, in conjunction with its partners, to produce a full report on the flooding, its effects, how the flood warning and emergency response worked, and what lessons we can learn. Although I shall ask to have that report speedily, I emphasise that I do not want preparation of the report to get in the way of the immediate work that needs to be done. I ask for understanding on that point.

At the weekend, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made an important Government announcement on flooding. He said that the Government were improving the Bellwin scheme to help local authorities which incur unexpected costs in response to floods. Assistance under the Bellwin formula will now be automatic for authorities dealing with the current floods. The rate of Government support will increase from 85 per cent. to 100 per cent. Valid claims will be settled within 15 working days and claims for advance payments can be made.

That announcement addresses important concerns that have been put to the Government. The scheme will also be reviewed more generally when the current flooding is over. The Government are also committed to discuss with the Association of British Insurers how the insurance industry can respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies such as this one and deal with problems of insurability for homes and businesses at risk of flooding. When the current problems are over, the Government, local authorities and other agencies will do all that we can in pursuing the recovery plan to help communities get back to normal as soon as possible.

On the funding of flood and coastal defence, the total amount of spending on flood and coastal defence in England from all sources approaches £400 million this year. The Government are by far the largest contributor to that expenditure. In the current financial year, the Government planned to spend some £337 million in England. That is a combination of Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food funding towards capital projects of some £80 million and £257 million delivered through the revenue support grant administered by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Revenue support grant funding is used, among other things, to pay levies to the Environment Agency which the agency uses to fund the maintenance and operational costs of flood defences and the balance of capital works not met by MAFF grants.

The announcement in the spending review in July this year foresaw that MAFF funding would be increased by £5 million next year, £10 million the year after and £20 million the year after that. In all, MAFF funding was expected to total £267 million in the next three years.

We would also expect revenue support grant funding to increase by about 4 per cent. a year, in line with the spending review settlement. Recognising the severity of the floods, I am sure that the House will welcome my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement of a further £51 million over four years starting this year for additional investment in flood defence works;new whole catchment area assessment studies; and making an earlier start to planned improvements in the flood warning system.

That is new and additional money for England. Further discussions are in hand about the possibility of extra resources for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The further funding is particularly welcome because it will

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allow us to progress more river-based defence schemes. That is an issue that the Ministry needs to discuss with the Environment Agency, but the Government expect to make an announcement on decisions as soon as possible.

I ask the House to join with me in expressing the Government's appreciation to all those who have been involved in responding to the flooding. I also ask the House to acknowledge the already major investment that the Government make in flood and coastal defence and to welcome the further funding that we are making available to help ensure that the risks are reduced for current and future generations.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I thank the Minister for his statement. I extend the Opposition's sympathy and commiseration to all those who have been so seriously affected by the floods in the past few days and weeks. Many of them, as the Minister has rightly said, have suffered on more than one occasion. None of us can put ourselves in the place of somebody who has seen his home or business totally flooded. I join the Minister in paying tribute to all in the rescue services, who have worked above and beyond any call of duty to help those in distress.

The Minister's statement, although welcome, made no reference to the Bye report which followed the last serious flooding in this country: at Easter 1998, when four people died. As the hon. Gentleman said in this House earlier this year, that report clearly said that work had to be done to stop development on flood plains. Planning policy guidance note 25 has been out for consultation for two years. When will the definitive document be issued, especially as it seems that local authorities are still granting planning consent? In the six months to April this year, the Environment Agency advised local authorities to refuse 190 planning applications because of the risk of flooding, yet in 83 of those cases, the authorities ignored that advice and granted planning consent.

There was speculation over the weekend about maps of flood plains becoming available from, I believe, the Environment Agency. When will that happen? What discussions will the Minister or his colleagues hold with the insurance industry not only on the issues to which he referred but on the whole vexed issue of properties on flood plains becoming uninsurable?

Have not the Government already given permission in the past three years for substantial development on flood plains in Hertfordshire, the Nene valley and Ashford? Will they now reconsider those consents?

I welcome the improvements to the Bellwin system that the Minister has announced. It is obviously valuable to local authorities to get the full 100 per cent. and prompt payment. Will that apply only to expenditure incurred by the authorities themselves, or will they be able to pass on resources to others who may have to take remedial actions to deal with the crisis? That is clearly relevant to what the Minister said about the significant impact on agricultural land.

On flood defences, will the Minister confirm that the £51 million will be allocated over four years, so that the funding, although representing welcome extra resources, amounts to only £13 million a year? Is that additional to the £15 million announced in the comprehensive spending review earlier this year? Does he accept that the figure of £400 million is slightly misleading? Is not it the case that this year the Environment Agency is spending only £290 million, and that MAFF is allocated £80 million—we are not sure whether that is on top, or as grant aid for the self-same capital projects. In short, how much will be spent in total, forgetting by whom, and how much of it will be new money?

Does the Minister agree with the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, published two years ago, that said that there was significant confusion among the different bodies responsible for flood prevention and control—the internal drainage boards, local authorities, the Environment Agency and his Ministry? If so, what action will he take to create a much clearer line of responsibility, so that the House can better understand not only who is responsible but where the money is going and who is to spend it on flood defences?

Mr. Morley: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments concerning those who have been affected and the response of the emergency services.

The hon. Gentleman may remember that the previous statement that I made to the House was on the Bye report and what we were doing in response. We have made great progress in acting on the report by uprating the national flood defence scheme, introducing flood risk awareness programmes and setting high-level targets for annual exercises between local authorities and agencies for dealing with floods.

All that investment and time over the past two years have paid off in the response that we have seen to the current situation, with smooth, professional action by the emergency services, much improved early warning, and everyone living on a flood plain getting a leaflet through the door from the Environment Agency explaining what action to take in response to flood warnings.

PPG25 is expected in December, and we would expect all planning authorities to take into account the advice from the Environment Agency on development on flood plains. In fact, 90 per cent. of applications that are objected to by the agency are turned down.

The publication of flood risk maps was another Bye report recommendation, and the Government have set that as a high-level target for the Environment Agency. All local authorities have flood risk maps for their areas and I understand that the Environment Agency is to make them more widely available.

There will be discussions with the insurance companies about risk with regard to those people who might find it difficult to insure their properties in the future.

The variety of funding sources that go towards flood and coastal defences is being reviewed and a report on that will be out in September 2001. I can confirm that the £51 million announced for the listed schemes is new and additional funding. In terms of the funding proposed, I announced in the statement that the Government are planning to spend £337 million in England—a combination of MAFF funding for capital projects and the funding that is delivered through the standard spending assessment to local authorities for flood defence. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about

funding but, given the Conservative's party proposal for a £16 billion cut in public expenditure, how would it improve matters?

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, particularly the improvements to the Bellwin formula and the additional £51 million of funding announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Although we all recognise that the national focus has, understandably, been on the villages, towns and cities that have been inundated, does my hon. Friend accept that if one house is flooded, the misery is the same whether the flooding is localised or widespread? In that connection, and bearing in mind the repeat flooding in areas of my constituency, which, although localised, has nevertheless damaged dozens of houses in Mirehouse, Cleator Moor and Egremont, will my hon. Friend ensure that the changes that he has announced today will be equally and fairly applied to all areas and all families who have suffered, regardless of the extent of the flooding?

Mr. Morley: I assure my right hon. Friend that that is the case. He is right that although there has been much focus on areas in which many houses are at risk, there have been small, localised floods all around the country in which people have been seriously affected. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is ensuring that the Government talk to local authorities about how to make a unified response to ensure sure that people get the support that they need in all parts of the country.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I thank the Minister for the statement and join him in offering sympathy to those affected and thanks to our excellent emergency services. We also welcome the significant improvements to the Bellwin arrangements.

What plans does the Minister have to provide support to farmers in respect of uninsurable losses that they have suffered during the floods? Is he prepared to discuss with the Inland Revenue arrangements whereby businesses that have been affected by the floods will be allowed to submit their VAT and tax returns later than the official due date?

Finally, I welcome the fact that the Minister is planning to review the quagmire of our flood defence arrangements, but is it possible to bring forward the date on which that report is expected? Does he agree that given so many different bodies are able to act but there is no clarity about which has the duty to act, would it not be better to have a single body with the responsibility, power and funds to get on with the job?

Mr. Morley: First, I thank the Liberal Democrats for co-operating with the Government in providing time for the statement on their Opposition day.

The National Farmers Union has already made representations to MAFF about the problems that farmers are facing, and we will look at some of its suggestions. I also understand the hon. Gentleman's point about businesses whose records will have been destroyed in the floods. I give an undertaking that we will contact the Inland Revenue and ask for understanding on VAT and tax returns, given the circumstances, for the businesses affected.

As for the review on funding sources and arrangements, I give an undertaking to look at the time scale again, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman about it.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I represent a constituency that has been adversely affected by much of the flooding on the River Aire in Yorkshire, so I thank my hon. Friend and other Ministers for the serious and thorough way in which they have dealt with the problem as it has developed. Will my hon. Friend give more details about the changes to the Bellwin formula which will increase the speed at which help can be given? Will the Government consider developing plans to help people with the reinsurance of properties if they have difficulties insuring them in future?

Mr. Morley: I know that my hon. Friend represents an area that has been affected. I have visited those areas and the emergency centres in Yorkshire, along with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. I can assure my hon. Friend about the changes to the Bellwin scheme. Applications had to be made because payment under the old system was not automatic, which could lead to delays. That point was put to me when I travelled the country, talking to local authorities and visiting the affected areas. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has acted—payment under the Bellwin scheme is now automatic, the funding is 100 per cent. and there is a prospect of advance payments and a 15-day turnaround for claims.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister appreciate that some businesses and households have been told that insurers will cover this disaster, but that their insurance will now cease? Is he aware that, for example, the Yorkshire Dales Icecream Company and the households and other businesses in and around Cononley are in precisely that position even though the flooding there was partly caused by the malfunctioning of a flood reservoir that was built under a previous flood relief scheme? Will he ensure that, while the Environment Agency undertakes its work, which is bound to be spread over a long time, those businesses are protected in the event of further problems between now and those works being accomplished? After all, we are not yet into winter.

Mr. Morley: I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point. Of course, that is one of the matters that we would expect the Environment Agency to look at when it has time to review the situation and the areas that might need attention. He is right about insurance, which is why my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has been anxious to take the issue forward in discussions with the insurances companies and to ensure that consideration is given to those homes and businesses that may face insurance difficulties in future. It is fair to say that, at present, there are few people who cannot get insurance in flood risk areas.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Minister for visiting the Stockbridge area of Keighley last Friday and talking to many of my constituents and taking on board many of their anxieties. On Friday, we discussed topping up area social funds. He assured me that he would take that on board because many of my constituents will need to resort to social funds to

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help them out of immediate difficulty. The uninsurability of dwellings has been mentioned. That will be a problem for many of my constituents because many insurers—most of whom have been helpful recently—may not want to take on those households again. Yorkshire Electricity's vans were very much in evidence on Friday, but we did not know that the company was charging households a £65 reconnection fee. I was going to mention that to my hon. Friend privately, but I thought that I would get it in now.

Mr. Morley: I was very moved by the experience of the people I met in my hon. Friend's constituency. Again, the local authority was working hard with all the agencies to provide support. I was impressed that Benefits Agency representatives were present at the rest centre to advise people on the spot. I understand that the Department of Social Security has a central contingency fund. I know that applications are being made from flood hit areas to ensure that there is adequate funding for those people who may qualify for the social fund. I shall take such matters as those raised by my hon. Friend into consideration. I must confess that I was not aware that the utilities were charging people a reconnection charge. I should have thought that the utilities would have taken into account the stress that those people were under at the time.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): As the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) said, areas where flooding is predictable already receive much attention from the Environment Agency. Other areas, however, which had not had problems with flooding for many years, including Duffield in my constituency, have suffered from severe and sudden problems during the past few days. How will the Minister encourage the Environment Agency to prioritise work in those areas, and what steps will the agency take to protect areas that had not previously had problems with flooding?

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency will, because of the current situation, prioritise work on river systems. In the evaluation of the floods, the needs of areas that were affected on this occasion but which had not been affected by previous floods will be taken into account. However, some areas were flooded because of blockages in or the backing up of drains, which are also the responsibility of local authorities. All those points will be taken into consideration.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Will my hon. Friend, who visited the Selby area on Saturday, ensure that the relevant authorities seriously consider a detailed plan from the parish council at Barlby, where 200 homes were flooded over the weekend, to strengthen and repair the flood bank there? He will also receive a report from the Selby area about the failure of the electricity supply during the weekend to more than 10,000 homes. That might have implications for the siting of supply stations and their protection from flooding. As the flood crisis spreads throughout rural Yorkshire, will he ensure that the relevant authorities liaise closely with parish councils, which are often the best sources of local information, community support and volunteers?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend will recall that we discussed many of those issues when we met in Selby on Saturday, when we also talked to local authorities. He is right about the situation in Barlby, although it is worth pointing out that many of the houses involved were built in 1995 in a flood risk area. Such considerations need to be taken into account with regard to such developments.

The same point also applies to electricity substations. I understand that the problem in Selby was that the substation was flooded. We need to consider the siting of such stations in flood risk areas and whether they need to be defended. The hard work of the Environment Agency prevented an important substation in Leeds city centre from flooding. If it had flooded—it was very close to being inundated—that would have caused absolute havoc in the city. We will have to take such matters into account when we plan for what might be more frequent extreme weather conditions and the need to protect vital infrastructure, such as substations.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I point out to the Minister that it was not just the Ouse but most rivers in Yorkshire that were flooding. The River Nidd overflowed in Knaresborough, and caused extensive flooding from the riverside through to two caravan car parks. Most of the area had to be evacuated. Thanks to the emergency services, the borough council and, in particular, King James school in Knaresborough, evacuees could be accommodated. Does the Minister share my concern about the fact that many people, especially those on Abbey road in Knaresborough, did not receive a flood warning until the flood was 4 ft high in their dwellings? There was no awareness exercise in that area, partly because—the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) made this point—it was not an area of traditional flooding. Will the Minister give me an assurance that the way in which the Environment Agency issues awareness warnings will be reviewed? People should receive that information in good time to save at least some of their property and belongings.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have emphasised that no Government can guarantee that floods will not happen. We must reduce the risks and ensure that people have adequate warning. In response to the Northampton disaster and the lessons that we learned from the Bye report, we have put many extra resources into a national flood warning system which, by and large, has worked better. However, that is not to say that there have been no gaps in the system—the hon. Gentleman referred to one. I give him an assurance that in the evaluation that will take place following the floods, we shall examine the area that he mentioned. When we identify failures, we shall take steps to ensure that the situation is improved.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): My hon. Friend will be aware that parts of the midlands—especially in Worcestershire and Shropshire—have been badly affected during the past week. Although, by comparison, my own area in Birmingham has not been particularly affected this time, people in parts of my constituency have suffered four times during the past two years an event that they had been told would occur only once every 50 years. The latest occasion was in July.

As a result, various local taskforces were set up and some lessons were learned that my hon. Friend might like to take on board. First, there is a desperate need to

improve flood defences. Although I welcome the changes to the Bellwin formula, we need to take a fresh look at the operation of cost-benefit analyses, because they often discriminate against areas of localised flooding in favour of big projects.

The second point is on insurance companies. Our experience in Birmingham is that, as a result of those four events, some properties are uninsurable or the premiums are unsustainable. Urgent approaches must be made to the insurance companies in order to stop them cherry picking.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point about frequency. Generally, flood defences are engineered to certain standards—for example, one flood in 150 years, or 100 years or 200 years. Although there is much that we do not know about global warming, there is certainly no dispute that the planet is warming nor that we are seeing changes in weather patterns. We may have to re-evaluate current standards of defences that are set at one flood in 150 years, perhaps reducing that time because of changing weather patterns. Of course, there are cost implications in that for the Government. We accept those implications; that is one reason why we are significantly increasing the available budget.

We have to apply a cost-benefit analysis, although I am aware that it causes problems in some local schemes. We shall certainly consider those in future.

The Government will hold discussions with insurance companies on all the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for visiting Tewkesbury last Friday to look at the flood damage. His visit was greatly appreciated. He will recall that I stressed the additional problem experienced in the small village of Sandhurst in my constituency where there was an explosion at a chemical factory—a couple of days before the floods, thankfully. If it had occurred during the flooding, the emergency services would not have been able to reach the area.

Will the Minister carry out a full investigation into that explosion, including the reason why a chemical factory was allowed to be sited on an obvious flood plain? As my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) pointed out, to build houses on or near flood plains causes many problems. One reason why councils do so is the pressure to accommodate the number of houses that they are asked to provide.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right about the risk of pollution during floods. Any company dealing with hazardous products, such as chemicals, must follow certain standards. I understand that the Health and Safety Executive is currently investigating the case to which the hon. Gentleman refers and I am sure that it will be dealt with.

On flood plain development, new guidance will be issued in December and we shall expect planning authorities to act on it.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The Minister will agree that there has been much debate about who is responsible for approving new developments on flood plains. However, there is a further question: about approval for the development of new estates, where the increased run-off created by extra hard surfaces inundates adjacent areas. That is a recurrent problem—year on year—in my constituency. Who is responsible for approving such plans? Is it the planning authority, the Environment Agency or the drainage authority? At present, they are all passing the buck.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right. Increased run-off must be taken into account in flood plain development. I understand that PPG25 will address the issue of run-off as part of the guidance to local authorities. That new guidance will not be merely a code of practice as it was in the past; it will have much stronger force to ensure that planning authorities take note of it.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the giving of permission; that is a matter for the planning authorities.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I too thank the Deputy Prime Minister for visiting Malton on Friday. The Minister went to Malton last year; this year, the floods are worse. The beleaguered community wants to know whether his announcement and his change of policy today mean that flood defence systems, currently at the design stage, will be built more speedily. Is it likely that they will be progressed and constructed as quickly as possible?

Will the Minister ask his recovery plan teams to pay attention to the problems of alternative accommodation? Currently, the homes of about 1,500 families in North Yorkshire are flooded and are likely to remain so for several days. Those families will be out of their homes for nine months or longer. We need desperately to find them accommodation for that period—especially during the run-up to Christmas.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right. I visited Malton and Norton in 1998 and, given the severity of the flood then, I did not expect it to happen again for a very long time. However, as he said, the floods are even worse two years later.

The additional £51 million, which is new money, means that we can progress more schemes. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a scheme for Malton is at the design stage, but I understand that some technical issues need to be addressed. The scheme will be introduced as quickly as possible, and I assure him that the frequency of flooding that Malton has experienced will have an effect on the way that we score the schemes and on the priority that we give to them.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the problems of alternative accommodation is a serious issue. It will be tackled by local recovery teams and we want to ensure that people will continue to receive help from such teams even when the cameras and the newspapers are no longer present.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): When the Deputy Prime Minister kindly visited my constituency over the weekend, he gave so many assurances that they prompted my constituents to ask when Upton upon Severn will receive its share of the £51 million or when we will be told that it will do so. More generally, when we will we hear any details of the £51 million and, more particularly, what will its impact be on reducing the risks of flooding?

Mr. Morley: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, schemes for flood defence have to go through the

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processes of design, evaluation and receiving planning permission. They cannot be introduced immediately. Nevertheless, I repeat that the £51 million of new money means that we will be able to introduce a range of additional schemes that we could not have introduced otherwise.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is the Minister aware that the focus of attention in my area was the prevention of flooding in the down-town part of York itself? The perverse consequence was that the Vale of York was left totally exposed and, in Rawcliffe, the flood defences were breached. No sandbags were provided even though they had been requested from City of York council at 11 o'clock on Friday evening. I visited the area the next day and saw the consequences of the flooding. Sandbags were still not available and pumping was not started until 4 o'clock that afternoon. In fact, social services were nowhere to be seen until today and no soup kitchens had been provided. When I was in the area, I learned that one couple had not been rehoused and had nowhere to go. It is a serious problem, and the people in that area feel neglected and exposed.

The Minister also mentioned the revenue support grant. Will he respond to the request from the Local Government Association, which wants additional safeguards so that within year changes, as there will be this year, in local authority spending on flood defence schemes are recognised in the SSA for future years?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Lady has an Adjournment debate on the subject tomorrow and that will enable us to debate some of the issues in more detail than I can now. Much of her constituency is a flood plain and its flooding has taken a great deal of pressure off urban areas. The flood plains in Leeds, which flooded to take some pressure off other areas, have reduced the water level in Leeds by 1.5 m. Water catchment areas form part of the cycle of defence.

Sandbags have been issued in York, but some of the city's flood defences were operating beyond their designed capacity. Sandbags were needed in the city to stop the water getting under the flood defences and destroying them. Therefore, their distribution was an issue of priority. However, I understand that sandbags have been distributed as widely as they possibly can be.

On the SSA, money at above the rate of inflation is being made available for flood defence in all parts of the country. I am sure that we shall have the opportunity to discuss that in more detail tomorrow.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Stamford Bridge in my constituency has been affected twice in the past two years. I never thought that I would welcome the Deputy Prime Minister tramping around my constituency, but we were grateful that he came. I apologise for not being able to be with him, as I was attending a meeting of the Economic and Development Committee of the Council of Europe.

I am sure that the Minister will recognise that, having being affected twice in two years, with the prospect of floods again in another two years, the people of Stamford Bridge are saying that something must be done. I accept that the problem is enormous and not easy to solve, but when he is considering new flood defence work once the floods have gone down, will he make it clear to the Environment Agency and English Nature that top priority must be given to the safety and property of householders and businesses, rather than to birds and wildlife?

There will be a problem with insurance. In Stamford Bridge, small businesses have been particularly affected. Will the Minister consult the Deputy Prime Minister on whether businesses and houses which people cannot insure or for which excessive insurance rates must be paid should receive council tax relief?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman will know that when I visited Malton two years ago, I also went to Stamford Bridge, where, again, I did not expect such flooding in another two years. We will have to take into account changes in weather and more frequent flooding—and we are doing so by providing increased expenditure. His idea about council tax relief for affected businesses is interesting. We are discussing the matter of insurance companies, and we shall be looking at a range of options. The option that he is advocating would of course involve increasing public expenditure—of which he has not always been in favour.

Miss McIntosh: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Although it is always a pleasure to see the Deputy Prime Minister and other Ministers in one's constituency, may I seek your guidance? I have written to you on the matter. I was informed that the Deputy Prime Minister was coming to my constituency, and then that he was not. In the end, he came to my constituency accompanied by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), and a number of national film and local radio station crews, but I was not informed. May I be assured that parliamentary conventions will be respected in future?

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I met you, you twit.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is an established parliamentary courtesy that a Member visiting another Member's constituency on official business should give prior notification. That applies to Ministers as it does to other Members. However, the matter should be sorted out between the Members concerned. I suggest that the hon. Lady write to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Under-Secretary.

Miss McIntosh: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it parliamentary language to call a fellow parliamentarian a twit?

Mr. Prescott: On this occasion, yes.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is not nice.

Opposition Day

[19TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Pensions and Pensioners

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) to move the motion, I should announce that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.13 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I beg to move,

That this House believes that pensioners have been betrayed by both Conservative and Labour Governments over the last twenty years; notes that the Conservatives devalued the basic state pension, slashed future SERPS entitlements and oversaw the scandalous mis-selling of personal pensions; notes that the Labour Manifesto promised that pensioners would 'share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation', but that the Government now spends a smaller share of national income on pensioners than when Labour came to power; notes that pensioner poverty rose by 400,000 in the first two years of the present Government and that there were nearly 50,000 excess winter deaths in 1998–99 alone, mainly among pensioners; further notes that this year's 75p pension rise was an insult to pensioners and that despite a multi-million pound take-up campaign half a million pensioners still do not receive the means-tested assistance to which they are entitled; believes that the failure to adopt the recommendations of the Royal Commission on long-term care will still leave tens of thousands of pensioners having to sell their homes to pay for care; is concerned that hundreds of thousands of pensioners have faced delays in receiving their pension because of the Government's failure to deal with the problems of the NIRS2 computer system; and therefore calls upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer to announce a substantial increase in the rate of the basic state pension, with additional increases for the oldest pensioners, and to apologise for failing to deliver a decent pension to all pensioners.

Today's debate is about pensions, but it is about much more besides. It is about the attitude of successive Governments to older people. The 75p pension rise has been much talked about and is a symptom of that attitude, but it is but one of many examples. The Government's failure to implement the recommendations of their own royal commission on long-term care is another example, to which I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) will be able to draw attention later in the debate. The Government's failure to legislate against age discrimination in the workplace—they went only for a feeble code of conduct—and to stamp out ageism in the national health service are but a few more examples. In failing to treat Britain's older people with true dignity, the Government are following the tradition set by their predecessors. For that reason, our motion refers not only to the current Government but to those in office over "the last twenty years", wherein pensioners have been second-class citizens.

The Government's attitude to older people was summarised by the Prime Minister telling the Labour party conference that he wanted Britain to be "a young country"—that all the things associated with youth were positive and that, by definition, an older and ageing country, which ours is, was a negative thing about which we should be concerned. That is symptomatic of the current Government's attitude. Later, I shall refer to key documents that the Government are concealing, which would reveal their failure to act in support of pensioners and their willingness to keep the pressure off in terms of pensions increases. The Government are sitting on two important documents that should be before the House, but are not. That is a matter of concern.

Our motion begins with the Conservatives' record. As the House will expect, I am a regular reader of *Saga Magazine*, and I am sure that the Minister of State is too. The magazine recently conducted a survey asking its readers their views on Conservative proposals on pensions—which I have heard described as robbing Peter to pay Peter, by taking pensioners' awards away with one hand and giving them back, plus a few pence, with the other. Although it might have been presumed that the readers would want more money on the pension, rather than in other forms, they voted substantially against the Conservative proposals. The reason was simple: as many said, "We don't trust the Tories on pensions."

Pensioners have long memories. They remember the Conservatives' record on pensions and they are not willing to trust the party again. That record is one of not believing in the state pension, of eroding the basic state pension during their 18 years in office, of attacking SERPS—the state earnings-related pension scheme—and of slashing entitlements. In addition, as the House knows, women whose husbands were concerned about making provision for them when they became widows are now reaping the harvest of changes that were sown by the Conservatives in the mid-1980s. Pensioners, rightly, do not trust the Conservatives on pensions.

What do the Conservatives offer pensioners for the future? They face a dilemma: they have to go into the next election pledged to cut taxes, but they still need something to say to pensioners. The entirety of the policy that they have announced is twofold. First, they pledge to take money that pensioners already receive and then to give it back to them; added to that will be some money taken from lone parents who are trying to find work and some taken from the poorest of the poor through the social fund, to a grand total of 42p. At the next election, the electorate will be faced with a choice between a party that gave them 75p and one that promises them 42p—what a choice.

In my customary fashion, I am being generous to the Conservatives by citing a figure of 42p. The Conservatives said that their pension increase next April would be £5.50—£2 for inflation and £3.08 for the gimmicks, leaving 42p. However, we now know that £2.25 will be needed to cover inflation. Although the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) might provide one in her speech, we have not yet heard a revised figure for the increase. If it is still to be £5.50, with inflation taking £2.25 rather than £2, that leaves only 17p. Perhaps I have been too generous.

Secondly, those calculations are based on an equation that does not include tax, which leads me to one of the features of the Conservative proposals to which the readers of *Saga Magazine* objected most. The £150 winter fuel payment is tax free, as is the reduced television licence, worth more than £100. Once those pensioner benefits are subject to tax, many pensioners will be worse off overall. That is the best the Conservatives offer for the state pension in year 1; in years 2, 3, 4 and 5, they offer nothing. They would return to the old ways of nothing more than price indexation—nothing more than 75p and its equivalent.

[Mr. Steve Webb]

As for the Conservatives' long-term plan, they have always wanted to privatise everything that moves—and, in the case of the railways, plenty of things that do not move—and pensions are no exception. They tried to go for the full Monty—to phase out the basic state pension. Before the previous general election, they cobbled together a policy that was roundly rejected, so now they are going to try to do it very slowly.

The Conservative party intends to start with the young, by telling them that they can opt out of national insurance and save for a private pension in future. However, there is a slight cash flow problem. If people in their 20s start paying less national insurance in return for the state saving some national insurance in 40 years, there will be a bit of a gap between the loss of revenue now and the saved expenditure in 40 years. Where will the money come from? That is another black hole in the Conservative spending plans.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to dwell too long on the Conservative record. The House is familiar with it; more important, pensioners are familiar with it. I have one thing to say about Conservative proposals for the future. I have seen examples from around the country of Conservative literature relating to the party's proposals for pensioners, and the figure of £5.50 features prominently. I am reminded of the situation that arises when one writes an article for a newspaper, and the sub-editors remove the final paragraph because there is insufficient space. In this instance, it is the paragraph which discloses where the £5.50 will come from. Mysteriously, those who read the first line will see that £5.50 is to go on the pension, but they may never read the line that states that £5.08 is to come off. I believe that that is dishonest, and I hope that the hon. Member for Beckenham will dissociate herself from any local Conservative association that is putting out such literature.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He observed a few moments ago that the Conservative party is not trusted by pensioners on the subject of pensions. How, therefore, does he explain the fact that even at the 1997 general election, 44 per cent. of pensioners voted Conservative, only 34 per cent. voted Labour, and we cannot quite remember how poorly the Liberals did?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman underestimates pensioners by assuming that all they do is make a simple calculation of what their pensions will be. Pensioners look at a range of policies, not just pensions. Does the hon. Gentleman want to dispute the verdict of *Saga Magazine* readers on the Conservative pensions policy, which they rejected by an overwhelming majority when specifically asked about it a month or so ago?

The Conservative record is well known. We might have expected better from Labour. Many pensioners voted Labour in the hope of something better. In their manifesto, the Government set themselves the goal that pensioners would share fairly in the rising prosperity of the nation. How is that to be measured? Clearly, by the share of national income going from the Government to pensioners. One would not measure it narrowly, by looking just at pensions. One would look at the range of things given by Government to pensioners. I did that, in the form of a written question.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The hon. Gentleman referred to an election manifesto. The Liberal Democrat election manifesto at the last election stated:

> The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices.

That means that this year the Liberal Democrats would have increased the basic retirement pension by 75p. That is what the hon. Gentleman admitted to me in the debate on 8 June. It is sheer hypocrisy to describe as an insult what the Liberal Democrats themselves would have done.

Mr. Webb: I am well aware that the right hon. Gentleman is rattled by the local success of the Liberal Democrats and is nervous about the subject of the debate. Earlier this year, I moved a motion in the House condemning the 75p pension rise as inadequate. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman was elsewhere. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I supported the motion. The right hon. Gentleman and his party voted that the pension rise was adequate, and the Conservative party abstained. That is what happened this year.

The Labour promise was that pensioners would share fairly in the rise in national prosperity, so the least one would expect is that pensioners' share of national income from the Government would rise. For goodness' sake, doing better than the Tories is not much to ask, but they have not done so. Under this Government, the share of national income going to pensioners is lower than in the final year of the Conservative Government. No Labour-supporting pensioner who voted for this Government can have expected that to be the outcome.

There is plenty more evidence of the disappointment caused by the Government on pensions. The Government's own figures show that the number of pensioners living in poverty rose by 400,000 in the first two years of the Labour Government. The Government will say, "Since then, we have done A, B and C." Is it acceptable for two years to go by, with hundreds of thousands more pensioners living in poverty, before the Government get around to doing something as an election approaches?

Last December, we highlighted the figure for excess winter deaths—the number of deaths that exceed the expected figure. Those numbers are not large in much colder climates, but they reach extraordinary levels in this country. We have been trying to get the figures for last winter, but we are not being told them. My noble Friend Lord Russell asked for that information almost six weeks ago after one of our researchers phoned the Office for National Statistics and was told that the figures were ready but that we had to ask a parliamentary question to get them.

I tabled a question to the Treasury a couple of weeks ago and was given a named-day answer. I was told that we would get the figures soon. We phoned today and were told that they were still being "worked on". The Government want to get the figures off the political agenda. They want to announce a big pension increase before they receive the flak. They are sitting on the information, which should be before the House now.

As the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) knows, that is not the only information on which the Government are sitting. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman

will try to make that point during the debate. The Government Actuary's Department has been asked to produce a report on the funds available to the Government, the cost of higher pensions and the state of the national insurance fund. The Government Actuary wrote to the Southwark pensioners action group and said that his report was more or less ready at the end of September and would be finalised in the next few days and sent to the Government. I am grateful to the group for letting me know his comments. I have it on good authority that the report was sent to the Government. However, in a written answer today, the Minister said that it was being finalised. We bet it is being finalised!

One imagines that the figure for the national insurance fund balance was so huge that the Government had to get some different figures. That is the problem. There is key evidence for the Government's overflowing finances and the Government's record on pensions, but the Government are sitting on it—so much for freedom of information.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Does the hon. Gentleman seriously suggest that the Government would try to manipulate the report of the Government Actuary's Department?

Mr. Webb: Yes. *[Interruption.]* I make no bones about it; yes is the answer to the question. I believe that the Government were sent a report, which did not provide the answers that they wanted. I hope that the Minister will explain the delay in making known the contents, given that he has had the report for approximately a month. What extra questions has he asked the Government Actuary? What was the bottom line? Perhaps the Minister will tell us now; he has seen the report. The Government Actuary knew the figures at the end of September; I hope that the Minister will give us the figures.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): A little more than an hour ago, a journalist told me that the Department received the report on 6 October—the date it was expected—and that it would be published next Thursday. That is significant. That was the reason for a long point of order that you allowed me to make last week, Mr. Speaker. It is worrying that information crucial to deciding whether restoring the link is affordable has been kept from the House for a month.

Mr. Webb: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his dogged pursuit of the matter. I have written to the Minister about it, and, so far as I know, I have not received a reply.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does my hon. Friend know that he is describing common Government practice? My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and others have made the point that Governments publish independent reports only with their spin on them, rather than letting the public read and judge the reports, and responding to them alone. The freedom of information measure has not yet been amended at the other end of the building to deal with that because the Government continue to refuse to allow facts that are given to them to be free from Government constraint, and to insist that they should not be generally available.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Freedom of information is sometimes viewed as an esoteric issue that is only for the cognoscenti, yet it clearly has practical consequences in the case of BSE, rail and pensions.

A couple of administrative issues that relate to the way in which the Government have run pensions remain a shambles and are symptomatic of the lack of priority that is given to the needs of pensioners. The first is the infamous NIRS2 computer system. In the fourth year of the Parliament, the Government are still incapable of paying pensioners the right pension on the day that they are entitled to it. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has pursued the issue in the House.

I tabled a question to the Treasury—I know that that is usually a triumph of hope over experience. I asked what progress there had been on the NIRS2 system. The Paymaster General replied:

> Following the well-documented problems . . . considerable progress has . . . been made and the Inland Revenue now regards the system as stable.—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 409W.]

There was an answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), a Conservative spokesman, on 2 November. He asked

> how many pensioners are not receiving

their pensions on time. The reply was as follows:

> As at 15 September 2000, Benefit Agency offices had 97,000 pension awards waiting to be reviewed.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 573W.]

If that is stable, is it being suggested that that is the way we can expect things to be indefinitely?

I raised the issue of delays in state pension payments in an Adjournment debate in July 1999. I was assured that the problem would be sorted out by Christmas. Which Christmas? When will the problem be sorted out? How long will pensioners have to wait?

It is not only the computer system that the Government seem unable to run. I mentioned earlier the position of widows' state earnings-related pension schemes.

Mr. Butterfill: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the computer system, is he aware that each of the seven different types of benefit that are payable by the Benefits Agency has its own separate computer system, none of which is capable of interfacing with the other systems? Even if the Government get NIRS2 right, they cannot get the benefit right.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right. There are fundamental issues that have gone unaddressed by consecutive Governments. I shall give some evidence of the scale of the problem. The *Financial Times* reports that

> there are 7m cases on the computer system with data missing today, compared with 2.5m in 1998.

The situation is getting worse, not better, and the Government have failed to address it.

I understand that Age Concern is taking the Government to the European courts on the issue of widows' SERPS. The Government have said that men—it is typically men—who inquired about SERPS rules in the early 1990s and were given duff information can claim protected pension rights, on condition that they can show that they

> would or might have acted differently if they had received the correct information.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 166W.]

[Mr. Webb]

I have discussed the matter with some of the folk who have been through the personal pension mis-selling follow-up. Each case is painstakingly examined and the process is taking a long time to complete. However, the work is being done thoroughly. How can anyone prove that seven or eight years ago he saw a duff leaflet—*[Interruption.]* I think that the Minister said from a sedentary position, "He does not have to prove." The individual will have to say that he received a duff leaflet and show that he

would have or might have acted differently.

That person would have to produce the scheme of which he was a member at the time, the alternative schemes that were available and the situation and provision of the spouse. How will that be done? I believe that the Government are giving a misleading impression to the many men in this position—there are some women—who have been told that they will be protected. They will find out in a few years' time, when we know how the scheme will work, that they will not be protected. What they will have to prove will be impossible to prove. I hope that the Minister will clarify what exactly these men will have to provide.

I shall set out the Liberal Democrat approach to the issue. First, I shall reflect briefly on the Government's strategy for pensioners. Almost certainly, "strategy" is completely the wrong word. It is a dog's breakfast. The Government have been making it up as they have gone along, and there is still a lack of coherence. A few months after the general election, there was a massive increase in the level of the means test, and a renaming, which is essential. It is the minimum income guarantee.

We know that about 500,000 pensioners—

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No, I would like to make some progress. I will give way later.

About 500,000 pensioners are not claiming the money to which they are entitled. When the Government said that they are prioritising the poorest pensioners, they have it wrong. The poorest pensioners are not those who claim their entitlement. There are about 500,000 with an entitlement who are living below the poverty line but do not claim.

To be fair, the Government have ridden into battle. Thora Hird was brought forward to tackle the issue. The most recent figure that we have been given in a written answer—perhaps the Minister can update us—is that 30,000 of the 500,000 have now claimed their benefit. After the millions of pounds spent on publicity and on sending nearly 2 million letters to pensioners—at least three quarters of them did not have an entitlement—they have managed to increase by 30,000 the numbers of those who claim. Therefore, 470,000 pensioners are still going without. Aiming for a target of 500,000 and hitting 30,000 is a pretty poor performance. Is the Minister satisfied with that?

Reliance on the means test—which, of course, the Chancellor will increase massively on Wednesday—means missing the poorest pensioners in the land. The basic state pension reaches those pensioners like nothing else. That is why we believe in it.

Mr. Rammell: The same Liberal Democrat manifesto as my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) mentioned commits the Liberal Democrats not only to increasing the pension in line with prices, but to introducing a top-up of the basic state pension to meet the needs of the poorest pensioners. How is that different from the minimum income guarantee?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right. I am well aware of what the manifesto said. We committed ourselves to ensuring that the incomes of those pensioners would rise at least in line with earnings. That is the basis on which we will work, but we need to go beyond that.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Webb: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will tell him what we want to do in addition.

The minimum income guarantee sounded like a good idea. The Government thought that if they changed the name, came up with a new scheme and got Thora Hird involved, all would be well, but there was a problem. They realised that by creating a chasm between the basic pension and the means test, they were also creating a savings trap. They were discouraging pensioners from saving for the future and saying to today's pensioners who had already saved, "What was the point of saving? You've got your small pension, but all it's doing is disqualifying you from the minimum income guarantee."

What do the Government do? Instead of closing the gap between the pension and the means test, they increase it. If the Chancellor does what is widely expected of him on Wednesday and puts a fiver on the pension and takes the MIG up to £90, he will increase the gap between the basic state pension and the means test, which will push more pensioners on to means testing. I recently asked how many extra pensioners will be means-tested as a result of the increase under the new package, and was told that nearly 100,000 extra pensioners are to be means-tested.

The Government decided to do something else to deal with the hole that they had dug themselves into by creating a huge gap between the basic pension and the minimum income guarantee. Instead of putting the pension up, they decided to have another scheme called pensioner credit, but because it is so complicated, they have said that it will be years before they can introduce it.

In the meantime, however, they needed something else, which I think the Chancellor called transitional measures. What transitional measures could the Government possibly take between now and 2003? Well, let us think: what is happening between now and 2003? Oh, an election, so the Government decide to introduce transitional measures which will put money on the basic state pension, the very thing that they have spent several years telling us is a bad idea.

The Government have said that they could not possibly put money into the basic state pension because it is poorly targeted, but they have now decided to pay £150 to every pensioner regardless of means. It is a complete mess.

There is no coherence to the Government's approach. There are pension increases when an election is on the way, but only a 75p increase when it is not. That summarises the Government's approach. More schemes, more claim forms. Why does it have to be so complicated?

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): If the hon. Gentleman wants all funding for pensioners to be given through the basic state pension, what would be an adequate amount to replace what he is describing as gimmicks and what we describe as targeting resources where they are most needed? How would he pay for that?

Mr. Webb: The £150 winter fuel payment, to which I presume the hon. Gentleman's remarks also refer—he is not indicating whether that is so—goes to every pensioner household in the land, regardless of means. It is impossible to imagine anything more untargeted. It is so untargeted that his right hon. Friend the Minister of State will get it this winter.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): He is not a pensioner.

Mr. Bercow: He is only 59.

Mr. Webb: I would not begrudge him £150—I am sure he needs it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. There are far too many interventions from a sedentary position on both sides of the House, but particularly from Labour Members. The hon. Gentleman must be allowed to carry on with his remarks.

Mr. Webb: There is a rag bag of schemes—take-up campaigns, publicity campaigns and new schemes to deal with the problems of the old schemes. Even the free television licence scheme is a shambles. Many other hon. Members may have had my experience of receiving a letter asking whether I am over 75 and want to claim. Plenty of pensioners have received cheques to refund the money that they spent on the licence. Many pensioners do not have bank accounts, so they are being asked to send the cheques back so that they can have some money to take to the post office. This lot could not organise—well, it is a complete shambles.

What, then, is our priority? The hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) asked what should be done—

Mr. Kaufman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No, I will not.

The hon. Member for High Peak asked what level of pension we proposed, and I am keen to give him a specific figure. At our party conference a few weeks ago, I moved a motion on our new pensions policy, which our party has overwhelmingly endorsed. I can put on record precisely the policy on which we shall go into the next general election.

We propose that those who benefited from the Lawson tax cuts of 1988 and are always on the top incomes, having done two, three, four or five times as well as those on average earnings—that is, those on more than £100,000 a year—should be asked to pay more tax on their slice of income above £100,000. They, after all, are most able to do so. That would raise enough to allow us to put money on to the basic pension.

We propose that, over and above the figure that the Chancellor announces for next April, there should be rises of a minimum of £5 a week for all newly retired pensioners, of £10 a week for those aged between 75 and 79, and of £15 a week for those aged 80 or more. Those figures are in addition to inflation, in addition to what the Chancellor announces, and in addition to the other payments that the pensioners currently receive.

The payments will not be means-tested, but they will be intelligently targeted. That is the beauty of our proposals.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Webb: I think I had better ensure that I set out the entire policy.

I mentioned an increase of £15 a week for those over 80. Why should the amount be tapered according to age? Because there is a strong link between the oldest pensioners and the poorest. I have received letters from pensioners up and down the land, and those in most need are often the oldest. Almost all are women, who are given a particularly raw deal in regard to both state and private pensions. We can give extra help to those in most need without forcing them through additional means-testing. That is the clear distinction between what the Liberal Democrats advocate and what the other parties advocate.

Mr. Levitt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No; I am about to finish my speech.

The Conservatives propose to give people back their own money, plus 42p top whack. Labour proposes a pre-election giveaway. On Wednesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will stand up and do a Chris Tarrant routine: "£2.25 for inflation—but we don't want to give you that! £3.40 for the earnings link—but we don't want to give you that!" It will be £5; it will be £8. Who wants to be a millionaire?

Labour will be throwing the money at pensioners because there is an election around the corner. Pensioners, however, will remember what the Government did when there was not an election around the corner. They will remember which was the only major party in the House that voted against the 75p—the Conservatives abstained. At the next election, when Conservative candidates show themselves to have undergone a damascene conversion to the basic state pension, they will need to be reminded that, given the chance to decide whether 75p was enough, they said "We do not really know." I note that the Conservative party declined to table an amendment to today's motion. Clearly, only one party is expressing serious opposition to the Government on pensions: the Liberal Democrats.

We believe that a substantial increase is needed in the basic pension. The Chancellor has created a huge gulf between the pension and the means test, and on Wednesday, whatever he says, he will increase that gap. We believe that there should be fewer pensioners on means-tested benefits, not more. We believe in a decent basic state pension, and we believe that we will be the only party to go into the next election committed to that.

4.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"endorses the Government's approach to pensions and other policies for pensioners; notes that the Government has already committed £6½ billion more to pensioner benefits during this Parliament than was planned by the Conservatives, while ensuring that this additional expenditure is funded prudently and consistently with the Government's fiscal rules; strongly agrees with the Government that the basic state pension should be retained as the foundation of pension provision, and that most should be done for those pensioners who need most help through the Minimum Income Guarantee; supports the additional help for pensioner households, including winter fuel payments, which now gives them the equivalent of a further £3 a week and free TV licences for the over 75s, which were introduced from 1st November 2000; also supports the wide range of other measures taken by the Government for pensioners, the record investment in the National Health Service, free eye tests, help with home insulation and concessionary public transport fares and reductions in income taxation; and further agrees with the Government that the next priority should be to help pensioners with moderate savings and small occupational pensions to ensure that their thrift is rewarded and that they are able to share in the rising prosperity of the nation."

I do not wish to be misunderstood, but I am one of the few Members of Parliament who can say with some certainty that I have a limited amount of time in which to listen to this drivel. The reality is that the speech of the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) was thirty minutes of drivel. I shall do my best to answer some of his points, some of his highly misleading statements and, indeed, the contemptible scare stories that were deliberately designed to frighten people outside the House.

The hon. Gentleman started off with a point about age discrimination. I wholly agree with part of his speech, as age discrimination is rampant throughout society in this country and goes across the board, whether in jobs or the health service. It is not the easiest thing in the world to deal with that but, as the House knows, we have attempted to tackle it in employment on a voluntary basis. We also made it abundantly clear with the publication of the report "Winning the Generation Game" that we are considering going beyond a voluntary approach. The hon. Gentleman therefore made a valid point.

The hon. Gentleman made some assertions on the share of the gross national product going to pensioners, but did not provide figures or *Hansard* references. He was on the verge of giving a quote or reference, but did not do so. I suspect that he got a quote from a parliamentary answer that appeared some months ago. I have read the motion and done Liberal Democrat Members the justice of taking it seriously, even if I cannot take the hon. Gentleman's speech seriously. I went back and looked for that parliamentary answer because I recall it—although parliamentary answers in March are not good up-to-date information in November.

One should look at expenditure on pensioners, including retirement pensions, winter fuel payments, means-tested benefits and other benefits paid to pensioners, as well as concessionary TV licences, which came in last week, and compare the last year of the previous Government, 1996–97, with the planning year 2001–02, which begins next April. Even before the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday about what will happen next April, the percentage of the gross national product spent on pensions is higher than it was in the last year of the Tory Government.

Mr. Webb: What about the first four years?

Mr. Rooker: It is no good the hon. Gentleman saying that, as he said that we have spent less. I am telling him that we have spent more, even before the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday.

Mr. Webb: And now?

Mr. Rooker: It is no good, the hon. Gentleman cannot go back and rewrite his speech.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I shall not, as I am going to make my speech in my own way and answer some of the drivel that we heard before it becomes folklore that is repeated by Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners up and down the country.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: In a moment, but first I want to put the matter on the record so that no one can go round using the hon. Gentleman's statement, as they will have the knowledge that I rebutted it with figures, which are 5.32 per cent. and 5.33 per cent. That is a small difference, but it is bigger than the hon. Gentleman said it was, even before this Wednesday's announcement.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: In a moment. I may be able to save my hon. Friend time, although I shall gladly give way if he is not happy with what I say.

The hon. Member for Northavon raised the matter of the Government Actuary's report and, in response to a question asked by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), said that the Government were seeking to manipulate it. I do not think that the Government Actuary would admit to that, and it is useful for me to put on the record the fact that we have answered parliamentary questions on the matter in the last couple of weeks. I do not resile in any way from what I said when the Government accepted Baroness Castle's amendment at the final stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill last year. It is true to say that the Government Actuary is finalising his report on the effect on the national insurance fund of an earnings uprating of basic state retirement pension, and it will be published when it is completed. That is the phrase that we have used in parliamentary answers and in answers to letters from right hon. and hon. Members, but it is important to point out that, on Friday, Baroness Castle received a letter from the Government Actuary in which he answered some specific questions. He said:

I can confirm that I submitted a report to the Secretary of State during the week ended 6 October, as indicated by Mr. Young in his letter to the Secretary of the Southwark Pensioners Action Group,

which is what the hon. Member for Northavon quoted. The Government Actuary went on:

> In my letter to the Secretary of State covering the report I made it clear that the report did not cover the Government's proposals for uprating in April 2001. In pursuance of my responsibilities with respect to the uprating orders I would either have to amend this report or lay a supplementary report detailing these effects.
>
> The Secretary of State wants Parliament to have all the relevant information before it debates the uprating orders.

That is the commitment that the Secretary of State for Social Security made clear. Before Parliament is asked to approve the uprating orders, the House will have all the relevant information, including all the reports available. That commitment has been given and will be met. It is outrageous for hon. Members to imply that the Government are deceiving the House or that Ministers are lying.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: I have not finished the letter yet. It goes on:

> Accordingly he—

that is, the Secretary of State—

> asked, and I—

that is, the Government Actuary—

> have agreed, to complete the report by adding a further section to take account of the Government's proposals for uprating in April 2001. The Secretary of State has asked me to complete that section in time for him to lay the report when he sets out his proposals to Parliament next week.

As everyone knows, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make the pre-Budget report statement on Wednesday and the Secretary of State for Social Security will come to the House and make a statement on Thursday, so there is nothing secret. Nothing is being hidden. It is only once our plans for next April's uprating have been announced—they will not be announced in the main until Wednesday and in more detail on Thursday—that the report can be published.

Therefore, it is not possible to publish the Government Actuary's report in a way that allows right hon. and hon. Members to have a meaningful debate, but when the House is asked to vote and to approve those orders—some time in the near future, subject to the business managers—the report will be available. It will be published on Thursday.

What is the problem with that? The report could not conceivably be published beforehand. Any report that was half completed and put in the hands of hon. Members for today's debate would not take account of what will be proposed for next April. Surely, it is relevant for Members to have the full picture before we get involved in a debate and in decision making.

Mr. Beith: May I suggest that, in any publicity the Government give to the figures to be announced on Wednesday and Thursday, any press release or briefing given by the Department contains the relevant passage from the Actuary's report, particularly if that briefing takes place before an announcement to the House?

Mr. Rooker: Drivel plus. The report will be published in full. We are not in the position of manipulating the Government Actuary's report.

Mr. Simon Hughes: You are delaying it.

Mr. Rooker: We are not delaying it—it is not finished. It cannot be finished until the Government Actuary is given the figures that the Chancellor will announce on Wednesday.

Mr. Beith: Has the Government Actuary been given the figures?

Mr. Rooker: The right hon. Gentleman cannot expect me to answer that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Again, we cannot have conversations from sedentary positions with the Minister at the Dispatch Box. If Members want to intervene, they should stand up in the normal way and the Minister may or may not give way.

Mr. Rooker: As Liberal Democrat Members well know—and as they knew when they chose the subject of today's debate—they cannot have any information whatever on Wednesday's uprating statement. I can answer no questions today on Wednesday's statement.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: Yes; I promised my hon. Friend that I would.

Mr. Flynn: Does my right hon. Friend recall telling the House, on 24 July, that the earliest opportunity to publish the Government Actuary's report would be in January 2001? Does he also recall that the Deputy Government Actuary—in his letter to the Southwark Pensioners Action Group, of which I am a member—said:

> The report on the financial impact of price and earnings indexation of the basic pension—

which is what he was talking about—

> is now at a very advanced state and I am hoping to be able to submit it . . . next week.

The Deputy Government Actuary's letter was written on 28 September, since when I have tabled five parliamentary questions—including one during the recess—on the subject. However, I can generously describe the answers given to me by my right hon. Friend the Minister as evasive. Would it not be better if he had replied to those questions with the type of answers that he has just given the House?

Mr. Rooker: Indeed; that is precisely what I have done. As I said,

> The Government Actuary is currently finalising his report on the effect of the National Insurance Fund of an earnings uprating—

of pensions—

> and it will be published when it completed.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 575W.]

[Mr. Rooker]

The report will not be completed until the Government Actuary has the figures that the Chancellor will use on Wednesday. That is precisely what I said in parliamentary answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) and to other hon. Members.

I should address some of the other issues raised in the debate, including those on administration. I do not deny that NIRS2 is a problem that has not been solved. However, I am not going to review the history of NIRS2 or the preceding years in which competitive tendering was used. I should add that the word "stable", when used in relation to information technology systems, does not mean that those systems are 100 per cent. perfect.

Each month, about 50,000 plus people become pensioners. Currently, the system is not dealing correctly with payments to about 2,300 of those people, which is not satisfactory. Also, there is still a backlog of information from NIRS2 to the Benefits Agency. We are, however, working very quickly to correct the situation.

I do not think that it is a secret that the Department of Social Security is not proud of our IT systems, which are rubbish. Over the years, underinvestment in IT and purchase of the cheapest systems have brought us to the current sorry state. Although I shall not blame all that on the legacy that we inherited, everything cannot be put right in three years. We are purchasing and designing new systems. Had hon. Members examined some of the finer points of detail of the spending review 2000, they would have seen that more money is being made available to obtain those systems.

In his remarks on inherited SERPS, the hon. Member for Northavon showed himself to be a disgrace to his party and to the House. By refusing to accept that the Government have accepted, from the ombudsman and from the Public Accounts Committee, that the burden of proof is on the Government and not on the individual, he sought deliberately to create a disturbance among the public. Our difficulty in designing a scheme is that the burden of proof is on the Government, not on the individual. It is for the individual only to make a claim, subject to procedures that we will be introducing for debate.

The hon. Gentleman knows that it is untrue that individuals will have to satisfy the burden of proof, and it is dishonourable and disgraceful for him to repeat that statement on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Webb: The Minister is getting extremely carried away. It is a serious issue about which many pensioners have contacted me, because they are concerned about the Minister's utterances on it. I think that everyone agrees that those pensioners saw duff literature. Will he clarify whether the Government will seek to disprove their claims that they might have taken different action, or will their assertion that they might have taken different action be sufficient?

Mr. Rooker: The House can debate that when it debates the regulations—*[Interruption.]* No; the burden of proof is on the Government, not on claimants. I cannot express the position any clearer than that.

The hon. Member for Northavon is trying to twist my words. Claimants do not have to prove anything. They do not have to have documents; they only have to make a claim. They have to fill in a form and answer some questions. The onus of proof is on the Government, not on claimants. I have said that since March, and it is entirely false and disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman to try to assert otherwise.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Northavon talked about it taking years to introduce the pension credit. A few sentences later, he slipped in the date of 2003. We hope to get the pension credit up and running in two years, and we shall publish detailed information on that. As we have not yet published that information, and there is not much on the subject in the public domain—other than the speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security—the hon. Gentleman cannot say that that information is complicated. A consultation document on the subject will be published very shortly.

I am not sure what the hon. Member for Northavon said about his party's policy on the minimum income guarantee, because I was adding up the figures. He can make assumptions, based on press speculation—I cannot—about Wednesday's announcement. However, it did not seem that pensioners aged between 65 and 75 would end up with a pension that reached even the present MIG level of £78, let alone our £90 proposal. I say to pensioners who are now on £78.45p that it is not a princely sum—it is a safety net, and one cannot have a comfortable life on it. However, before April, the figure was £75; there has been an increase of £3.45. By next April, the figure will be £90—an increase of almost £12 a week. I do not hear many cheers from the Liberal Democrats about that increase for the poorest pensioners. I assume that they will vote against it, as they did with regard to the help for pensioners earlier this year.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I will not. Let me finish this point.

The hon. Member for Northavon seemed to imply that the winter fuel help would disappear. From his calculations, I thought that it had disappeared. We know that it would disappear under the Tories' plans, and they have the brass neck to complain about us not getting money to men aged between 60 and 64 who have been working when they plan to take that money off them anyway.

This month, the over-75s start to get their free television licences. This week, the cheques start to go out for the winter fuel allowances. Those are not celebrated by Opposition parties. All they do is come here to whinge and moan. There will be good news later this week and we will be able to rebut in detail many of the assertions made by the hon. Member for Northavon.

The hon. Member for Northavon has not outlined to the House a cohesive strategy for pensioners. He let it slip that the Liberal Democrats' policy would be paid for by taxing those on £100,000. Earlier this year, they said that they would pay for the policy by abolishing SERPS—the additional pension. We have not heard that rebutted, so our assumption must be that the Liberal Democrats would still have to abolish SERPS to make their policy work. Those who have been on average earnings for the past 20-odd years will get SERPS payments of £70 a week. The Liberal Democrats are offering to take that away. That is more drivel.

5.2 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I am glad to follow the Minister, but I hope that I do not get so excited. As all will be revealed on Wednesday, the Minister must feel—I have a great deal of sympathy with him—a bit like the emperor without any clothes.

I agree with the Minister's analysis of the speech by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), which was a classic Liberal Democrat speech—holier-than-thou, sanctimonious to the nth degree and of breathtaking cheek, particularly in the attempt to exempt his party from any electioneering. His speech was guaranteed to be attractive to a certain part of the electorate, without taking any responsibility. Suggestions have come today from the hon. Member for Northavon and, last week, from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) in Westminster Hall, on how much the Liberal Democrats intend to give pensioners. I cannot think of a better, or more expensive, way of appealing to one particular, but very large, group of the electorate.

It might be worth while to go through some of the information that we elicited from the Liberal Democrats in the debate in Westminster Hall on the exact cost of their proposals.

The hon. Member for Northavon set out what he thought was the cost of the £5, £10 and £15 hike, and he maintains that it can be covered by the 10 per cent. hike in the higher rate of tax for people earning more than £100,000. My calculations show that that hike would raise only £2.6 billion, and that the cost would be £4.5 billion.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): No, £3.1 billion.

Mrs. Lait: Well, I did not want to burden the House with figures, but I am willing to enlighten the Liberals as, judging by the puzzled face of the hon. Member for Northavon, they have not done their sums.

My calculations show that £5 a week for all pensioners would cost £2.8 billion; that the cost of the extra £5 for pensioners aged between 75 and 79 would be £500 million; and that the further £5 for the over-80s would be £1.2 billion: a total of £4.5 billion. The Liberals are £1.9 billion adrift on the total that they plan to spend.

Last week in Westminster Hall, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam declared that the Liberal Democrats' target was to offer single pensioners £90 a week and couples £135 a week. That was all hedged around with phrases about growth in the economy and not reaching that stage in one go. In fact, growth in the economy is usually linked to earnings. Despite the hon. Gentleman trying to obfuscate the situation, we know that the Liberal Democrat conference chucked out that proposal, possibly because the delegates did not want to frighten their supporters with the consequences, which, as worked out by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research—not a body known to favour Conservative philosophy—would be to put 5p on the basic rate of income tax.

The Liberal Democrats have adjusted their figure, as we heard last Tuesday. I was surprised that the hon. Member for Northavon did not use the figure, because it represented such a clear commitment and, given how much they are pandering to the pensioner vote, I should have thought that they would want to re-emphasise it. However, the total cost of increasing the basic state pension to £90 for single pensioners and £135 for couples is £8.5 billion. I am prepared to subtract from that the £2.6 billion that we have already agreed would be raised by the tax hike, so that we get a difference of £5.9 billion, which is the equivalent of an increase of 2.3p in the basic rate of tax. Or are the Liberals planning to increase the higher rate of tax on those earning more than £100,000 to the 73p in the pound that I have calculated it would cost? Those of us of a certain age remember what that did to public finances in the 1970s.

We have heard a speech of such breathtaking electioneering cheek that the House can treat the suggestions in it with the contempt that they deserve and get back to the real world of trying to help pensioners.

I am concerned about a broader matter mentioned in the motion: long-term care policy. Most of us would agree that paying for nursing care in England and Wales is a recipe for bureaucracy. Anyone who has had anything to do with defining what is nursing care and what is not will know the difficulties.

In recent days, we have seen emerging the very difficulty that we warned about all along when we were debating the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The Scots are being promised that all their care costs will be covered. They are in charge of their own budget and can make their own decisions; the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people have to pay for it. We can clearly see a battle royal taking place between the Scottish and English Executives—between No. 10 and the Scottish Parliament. Scots are able to vote on English and Welsh issues but not the other way around. We will also have the dubious pleasure of watching those with a dual mandate having to vote against their Scottish parliamentary colleagues and for the London Government, or for the Scottish Parliament and against the London Government. It will be most interesting to see what happens when people who sit in both Parliaments have to vote.

Mr. Burstow: Is it now the Conservative party's official position in this House that personal care should be free on the basis of assessment of need, as the royal commission recommends?

Mrs. Lait: The point that I was making, which the hon. Gentleman obviously missed, was about the constitutional position known to many as the West Lothian question, which is the key to the illogicality of devolution. What happens on long-term care, as the hon. Gentleman should know, is the responsibility of the Department of Health, and some elements of social security may well be included. If he is not careful, he will get the same lecture on annuities as he got last Tuesday. He gave me the opportunity to give it then, and I am happy to give it again now, but I know that a number of Back Benchers wish to contribute to this debate on pensioners' income.

Many of us have seen the statistics arising from the Government's annual poverty report, which show that, since 1997, the number of pensioners in poverty has increased from 28 per cent. to 30 per cent.—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, it is not mentioned by the Government. Their attempts to change it—although who knows what will happen on Wednesday—appear to be falling on stony ground. We still see pensioners losing out, as has been discussed, from the minimum income guarantee.

[Mrs. Lait]

We have all seen the Thora Hird advertisements on television. On my way here today, listening to BBC Radio Kent, I heard someone from the Benefits Agency explaining the minimum income guarantee and how it will work. I know that many letters have gone out to pensioners who could claim. From surgery experience, I am aware that some have still not received their letter or, if they have, that they thought that it was junk mail and chucked it in the bin. However, this past week has seen the figures so far emerging and they have not been a pretty sight.

In last Tuesday's debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), told us that 500,000 people have inquired about the campaign. However, it has taken parliamentary questions to extract the answers as to how many have been successful. On 31 October, we were told that 24,746 claimants had been successful so far and that 22,988 had been unsuccessful. Therefore, barely 10 per cent. of eligible people have replied; only half are getting anything, and the rumours are that they are finding the sums pretty small. I would be most interested to know the largest and smallest sums awarded so far, and the average payment.

Mr. Rooker: Because of the lack of time, I did not deal earlier with the take-up. The last time that I looked at the average figure of those successfully claiming, it was just over £20 a week. Furthermore, not all the 2.3 million letters have gone out; they are still being sent out at the rate of 30,000 a day.

Mrs. Lait: I am very pleased to have the average figure. We knew that the letters were still going out. However, more significantly, only 10 per cent. of people are replying at present. As anyone in marketing knows, 10 per cent. is a jolly good return. I congratulate the Government on attracting replies from 10 per cent. of people; a marketing company would consider 1 per cent. a very good return. However, 10 per cent. is still scandalously low, and I hope that more people will be able to claim that to which they are entitled.

People are losing out in other ways as well. We heard that a million people are still waiting for winter fuel payments. The Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), said:

all payments should be issued by the end of September.—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2000; Vol. 354, c. 27 4W.]

Perhaps we could be updated on that as well, because we understand that a million people are still waiting.

It is worth stating that the length of time taken to deal with the problem has increased. However, the then Pensions Minister, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms), predicted that, by the end of the year,

everybody would have received all of the benefits, plus any compensation . . .—[*Official Report*, 26 July 1999; Vol. 336, c. 97.]

The Minister of State said that 2,300 new cases a month were emerging. I should be most grateful to him if he would confirm that figure because those cases are in addition to the 100,000 people who are still waiting.

Mr. Rooker: There was an argument about whether the system is stable. I shall not refer to my folder, but I said that being stable does not mean working at 100 per cent. accuracy. The system is not 100 per cent. accurate at present. About 650,000 people become pensioners each year—50,000 plus a month—but 2,300 are not dealt with accurately. I saw that figure this morning. However, that does not mean that they do not get their pensions. Some pensions are calculated on the basis of what the figure may be and involve an overpayment or an underpayment.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I accept that the word "stable" does not mean 100 per cent. accuracy, but I take that to mean that, of the new pensioners who can claim SERPS payments, approximately 2,300 a month are new cases. It is useful to have that information on the record. Taking into account all such matters—NIRS2, MIG and the winter fuel payment—it is interesting that 2.5 million people are awaiting the pleasure of the older person's champion, otherwise known as the Secretary of State. To add insult to injury, it now appears, from coverage in *Pensions Week*, that the reorganisation at the Department of Social Security has led to a shortage of pensions advisers, so much so that the Department has asked the National Association of Pension Funds to do its work for it.

We, and all other hon. Members, await with interest the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday, although I assume that information on the pensioners credit will be given on Thursday. We hope that the consultation document will be published on Wednesday, so that we have time to study it before Thursday's statement and can provide a relatively reasoned response, which we may otherwise not be able to give. I congratulate the Government on the fact that, unusually for them, they have so far failed to leak what is in that document or, indeed, to spin it.

Precise details about the pensioners credit are scarce, but I cannot understand how a pensioners credit and the transitional arrangements could be introduced without some sort of means test. Thousands of pensioners may have to fill in tax forms, as opposed to income support forms, but that still constitutes a means test.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does the hon. Lady regard herself as being subject to a means test when she completes her tax return?

Mrs. Lait: The pensioners credit has a great similarity to the working families tax credit and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the tax credit is merely income support provided by another Department, and the pensioners credit will, in effect, be the same—hence a means test will be involved.

We shall make our own judgment of the Government's proposals when they are produced on Wednesday and Thursday, and so will the pensioners of the United Kingdom. To date, they and we are unimpressed by the Government's treatment of them.

5.19 pm

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): Our debate so far has been combative. As the chairman of the all-party group on ageing and older people, I shall refrain from making party-political points. Clearly, other hon. Members in the Chamber will make enough of them.

I pay tribute to the great deal that the Government have already done for pensioners. I recognise that the £6.5 billion allocated to pensioners in benefits and in kind

during this Parliament is considerably more than the cost of uprating pensions in line with earnings. In view of my constituency's demography, the majority of pensioners there will benefit from the Government's policy of targeting the poorest pensioners.

I am pleased by the increase in the threshold for payments of the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit for pensioners with second pensions and modest savings. Those measures go some way towards addressing my concerns, which I have expressed on several occasions in the Chamber, about those pensioners who are just above the income support and minimum income guarantee thresholds, of whom there are many in my constituency. They are typical blue-collar workers with a small occupational pension from, for example, Plessey or British Insulated Calendar Cables.

On the other hand, I want to discuss several areas in which the Government have not yet quite got their approach right and to urge them to do so in future. My right hon. Friend the Minister commented on the state earnings-related pension scheme, and I do not envy the Government their problem with SERPS. It was not of their devising, although they have the unenviable task of having to sort it out. I hope that my right hon. Friend was right to say that the onus of proof will lie with the Government. I have previously expressed to him my concerns about the fact that any system of remedying the mess that is based on justification is designed to be inequitable and perhaps to disfavour those in most need. We shall see.

The 75p uprating of pensions in line with inflation last year will be discussed extensively in this debate. It was entirely logical to those in the Treasury who crunch numbers in the abstract, but it was psychologically crazy to anyone who knows and cares about real pensioners. On previous occasions, I referred to the prism—it might be a distorting mirror—through which pensioners will continue to view the Government's pensions policy. That is sad, in view of the fact that their policy contains many generous provisions.

The argument about whether pensions should be uprated in line with earnings is complex. The Government maintain that that would be unsustainable in the medium to long term, and that the concept is outmoded because, for many pensioners, the state pension is not the main element of their retirement income. I understand the Government's concern that an increase across the board would put pension payments into the pockets of those who least need them. They are better targeted at those who need them most, but it is surely not beyond the wit of the Treasury to find a means to claw back some money from those who do not need it.

I disagree with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) that clawing back through the tax system or the allowances system involves means-testing. It does not involve means-testing, as I understand it. Everyone who pays tax has to have an assessment, but those who pay large amounts in tax commonly have different reasons for being sensitive to means-testing than do those many pensioners who simply find it demeaning.

Mrs. Lait: The pensioners' credit is for people who have a small occupational pension and who do not already pay tax. Many of them will have to fill in some type of form—whether a tax or an income support form.

Mr. O'Hara: I do not agree with the hon. Lady that that equates to means-testing. I was referring to those people whom the Government rightly do not want to receive pension benefits that are better targeted elsewhere. Such people do not fill in their tax return; they have an accountant to do it for them.

Pensioners regard the pension to which they have contributed not as a benefit or a handout but as an entitlement for which they have paid through their contributions. We are advised that there is a surplus in the national insurance fund that could provide an increase in line with earnings—at least in the medium term. However, in the absence of the Government Actuary's report, it is difficult to make a judgment on that matter, although I note the Minister's reasons for the delay in publishing the report.

Surely there is room for some policy improvement—on increasing pensions in line with earnings rather than with prices. The minimum income guarantee is the Government's own estimate of the minimum decent income for a pensioner. In the medium term, could we not at least move towards that as the acceptable amount for the basic pension? At the least, could we not have a discretionary increase in excess of inflation? I look forward to hearing good news on that in the autumn statement, although I realise that the Minister cannot be drawn on that at present.

Mr. Simon Hughes: As this is the last relevant parliamentary debate to be held before the Chancellor makes his announcement on Wednesday and before the subsequent debates on its social security aspects, is the view of the all-party group on ageing and older people that it would be preferable for fewer people to be in receipt of means-tested pensions or pension top-ups and for more people to receive a higher non-means-tested basic allowance? That is certainly the view that pensioners of all parties have put to me. Everyone understands that they may have to fill in a tax return and pay tax, but surely it would be a bad result if this week's announcements meant that more people were means-tested.

Mr. O'Hara: I hesitate to speak for other members of the group, but my view is that there should be a more generous basic pension, across the board, even if it cannot at present be increased in line with earnings.

To help pensioners to share in the prosperity of our country—a laudable aim in the Government's manifesto for the previous general election—is not an act of charity. When pensioners were earning, they contributed to that prosperity. They worked and, in many cases, fought to lay the foundations for the prosperity that we enjoy. What better argument could there be for the Government to show a little more generosity towards older pensioners—those aged between 75 and 80—in the settlement to be announced in the autumn statement?

5.28 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): None of the parties can look back on their record on pensions with any great credit. The Liberal Democrats made an attack on the Conservatives' record when we were in office. Under Baroness Thatcher, it is certainly true that we broke formally the link with earnings, although during our period in office the increase was slightly higher than inflation—about 10 per cent. higher. Furthermore, we introduced the winter fuel allowance—*[Interruption.]*—

[Mr. John Butterfill]

Yes, we did. I point out to the Minister of State, Department of Social Security that the real link with earnings was first broken when his party was in office—under a Lib-Lab coalition—although the Minister himself, to his great honour, was extremely critical of his Government when he was a young Back Bencher; the figures were fiddled and he said that the earnings link had been broken.

The problem is that all parties in the House, knowing that it would never be possible to give pensioners a full pension that would sustain them throughout their retired lives, have somehow connived, particularly at election time, to hint that that might some day be possible. No one has done that more than the Liberal Democrats with their series of wholly unsustainable and inadequately costed proposals that they know that they will never have the opportunity to implement. They know that all they are doing is putting out fodder for their *Focus* magazines.

Mr. Webb: We have tabled interminable questions on these issues. The revenue from a 50p rate in a full year is £3.1 billion. The cost of our proposals—I can show the hon. Gentleman the written answers—net of savings on tax on means-tested benefits is £3.1 billion. What more can we do than that?

Mr. Butterfill: I prefer the figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) gave. Even if the hon. Gentleman were correct, he is saying that his proposal is affordable. Even if were affordable in the short term, it would not be affordable, as he well knows, in the long term. Indeed, the present system is not sustainable in the long term. Anyone who has studied the issue sensibly and for a length of time—many Members on both sides of the House have done so—knows that the present system is not sustainable in the long term because of a demographic time bomb. People are living longer and not a state in the western world is capable of sustaining a system that is wholly unfunded in the way that ours is. It is a pay-as-you-go scheme that will never be affordable in the long term.

Mr. Flynn *rose—*

Mr. Butterfill: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he knows much about these matters.

Mr. Flynn: I refer to a booklet entitled "The Age of Entitlement" that was published by the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). He refers to the myth of the demographic time bomb, which was used by the Conservative party when it was in government to wreck the national insurance system. In addition, the evidence given to the Select Committee on Social Security made it clear that the funds in the national insurance system now are enough to restore the link for the next five years and will be enough for the period after that if national insurance funding increases by just the rate of inflation.

Mr. Butterfill: The hon. Gentleman studies these matters carefully and he will know that there are many conflicting views. The majority view, which is expressed by all sorts of experts on the subject—I have read as many publications as the hon. Gentleman—is that the present system is not sustainable. Even if it were, it would be sustainable at a level of pension that would never be adequate for people to live on without additional savings of their own or the provision of means-tested benefits by the state. That is the point that I want to make. We must try to get away from the politicking and down to the reality of what can and should be done by all of us on an all-party basis to provide a sustainable decent standard of living for pensioners in future.

There are three groups in society. The young have inherited a wonderful economic climate and will have the opportunity during their lifetimes to make themselves rich beyond the aspirations of any of us here. Most of us probably represent the middle group and then there are the significantly elderly—particularly those aged over 75—who fought in the last war and grew up in a period of austerity. They did not have the opportunities that we, and certainly the young, have had to save for their retirements. If we are going to make a change, we should single out the elderly and accept that we have an inter-generational responsibility to pay them, as of right, a decent pension.

For the intermediate group—that includes most of us; certainly anybody between the ages of 40 and 65, and perhaps those between the ages of 40 and 70—we should say that the present system will continue. We should tell them, "You should have been able to save something for your retirement. It is reasonable to assume that you might do so and, therefore, you will not be entitled to more than the present system provides." For those who fall through the net, there should be the prospect of some means-tested safety net.

Most people under the age of 40 view with horror the idea of having to live on a state retirement pension—and quite rightly so. They know that they must save for their old age and are quite prepared to do so. We should make that far more possible for them. At the moment, a series of incentives—many of them introduced by my party—is proving inadequate to persuade people to save.

The Government stakeholder pension scheme benefits nobody. The poorest group of people, whom the Government are keen to encourage, will find it better to be on the minimum guaranteed income and, frankly, it would be pension mis-selling to sell them a stakeholder policy. The richer group have better savings vehicles that are not encumbered by the ludicrous rules that currently apply to pension saving. Therefore, only a small group of people in the middle could benefit from stakeholder pensions, but they are not those whom the Minister of State and his party wanted to target.

Eventually, the answer must be to look at what has happened in other states, such as Australia, Argentina and Singapore. We need a compulsory retirement scheme into which everyone will have to pay. The young should be told that there will not be anything else and that they must save for their retirement. Then, we should concentrate on looking after the group of people to whom we all have an obligation—those who were not able to save during their working lives—and pay them a decent pension.

5.37 pm

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Given that about a third of my electorate are retired, my concern is that we need to do better—even than we have already. I know, however, having gone around the constituency

just recently, that many of my constituents already recognise just how much better things are than they were three years ago.

I do not think that people will forget that, in 18 years, the previous Government badly short-changed pensioners. Many will recall the hardship that pensioners suffered without relief. Even when the economy was going well during the many years of rising prosperity, there was nothing for pensioners beyond a basic increase in line with prices. That makes it clear where the Conservatives have been coming from. That record will not be forgotten; pensioners were not born yesterday.

When I faced the electorate in 1997, not one of my political opponents proposed anything more than an uprating of pensions in line with prices. That was true of the Liberal Democrat candidate, as it was of everyone else. However, because things have gone well, the Government have done better than could possibly have been envisaged. Benefits such as the minimum income guarantee, the uprating in line with wages, fuel payments and free television licences for older pensioners could not have been expected in 1997. Those things are appreciated, but I acknowledge, as I am sure many hon. Members would, that pensioners need and want more.

I have spoken to a number of pensioners over past weeks and found that, on analysis of their incomes, very few regard themselves as worse off under the Labour party. In fact, I have found quite the reverse. Pensioners get excited at public meetings, but when I had the opportunity to offer to write a cheque for the difference to anyone who was worse off, no one came forward. That is not to suggest that the pensioner's lot is sufficient, but they are better off under Labour than they were three years ago, and certainly better off than they would have been under the policies of the other two major parties.

My concern centres on the way in which things could get worse—indeed, they could only get worse if the Conservatives were to have the opportunity they seek—for the one third of my pensioner constituents who are on or near the level of the minimum income guarantee. They would lose from the minimum income guarantee no longer being upgraded according to wages, as well as on the winter fuel payment and free television licences. Happily, most of my constituents have seen though the Conservatives' hall of mirrors and are unlikely to fall for it. It is by one's deeds that one is judged and the Tories have a long way to go, especially among our experienced constituents, who remember them for what they did, not for what they say.

For all their good will, the Liberals never promised more than Labour has provided—how could they, when they reject the means by which the Labour Government have delivered an economy that is able to create options to pay more? If the Liberals early spending commitments had been implemented and their refusal to back the new deal had been accepted, we would be looking, not at a budget surplus this year, but at a deficit that would make it impossible to help those to whom we want to give priority.

It is important that we abandon the dangerous idea, often mentioned by hon. Members, of linking pensions with national insurance contributions. I had the Library calculate current pensions based on 40 years' national insurance contributions at the basic rate. The result would be a pension of £40 a week—of course, that pension would be upgraded according to inflation, but it is significantly less than is already paid. When the Tories talk about privatisation, with private pensions replacing the state system, we must remember that pensioners have made a wider contribution to our society, for which they should be rewarded; that contribution is more than merely the national insurance contributions they made, which would pay far less than even the current meagre pension.

Mr. Flynn: Does my hon. Friend recall that there was a substantial sum known as the Treasury supplement which was paid into the national insurance fund from 1911 to the mid-1980s, to which all those who are pensioners today have contributed? Therefore, one cannot measure the pension only using national insurance contributions; one has to take into account the sums paid through the Treasury supplement, which was interrupted in the late 1980s by the Conservatives.

Mr. Foster: I accept my hon. Friend's point that pensioners have made a contribution greater than their national insurance contributions alone. My point is that, often, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives imply that national insurance contributions alone could pay for a pension greater than that which pensioners now receive. That is far from the truth. If the sums involved in national insurance contributions were paid into a private scheme, as the Conservatives would have us do, the resulting pension would be far smaller than the one that is currently paid. Their calculations are invalid. Whether or not they have been able to contribute through taxation, people's broader contribution to society should be taken into account.

I strongly support the Government's desire to improve the lot of all pensioners while simultaneously targeting the greatest benefits on those in greatest need. However, I believe that there is a weakness in the way we attract claims from those who are deserving of extra help. The problem is that we have mixed up supplementary pensions with the income support system: there is a significant difference between those who require temporary assistance while awaiting employment opportunities, for example, and those who have completed their years of toil and now look forward to security in retirement.

The supplementary pension that is sometimes necessary to produce a minimum guaranteed income should not be referred to as "income support". It is a supplementary pension for which people have worked and which they deserve. The perceived degradation of older people claiming an income support payment could easily be alleviated by changing the name of the payment—perhaps by using the term "supplementary pension" to refer to that special payment applied only to older people who require extra help.

I do not accept, as is sometimes suggested by the Government in answer to questions, that legislation is required to change the terminology on a form. That could be done without a great deal of effort. When the next version of the form is printed, perhaps the heading could be something other than "Income Support".

I commend the Government for their work in targeting groups that may be eligible, but while the term "income support" persists, there will be those who refuse to claim it. Many pensioners, rightly or wrongly, associate income support with folk sitting outside McDonald's with their dogs and their begging bowls. That is not an image that pensioners are prepared to accept.

[Mr. Foster]

I plead with the Government to look again at the administrative apparatus for delivering the minimum income pension. That should refer to a minimum retirement income, and the difference between other incomes and that level should be made up by a retirement supplement.

Terminology is important. To some extent pensioners have been aided by the introduction of telephone claims, but they will not fill in forms that warn of the dire consequences of fraud. More work needs to be done on that. However well-meaning Department of Social Security staff are, specially trained staff are needed to work with the claims of elderly people. Pensioner applicants are not skivers and must not be made to feel uncomfortable when they make their claims.

Much has been done, but much remains to be done for our pensioners. A change in the name of that additional benefit would make an enormous difference to many people in my constituency and elsewhere.

5.46 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) referred to the Liberal Democrats' commitment to additional investment in public services early in the life of the present Parliament. Hon. Members on both sides will recall that on a number of occasions we highlighted what we believed to be weaknesses in public services that needed early investment. It is only recently that the Prime Minister has acknowledged those weaknesses and the fact that the Government failed to invest in the early days of their Administration to address them. For that reason, we continue to have NHS winter crisis after winter crisis.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: Briefly, as I must make progress.

Mr. Corbyn: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about investment in the public services. In a spare moment, will he ask Islington Liberal Democrats why they are closing day centres for the elderly, other day centres and luncheon clubs?

Mr. Burstow: One of the reasons, I suspect, is that the Government have decided that the data changes that would lead to an increase in standard spending assessments for London this year will not come through. Consequently, London will lose substantial resources. I imagine that that causes concern to the hon. Gentleman as well. I shall bear in mind what he said and find out whether that is, indeed, the case.

I return to the subject on which I intended to speak—long-term care. At the last Labour party conference before the 1997 general election, the then Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, gave this pledge:

> I don't want to live in a country where the only way pensioners can get long term care is by selling their homes.

That was clear and unambiguous, and it was deservedly welcomed by many across the country. It was a promise to act to end the grotesque spectacle of the debt collector pursuing the dementia sufferer for care home fees.

Three years on and one royal commission later, what is left of the Prime Minister's promise? Nothing but bitter disappointment and a sense of betrayal among many people outside. What do the Government propose to put in place of the Prime Minister's pledge to the Labour party conference in 1997? The sop offered by Government is that nursing care will be free in future. Legislation will be needed to bring that about, and it will not start until 2003 at the earliest.

Everyone in the country, and many of my constituents to whom I have spoken directly about the matter, thought that nursing care was free anyway. They are puzzled about why the Government intend to give them the great gift of free nursing care.

The message about the Government's views on long-term care is plain. Care is free for those who have a medical condition from which they can recover. That applies to every aspect of the care: hotel accommodation, food, personal care and nursing care costs. Everything is free, and so it should be. That is part of our commitment to a universal, free health-care system. However, care for those who suffer from a chronic medical condition such as Parkinson's disease or dementia comes with a bill attached. Liberal Democrats are clear and unequivocal about our commitment to making personal care free on the basis of an assessment of need.

Mr. Rammell: If the commitment is clear and unequivocal, why does the Liberal Democrat alternative Budget for 2000 include only a costed commitment to pay immediately for nursing care?

Mr. Burstow: If the hon. Gentleman had read on, he would have realised that we are also committed to funding all personal care. It is clearly stated in the same document. During our previous debate on the subject, the hon. Gentleman did not have a copy of the alternative Budget. I am glad that he now has it. He can read that it goes on to refer to a first step towards implementing the royal commission's proposals for free personal care.

Mr. Rammell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: I shall not give way because I have answered the hon. Gentleman's point. The royal commission's recommendations are also clear. It was right to recommend that personal care should be free.

With chronic health conditions, it is difficult to predict or anticipate the way in which the risk will fall on an individual, and whether someone will need long-term care. Consequently, the costs fall disproportionately on a few people. We believe that the costs of long-term care should be spread across the whole community and ultimately met through taxation. The royal commission also took that view after undertaking the inquiry that the Government requested to ascertain the way in which we can construct a fair, effective and sustainable system for financing long-term care. Unfortunately, the Government chose to miss the opportunity of accepting the royal commission's proposals. Instead, they plumped for short-term fix. We have had what could be described as an adjournment of the debate on long-term care. The Government will return to it because they must do that.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does not my hon. Friend agree that the Government discriminate against

people who are mentally ill through their policies on long-term care, which affect sufferers of Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, which becomes a mental illness? That is grossly unfair.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend is right about such discrimination. Their policies are also another form of age discrimination. It means that many people, who rightly expect that their nursing and personal care costs would be covered if they suffered from a chronic condition such as dementia, know that nothing will change as a result of the NHS plan. The Government's announcement will leave in place the postcode lottery of care that existed under the Conservatives for years. It will create new anomalies when the new definition of nursing care is interpreted.

The NHS plan leaves in place the perverse incentives that encourage local authorities to utilise residential care rather than help older people who remain in their homes. It leaves unanswered a fundamental question: where does the balance lie between an individual's personal responsibility and that of the state for meeting care costs? The Government have not provided a clear answer to that. They have put the matter into a siding, but they will have to return to it, and answer that question clearly and definitively.

As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) said, reports in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend, and in the *Daily Mail* today, describe the way in which the Scottish Executive will view long-term care. If those reports are correct, the Government will be put under a spotlight to explain why they have followed one road while the Scottish Executive have gone down another. The Scottish Executive appear set to go further than the Government. The new First Minister, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), is reported as saying that not only nursing care, but personal care should be free.

In *The Sunday Times*, the First Minister is quoted as saying:

> If you are rooted in public concern then you will know that if every organisation you talk to, every medical group, every local authority, the Sutherland people themselves, the PLP, the Liberal group—

I believe that he means the Liberal Democrats—

> the opposition are all agreed, then sometimes you just have to say to yourselves: "Well, look. There is a firm body of opinion. Is what we have as a policy the right thing to do?"

Clearly, the First Minister believed that the Government of Scotland had not adopted the right policy by embracing the Westminster Government's policy of covering nursing care only. I welcome that decision, which is a step in the right direction. I hope that we, along with all the organisations in England and Wales that want the same policy as Scotland, can persuade the Government to provide it.

There has been no action on the matter during the whole Parliament. Plenty of debate has taken place, and the Government have often refused to set out their clear policy intent. They set up a royal commission within six months of the general election and we had to wait a year for it to report. That is unusually quick for a royal commission, and we welcomed that. Another 18 months passed before the Secretary of State told us at the Dispatch Box that he had to consider the report for another six months. In June or July, smuggled out under cover of the NHS plan, we received the extremely bad news that nothing would be done in this Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) spelled out, pensioners feel betrayed not only in the case of long-term care. There is genuine anger about the pension. I have met many of my older constituents, who feel insulted by the 75p increase in the basic state pension this year. Labour has presided over an increase in pensioner poverty—400,000 more pensioners live in poverty today than when the Government took office. The Government spend less of the national income on pensions now than when they took office—they have spent less in the first four years of the Parliament. The Minister may have wriggled at the Dispatch Box, but relying on future figures is not helpful and does not bear close scrutiny. When we consider the true figures for Government spending in their first four years in office, we realise that the prosperity of the nation is not being shared.

If Labour has made matters worse, the Conservatives are not the solution. Let us consider how much their pensions policy will cost. The hon. Member for Beckenham did an exercise to try to cost our policy. She needed only to read *Hansard*, which makes it clear that our policy will cost considerably less than the figures that she chose to peddle to the House. The Conservatives would scrap the winter allowance and the free television licence for the over-75s, and they would end the Christmas bonus.

What extra money would pensioners receive through Conservative pensions policy? My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon was generous; he said that they would receive 42p extra. However, the inflation increase of £2.25 would mean that pensioners would receive only 17p extra.

Mrs. Lait: Will the hon. Gentleman deny that, last Tuesday, he said that he wanted the basic state pension to be £90 for a single person and £135 for a couple? Will he also deny that the net cost of that could be 2.3p on the basic rate of income tax?

Mr. Burstow: I have the relevant copy of *Hansard*, and I urge the hon. Lady to read my speech, her speech and the interventions before she pursues that line of argument. The construction that she placed on my words—although I am happy to accept it—does not entirely reflect what I said. I was referring to the family budget unit's work on low cost, affordable pensions. The unit suggested two figures: £90 for a single person and £135 for couples. I said that we wanted to establish a commission to review the way in which pensions are increased year on year, and that the family budget unit's methodology should be considered as part of the commission's work.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: No, I have dealt with the hon. Lady's question clearly for the third or fourth time. She asked me similar questions during last Tuesday's debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon rightly said, the Conservatives' proposal is the first case on record of robbing Peter to pay Peter. They would be taking money from pensioners and giving it back to them. We shall hear a great deal about pensions this week because of the pre-Budget statement, and those who consider the debate and the issues should carefully

[Mr. Burstow]

examine Conservative proposals and not take them at face value. They should look carefully at the contents of their pockets before accepting any pension proposals from the Conservatives. I think that they will find that they would be well and truly short changed.

That is hardly surprising when we consider the record of the Conservatives over the 18 years they were in office. It is undoubtedly true that the richest of our pensioners, who are a small minority of pensioners, enjoyed significant increases in their pensions. The poorest pensioners saw their incomes rise by only £10 a week. After 18 years of Tory rule, pensioners had only £10 to show for it. That was the consequence of a Conservative policy which was all about targeting extra help on the rich rather than doing something to help the poorest pensioners.

We are clear that the most effective way of getting extra help to pensioners is through the basic state pension. It is the most administratively cost-effective way of targeting extra help.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Burstow: On the effective targeting of extra help?

Mr. Bercow: Yes. Given that the Liberal Democrats June 2000 policy document proposed a restoration of the earnings link, that their party conference took a different view and that the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends were veritably at sixes and sevens on the subject, with no coherent overall position, will he now remove the fog of confusion that is descending?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman intervened on a specific point and then moved on to another. He should draw out the document from the Library and read it. It does not state anything to do with the earnings link. An amendment to that effect was moved from the floor of the conference.

Mr. Bercow: I studied reports of the debates and the votes.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman obviously blanked out during that part of the conference. He should check his facts. Central office briefing was completely wrong.

The most effective way of getting extra help to pensioners is through the basic pension. Administrative costs are about 6 per cent. of expenditure if there is targeting through a means test. They are about 0.9 per cent. if we proceed through the basic state pension. The Minister has accepted that it is far more costly to use a means test to get extra help to the poorest. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon rightly said, the poorest pensioners do not get the help because they are the ones who do not claim the minimum income guarantee.

As there is such a strong and clear link between poverty and old age, targeting extra help to pensioners aged 75 and 80 is the right way forward. We all know that at the age of 80 pensioners receive an extra 25p. That is not enough to buy a first-class stamp to send it back. When the increase was introduced in 1971, it was worth something.

Liberal Democrats want to increase the extra payment to £15 for a single pensioner and to £28 for a pensioner couple. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) says that our proposals cannot be afforded and cannot be implemented. We say that they can be afforded and delivered. There is clear evidence of a willingness outside the House to ensure that the basic state pension is increased. Even the evidence from the Department of Social Security bears that out. It is clear from social security research report 83 that the Department found from its research work that even people in work were prepared to pay enough to enable an extra £10, £20 or £30 a week to be paid through the basic state pension.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon has been chastised for not sticking to some of the commitments set out in the Liberal Democrat manifesto in 1997. I find it odd to be chastised for doing not less but wanting to be more ambitious and wanting to do more for our pensioners. It is rather novel to be challenged and chastised by the Government for taking such an approach.

The Prime Minister says that he has got the message about the 75p increase. On Wednesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer should say clearly and effectively whether he understood the message. We believe, along with people outside the House, that a decent pension increase is long overdue. Too many years have passed during which we have seen the basic state pension wither away. It is time that we reversed that long-term decline and invested for a decent basic pension.

6.4 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): During the 10 years of miserable opposition that I suffered, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends, we dreamed about the day when we would reform the pension system on the lines that we preached throughout those 10 years. Indeed, they have been preached during the party's entire history. We said that we would rebuild the pension on the basis of the national insurance principle. I shall say many things in opposition to the Government's policy, but I shall do so with the support of my party's history, my party's present policy as decided at the most recent conference and the approval of two marvellous reports by no fewer than three Select Committees since June, and knowing that we are talking about a policy that has worked brilliantly.

We can go to our constituencies and say that there is a Labour good-news story on pensions. We have provided a good £6 billion more than the Conservatives would have made available if they had been re-elected. I do not understand how the perception of our policies is so badly wrong. Many pensioners believe that we have been mean with pensions. The fault is ours. It cannot be said that what has happened was not predicted. It was predicted in early-day motion 1 this year. Over the previous four years, pleas have been made, with the backing now of 106 Members, to restore the earnings link and start to ensure that the basic pension has a strengthened foundation, not a crumbling one.

To his great credit, the Welsh Liberal, David Lloyd George, introduced the national insurance scheme in 1911. There were moves before that to introduce such a scheme. However, it determined how we would organise our welfare benefit throughout almost the entirety of the 20th century. The 19th century was marked by the

poor law. It was thought that the way to distribute welfare was to give it to the poor, tapping them on their grey heads and saying, "There is a little handout for you."

It is extraordinary that we appear to be reverting to the principle of the poor law in Government policy. It has been said that there is a young person's view of these matters, and that may lie behind what is happening. When we were in opposition, and especially during the final years, we said that 1 million of the poorest pensioners would be our first priority. They were getting basic pensions and not what we call the minimum income guarantee.

There is nothing new about MIG. It was around 60 years ago, and it existed throughout the life of income support, supplementary benefit and national assistance. It has always been possible for those whose pensions were not at a level that was deemed reasonable to obtain extra money. It was the handout, the charity or the gift from Government. The number of our poorest pensioners has been reduced to 876,000, and we are now talking about 500,000. They are living below a level that the Government have described as the minimum income guarantee.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), talked about the take-up of the scheme, which arrived two years late—the Government had been begged to introduce it a long time before. Take-up is disappointing. At the most, it is about 5 per cent., but it is probably about 3 per cent., which is tiny. Why is that the position? I suggest to my right hon. Friend the Minister that he should talk to pensioners. Many pensioners worked throughout their working life, paid all their dues and never claimed any dole or any benefit. That is a matter of great pride for them. When they reach the age of retirement, they are told that if they are to get the amount of money that the Government regard as the minimum that they should receive, they will have to complete a very long and complex form and ask for a handout. That is the difference between what the Government Front-Bench spokesmen are saying and what 85 Labour Members have said and have not resiled from in early-day motion 1. They want the extra amount put on the basic pension, so that it is an entitlement that pensioners can accept with dignity and pride. They do not want it to be a demeaning amount that pensioners have to claim through the income support scheme. The difference is crucial. It is difficult to see why that is not understood by the Government. Investigations have been made throughout this long period into why people entitled to the minimum income guarantee are not receiving it. The evidence shows that pensioners find the scheme demeaning, although it has not been published in great detail.

The majority of pensioners, including those who will come to Parliament tomorrow, want a promise that no party is making to them, which is that in their retirement they will have an increase in their pensions equivalent to the real rate of inflation. That is not a great deal to ask. Is it affordable? I agree with the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) about compulsory pension schemes.

It is not just today's pensioners who face these problems. People in their 40s and 50s who were mis-sold personal pensions will get a terrible shock when they reach retirement age and go into the world of annuities. Annuity rates dropped in value by 30 per cent. from the 1990–94 projections. That is a huge drop. Some of my constituents believed that their total fund was the annual amount that they would receive in their personal pensions, and they had organised their lives accordingly. People understand well their occupational pensions, but few understand the personal pensions that they were wickedly mis-sold.

Millions of young people will be in even greater trouble if we allow the basic pension to wither on the vine. Those not in work will be in terrible trouble, but so will those not paying into any occupational scheme. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West spoke against the policy of his own party. The most dangerous thing about the Government's policy is that it attacks the principle of the basic pension. If on some dark day in the future there were a change of Government, they would have an open invitation to destroy the basic pension. The Opposition already have a policy of allowing young people to pull out of it.

We all know the attitude of staff to pensions. They have almost to be nailed to the desk to get them to contribute to pension schemes that are freely given, which require a contribution of 10 per cent. of their salaries. It is difficult to persuade them that they are not immortal and that one day they will grow old and need that pension. They do not want to contribute during the early, furniture-buying, child-rearing days of marriage. In their 40s and 50s, they will have to pay 15 or 20 per cent. of their income on a pension. If the state pension goes, they will receive a derisory pension. That is an important point.

I want to consider the intellectual poverty of the Government's position on pensions. Since June, there have been reports from three Select Committees, which are not manned or womanned by people who present a challenging view for the Government. I have just discussed that with my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). We have been told in clear terms that we will never be allowed to serve on a Select Committee, certainly not the Select Committee on Social Security. The Government trust members of Select Committees to be loyal to them. I would love to read the Government's response to the splendid report of the Social Security Committee on "The Contributory Principle", which says that the Government's preference for means-testing

> involves a rejection of the wider functions which the contributory system offers, of allowing individuals, whatever their means, to redistribute income over their lifetime.

The whole point of national insurance is to provide help in certain periods of our lives: when we are very young, in the early days of marriage and when we are old. If we have paid into an insurance fund during that period when we can afford to do so, we can have money out at other times. Every party accepts that principle for child benefit, which enjoys almost 100 per cent. take-up. Why? Because there is no stigma attached to it, everyone can receive it and it is entirely untargeted. It is a very popular benefit.

The report from the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs on "Poverty in Scotland" said:

> fundamentally we believe that the basis for support in old age should be the universal state pension, payable at the age of retirement. The state pension should be linked to the increase in average earnings.

The Social Security Committee report on "Pensioner Poverty" referred to the aims set out in the 1998 pensions Green Paper. It said that

> people who work all their lives should not have to rely on means-tested benefits when they retire.

[Mr. Paul Flynn]

It went on to say that

> the Government's long-term aim of enabling working people to retire on incomes which will not require them to depend on a means-test, will be realised.

All those reports are detailed and thorough. They were the result of months of work by the various Committee. Not one of them supports the stubborn, doctrinaire line taken by the Government, which is contrary to the opinion of the Labour party and is difficult to sell to pensioners.

We know that the Government intend to allocate a large amount of money to pensioners. However, after the Budget, the £150 allowance and the policy behind it met a growing feeling of rejection. I went to a meeting of a pensioners' group, and the morning papers were saying that the Chancellor would be popular with pensioners. He was not. Feelings about that larger lump sum were similar to those that people had in the early years of trade unions when rogue employers cheated their workers every week by paying them low wages and then tried to buy back their favour by giving them a turkey for Christmas. The effect of being given a turkey was much greater than being cheated out of £5 a week in their wages. It was a gimmick. When the 75p increase was announced, those pensioners were very angry about it.

Liberal Democrat and Labour Members have expended much energy trying to find out the amount of the national insurance fund. That information is crucial to debates on pensions. Last November, there was a surplus of £8.43 billion. That money belongs principally to pensioners. This and previous Governments have raided the national insurance fund to reduce contributions to employees. Employees have a claim on some of that money, but large sums have been used for that purpose.

The stable employment situation, with the lowest unemployment rate for 20 years, and the Government's other great achievements have ensured that the national insurance fund contains an even bigger sum. That £8.43 billion was not the balance of the fund: it was the unneeded surplus. There was already enough money in the fund for contingencies, as the law states that there should be. Increases in unemployment could have been dealt with using the contingency fund, and there would still have been £8.4 billion available. An increase in the basic pension of £1 a week would cost about £500 million. No one is asking for an unreasonable increase for pensioners to bring pensions up to what they would have been had those pensioners not been cheated by the Tory Government every year between 1980 and 1997. We know that that is not possible: it would be very difficult to achieve.

We argue, however, that increases are affordable. They are just, and they are the best way to reward pensioners for the contributions that they have made. The Treasury supplement was paid for years. Real money went into the scheme. Pensioners who have worked all their lives and have contributed through their insurance contributions and through the Treasury supplement now have to beg for charity and take handouts to get a pension. Increasing the MIG to £90 may provide extra money, but instead of the current one in five persons on means-tested benefits there will be more of them—if the present trend continues that number will increase to one in four by 2050. We cannot say to a whole generation that they must rely on means-tested benefits.

I appeal to the Government to re-examine their policies. Those policies are deeply unfair, although the Government's heart is in the right place. Their spending is generous, but they are corrupting what has been one of the Labour party's great achievements over the past 100 years: supporting the principle of national insurance. Not only is a large increase fair, affordable and overdue; it should be possible to make that increase now, and it should be announced on Wednesday. There is no excuse for any other action.

6.20 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who speaks about these matters with great passion and knowledge. I thought I would be able to agree with him to an extent that would embarrass us both, but I am happy to say that in a moment I shall be able to resume normal hostilities.

The hon. Gentleman was right to talk about the restoration of the pensions link, a theme that has run through the debate. Certainly, out in the country there is a feeling that—if I may use the phrase employed by the hon. Gentleman a few moments ago—the Conservative Government cheated in 1980 by withdrawing the link with earnings, and that although the present Government would like to restore it now, they cannot for some reason. The Government seem to be trying to have it both ways: they are blaming us for taking away the earnings link, and are trying to achieve vicarious credit by saying that they would of course restore it, but cannot quite get around to doing so.

The history is instructive. Under the National Insurance Act 1974, Labour linked the retirement pension to the rise in earnings. I think that it was honouring an election pledge, and many people greeted the move with joy. The difficulty is that it is one thing to introduce legislation, and another to implement it. In 1976, pensions were raised by less than income or earnings. In that year, the Labour Government did not implement their own legislation. Then came the uprating for November 1977, when the link did not apply, because earnings had risen faster than prices, and earnings had risen faster in any event.

The real crunch for the Labour party came in the uprating statement of November 1978. Labour raised pensions by 11.4 per cent., but earnings had risen by 13.3 per cent. Labour then proposed an uprating that it was not in a position to implement, because it lost the election. That is nevertheless relevant to the point that I am about to make.

In March 1979, it was proposed that pensions should rise by 12.8 per cent. At the time, earnings were rising by something in excess of 15 per cent. That caused outrage among pensioners, many of whom had doubtless voted Labour and seen legislation passed, and now saw their own fluffy Labour Government and their own Secretary of State avoiding their own legislation.

Trying to square the circle and work out how such an extraordinary thing had happened—extraordinary, that is, to those who had not followed the track record of previous Labour Governments—Lord Ennals, then Secretary of State for Social Services, wrote in *Pensioners Voice* something that, even in a cynical profession, comes across as cringe-making. He wrote:

> There is a statutory obligation to take these figures (i.e., earnings) into account, which was done, but no statutory obligation to get it right—

a Government who introduce legislation then cynically refuse to implement it.

The Conservative Government did not, in some cloak-and-dagger or hole-in-the-corner way, repeal the link; they said in their 1979 election campaign that they would remove the link, because at the time it was unsustainable. Lord Jenkin of Roding, as he then was not—he was then Secretary of State for Social Services—explained why it was unsustainable, given the state of the economy at the time. I shall say more about that shortly. He went on to say that the rise in pensions would be linked to the rise in prices instead, because that was

> a more realistic, a more honest and, above all, a more sustainable, prospectus.—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1979; Vol. 976, c. 903.]

What has happened with the earnings link has passed into mythology. A Labour Government campaigned to introduce it, refused to implement their own legislation, and cynically sneered that all they were obliged to do was take the figures into account—they did not have to get it right. A Conservative Opposition and, in due course, a Conservative Government campaigned on the basis that those figures were simply unsustainable, and that it was better in the long run to promise something to pensioners that was sustainable.

Mr. Rooker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I would adore to give way to the Minister, so that I can share his embarrassment.

Mr. Rooker: There is no embarrassment. The hon. Gentleman has gone over the history of what happened during those four years and I do not dissent from any of what he has said, but he has neglected to draw attention to something that was fundamentally wrong. I refer to the attempts to forecast earnings and prices six months in advance. Ministers were coming to the Dispatch Box in March announcing what they thought earnings and prices would be in November, and stating what the pension would be. The forecasts were wrong, and it was necessary to return to an historical system.

There were inbuilt errors in the design of the system. I complained at the time, as did others. There was no precision in the attempts to forecast what would happen in six months' time, which is why we have an historical system today.

Mr. Nicholls: There is something glorious about the Minister. I always enjoy my exchanges with him.

As the Minister well knows, under the Labour Government in those days it was impossible to forecast rises in prices or earnings in terms of more than a few weeks, because the economy was completely out of control. At that time—the last time that the Minister was involved in an alliance, a Lib-Lab pact—it was impossible to forecast what would happen from week to week. At that time, the country was so bankrupt that when Lord Healey was going overseas he had to turn his car around on the way to Heathrow, because the International Monetary Fund had said that it would withdraw the country's credit and make it bankrupt.

In 1979 our economy was a thoroughgoing basket case, and it was certainly true at the time that the earnings link was unsustainable. We are now in a vastly different world. We now have an excellent economy, bequeathed by a Conservative Government who had learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. Although the economy will slow down as stealth taxes begin to bite, the present Government have not yet wrecked the economy that they were bequeathed. As it is a strong economy, I think it fair to consider whether the earnings link could be restored in some shape or form.

I say that without for a moment making light of the figures that would be involved. I understand that if the earnings link were restored for this year, it would cost £1 billion, and that by 2010 it would amount to £8 billion. Those are substantial sums, even if we allow for the amount that the Government have stored up to give back to those from whom they took it forcibly in the first place to persuade them to vote Labour next May, and even judged by the sums that are in reserve.

But—it is an important but—this is a vastly different world from that of 1979. Although all three parties have, in a sense, followed the historic and traditional view that the earnings link is unsustainable, I think it fair to ask whether there is something in it that we should try to revive or retrieve.

I think it comes down to this. I think that Members on both sides of the House always see such action as a sticking plaster. One thing that unites the hon. Member for Newport, West and me is our wish to see something done for pensioners that is better than what has been done for them by either of the last two Administrations. That much is clear; but we must also ask what is the underlying, and overriding, consideration.

When we talk of the earnings link, we are not just trying to outbid each other. We are saying that we want the elderly, who have played their part in producing the economy we have today, to be able to benefit in the future. That is the core of what we are trying to achieve, and I should have thought it was possible. I do not know whether it will be necessary to define it in relation to gross domestic product, but it should be possible to state the aspiration in regard to an earnings link, while ensuring the existence of mechanisms to deal with any substantial downturn in the economy without the need to refuse to implement legislation that we have ourselves passed.

I think that a debate on that should take place in my party, and I think it would be healthy for it to take place in all three principal parties. I should like it to be acknowledged that, although such action was indeed unsustainable in the world of 1979, we should now ask—given the present state of the economy—how pensioners can have a stake in rising prosperity, while not ultimately saddling taxpayers with burdens that they cannot afford.

The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) made an offer, but I do not know whether he is prepared to come down to my constituency on his holiday and keep his promise. He offered to give a cheque to anyone who, in a public meeting, could honestly say that, as a pensioner, he or she was worse off under the present Government. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has his cheque book ready, as the first person to whom he must send a cheque is Mr. Allen Bridges of Shaldon in Devon. Mr. Bridges wrote to the Prime Minister about the interesting matter of the financial burdens of partially sighted people and concluded his letter by saying:

> But no matter, I have my 75p increase plus my 75p "over 80" gift and to cap it all, £100 fuel allowance. Minus £97 tax credit loss, this then equals £3 for fuel plus increase plus age allowance. It makes the mafia appear as Fairy Godmothers.

[Mr. Nicholls]

I am sure that a cheque should be made out to Mr. Bridges, which is spelt with one "d".

I have dozens of such letters, which are completely unsolicited. If time allowed I would read them all, but I shall read out just one from Mr. Howell, again from Shaldon, who, I am sure, would also appreciate a cheque from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye. Mr. Howell writes:

> Dear Mr. Nicholls,
>
> My wife is 77 years of age and is registered disabled; I submit her tax return to the Inland Revenue each year.
>
> I am enclosing photostat copies of statements for the tax years ending April 1999 and April 2000 which reveal a substantial drop in income due to the changes made by the Chancellor . . . in respect of the taxation of dividends.
>
> Throughout her working life my wife endeavoured to save, out of taxed income, in order that she would not become a burden on the State. The Government boast that they have kept their promise not to increase basic rates of tax but are careful not to mention the many significant increases in indirect taxes.
>
> There are, most probably, large numbers of pensioners who have been affected similarly and I hope that protest continues to be voiced in . . . Parliament and the media.

Mr. Howell then sets out figures that have been accepted by the Inland Revenue, so there is no doubt about them. Mr. Howell says that for the year 1996–97 his gross income was £5,220 and his tax refund was £601—I shall leave out the pence for the sake of brevity. In 1997–98, his gross income was £6,853 and his tax refund was £619. In 1998–99, his gross income was £5,345 and his tax refund was £588. In 1999–2000, his gross income was £5,062 and his tax refund was £10.66. Mr. Howell concludes in irony, I assume, rather than sorrow:

> I had thought that the Government were encouraging people to save for their later years!!

We must be straight about the matter.

Mr. Rooker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I shall give way to the Minister who is marvellous and reminds me of the late Brian London. Boxing fans will know that that was not meant to be a compliment.

Mr. Rooker: I would like more information, as the hon. Gentleman has just quoted the figures for a tax refund for a gross income of £5,000. The basic pension for a couple is £107 a week and the minimum income guarantee is £121 so, because of the tax allowances, other income must be involved. In that situation, there would not be a tax liability. The hon. Gentleman should not kid the House that the couple's gross income is their only income. He cannot be giving the House the full information.

Mr. Nicholls: I am giving the House the full information, and it says something about the right hon. Gentleman, whom I respect, that he is embarrassed by what he has heard. I will send the right hon. Gentleman the information, which is news to no one on this side of the House. I accept that the matter is not entirely within his brief, as it is more of a Treasury brief. However, if he understood the effect of advance corporation tax on pensioner income, he would not be in the least surprised by the outcome. I shall send him the papers without any difficulty at all.

Mr. Bercow: As my hon. Friend is helpfully providing the House with a list, perhaps he would be so kind and generous as to add to it one of my own constituents, Mrs. Jones-Williams of Seven Gables, Buckingham Road, Winslow, whose husband is registered blind and who is trying to maintain a car. Mrs. Jones-Williams has suffered from the Government's ACT policy and assures me that she has been impoverished by this benighted Administration and wants them out of office yesterday.

Mr. Nicholls: There are dozens of examples of the way in which ACT has worked. The two examples that I mentioned simply made the point that the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye was wrong.

A moment or two ago, I said that, to some extent, given the figures we were discussing, we were almost swapping offers. We need to go much further than that, and a different approach should be considered by all the main political parties.

There is now a third age, and people live immeasurably longer than ever before. In 1909, which, give or take, was the time when Lloyd George introduced the first state retirement pension, average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 49 years for women. In other words, the state pension was paid 15 years after the actuarial calculation of one's death. Give or take a few years for the time that I was born, the figures for 1951 show that men's life expectancy was 66 years and women's life expectancy was 71 years. For a male born today, life expectancy is 75 years and, for a woman, 80 years. I have checked with the Library the proposition that once one takes out of those figures the fact that mortality in the early years is still relatively high, it is true that someone born today has every expectation of living well into his or her nineties. When the state retirement pension was introduced, it came into effect 15 years after one was expected to die. With a bit of luck, one will now live for a good 25 years after first receiving one's pension.

Mr. Butterfill: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Nicholls: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall continue as time is short.

We must draw the conclusion that we have the opportunity of a third age. We need a bigger idea, and Her Majesty's Government—it does not matter of which political party—should accept that we have moved on so much that we need a Ministry of the third age. We need an overriding, all-embracing Ministry that considers pensions policy, employment policy and health policy. It should also think about recreation policy, taxation and health care. Old age need not be undignified.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wants pensioners to be branded because he thinks that being old is uncool. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), who is chairman of the parliamentary Labour party, said that there is no point in trying to appeal to pensioners, as they are either racist or Conservative. The first notion is a slur and the second is not necessarily always true. However, we all aspire to a dignified old age and to have time during the third age

for opportunities that people of our parents' and grandparents' generation would scarcely have believed. If there was a Secretary of State in the Cabinet who was charged with considering the entirety of what it is like in the third age, we really could make progress. Until then, progress must be relatively slight.

6.37 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): In the three minutes available to me, I shall attempt to do justice to the proposition on the Order Paper. I shall make three short points, the first of which concerns the consistency of Liberal Democrat Members. If we go back to their 1997 manifesto, they were in favour of raising pensions only in line with prices. In the vote in the House in April, they committed themselves to restoring the link between pensions and earnings. Liberal Democrats campaigned on that issue in the local elections and, in my constituency of Harlow, put leaflets through the doors that made it clear that their policy was to restore the link between pensions and earnings. In the vote at the Liberal Democrat conference in September, the link between pensions and earnings was explicitly rejected.

That is a bewildering set of somersaults on policy, the end result of which, certainly in my constituency, is that Liberal Democrats refuse to admit that originally they were in favour of restoring the link between pensions and earnings. People expect from politicians a degree of consistency on the issue which, sadly, the Liberal Democrats lack.

I shall pick up on two other points made by Liberal Democrat Members this afternoon, the first of which concerns long-term care. I shall reiterate the fact that the Liberal Democrats' alternative set of proposals for the 2000 Budget did not include a costed commitment to paying for personal long-term care. Their explicit costed commitment was to pay for nursing care, not personal care. Frankly, that is symptomatic of what we often get from Liberal Democrat Members. They spray promises around like confetti and hope that, in the meantime, nobody will look at the detail or the fine print and find out that there is no costed commitment to implement their proposals. I am committed to progressive taxation to fund decent public services, but the case for that is not bolstered by not being straight with people about where the money will come from.

Finally, in the short time available, I shall refer to the specific pension proposals that the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) spoke about this afternoon. If I heard him correctly, he said that he would fund those proposals by raising the top rate of taxation to 50p in the pound. Only six months ago, the Liberal Democrats' alternative Budget for 2000 proposed raising the top rate of taxation to pay for cutting the 10p starting rate to zero. Therefore, in six months, the specific proposal from the Liberal Democrats has been changed for a different purpose. There is no consistency whatever from them on those issues. That is why, in my constituency and elsewhere, no one will believe them.

6.40 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) talks about consistency and about Liberal Democrat policy changing. I suspect that, on Wednesday, we shall see one of the Government's biggest U-turns. They have spent some three years arguing against the principle of above-inflation pension increases. I believe that, because of a campaign by the Liberal Democrats—with the support of many Labour Back Benchers—but, above all, by pensioners, despite having no support from Ministers or from the Conservative party, which did not accept the argument, the case for above-inflation increases, resulting in a substantial pension increase, will prove to have been won.

That is a measure of the mistake that the Chancellor made at the start of the Parliament in taking pensioners for granted and in forcing them into increased means-testing. It is a measure of the effectiveness of a public revolt that has had nothing like the attention of the fuel tax protests, but will prove to have been more effective.

In constituency after constituency throughout the country, pensioners have taken up the case for a decent income, on which they can survive, as of right. That was the basis of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), probably the most expert person in the House on the issue; he is certainly one of the most expert.

In those terms, I regret the tone of the Minister's response. Many years ago, I served with him on the Committee that dealt with the poll tax. He did an effective job; I think that we did quite an effective opposition job between us. The poll tax certainly did not last long. I have always had great admiration for him, but he misjudged his response and he was wrong in his criticisms.

The figures that the Minister gave were, to say the least, misleading. He did not let me intervene at the time. Had he done so, I could have put him right, so it is sad that he did not. The fact is that the Government will call a general election—we will see whether they get back—and leave office spending less on pensions as a proportion of national wealth than when they came in. They will be doing worse on the state pension than the Conservatives.

The figures that the Minister sought to give related to overall expenditure on pensioners. That is a different issue, but, even there, the Government's record is nothing to be proud of because the simple fact is that, at this moment, they are still spending less than the Conservatives.

We know that the Government have jacked up spending for the general election and that they will just, in the Minister's terms—not by much—reach the level that the Conservatives were at when they left office. In the meantime, however, pensioners will have lost out on money that they will never get back.

The Conservative official spokesperson, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), made up a series of figures. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) resorted to saying that he preferred those to ours. She simply got her figures wrong. Perhaps she should call the House of Commons Library. It is very good and it will sort her out on that. She failed to take account of the fact that the costs of our policy are net, not gross. She also underestimated the gross costs of the policy, but her maths are clearly not too good. Broadly speaking, the net costs are equivalent to the income that we raise from the 50 per cent. rate of tax on earnings over £100,000 a year. Some years will bring in more income than we need and others fractionally less, but the figures are almost identical. There is a tie-up there.

[Mr. Matthew Taylor]

We are clear about why it is necessary to put that tax on: we want to guarantee pensioners our big increases. We could simply hope that the economy delivers continued growth. The evidence is that the Chancellor has more than a big enough pot into which he can dip to make substantial pension increases. I hope that he will take a step towards that on Wednesday, but to guarantee, after a general election, to deliver substantial pension increases, we have to say that that might mean an increase in tax. We believe that it would be right to have a 50 per cent. tax rate on earnings over £100,000 a year, if necessary.

There are several reasons for that. First, we believe that it is important that pensioners should receive the benefit of the pension increases. Secondly, our tax system is regressive. People on high incomes pay less tax overall as a proportion of their income than those on low incomes. We do not believe that that is right. In tackling what was a real problem—taxation of very high incomes under Labour prior to 1979—previous Conservative Chancellors went too far. That is why very wealthy people now pay less, as a proportion of income, than people on very low incomes—the pensioners on whom we are concentrating. We believe that, if we have to make a tax increase, that is where it should be made. It will still leave this country's high-rate tax one of the lowest in Europe and lower than for most of the period that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister.

Mr. Bercow: Obviously, if the top tax rate is cut, those who pay that rate thenceforward will pay a lower proportion of their income to the Exchequer, but does the hon. Gentleman not accept that, as a consequence of the Lawson tax changes, the proportion of the overall tax-take contributed by the highest earners was higher? I hope that even a Liberal Democrat would acknowledge that point.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is trying to argue that, if we tax very high earners a little more, we will get less income. I challenge him to find an academic report that backs him. Even the last Conservative Administration—let alone any academic group—undertook their own report on that and failed to find the evidence.

The hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) made a far more measured speech than the Minister. Not only Liberal Democrat Members, but other Members on both sides of the House would agree with much of what he said. He sought to reflect some of the general concerns, which were echoed by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who has an exceptional record on this issue. He highlighted something that the Minister sought to deny: the Government are holding back key information on their ability to afford increases prior to their announcement.

The Minister says that we will be given the information after the announcement. That will help us to look at what the Government have done, but it does not help anyone to argue, before the announcement, for a better, more generous decision. Once that announcement has been made, there is no chance of any of us—whether the hon. Member for Newport, West or Liberal Democrat Members—winning the argument this year that the Government have the funds to do more. The decision will already have been made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) addressed the issue of long-term care. It was not the centre of attention in the debate, but it is an important matter. I have already touched on the accusation of inconsistency by the hon. Member for Harlow. It will be interesting to see whether he says the same of his Chancellor. In both cases, I hope that he will do more than he has previously argued for.

Let us be clear about long-term care. We made an absolute guarantee to fund nursing care, which the Government would not guarantee. We committed ourselves to work towards funding long-term care, too. That is a difference between Labour and us: it is not that the proposal is not budgeted; it is that Ministers oppose it and we shall work for it. People who are concerned about their elderly relatives selling their houses and having to pay for care should understand where the Liberal Democrats stand and where the Labour party stands.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that there should also be a rurality consideration? Provision for the elderly sometimes costs more in rural areas, such as mid-Wales, and the Government should take that into consideration in their planning.

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend tempts me, as the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, down the route of special offers for rural constituents. There are key issues for rural constituencies, and I hope that Ministers will address them soon in the long-promised but still-not-delivered review of local government expenditure. I have made that argument directly to Ministers.

Today's debate has very clearly set out three options available to pensioners. Conservative Members are so embarrassed by their true position on pensions that they dare not spell it out. The truth, of course, is that they are committed to the continued whittling away of the state pension as the basis for people's long-term support. The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), to be fair to him, countered by calling for restoration of the earnings link, which he believes would cost £8 billion. I notice that that is the very same sum that Conservative Members have committed themselves not to adding, but to cutting.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West spoke rather more in favour of the position advocated by Conservative Front Benchers—although they will not spell out their position. The truth is that, on the pensions issue, Conservative Members want to have their cake and to eat it. They want to talk about tax cuts, but not about the fact that those can be delivered only by cutting expenditure on pensions and forcing more people into private pension schemes. Nevertheless, they pretend to pensioners that they want a real increase in the state pension.

One Conservative leaflet after another promises that pensioners would receive a pension increase of more than £5. One has to read the fine-print—as many pensioners do—to discover that the Conservatives would take away pensioners' Christmas bonus, heating allowance and even the 25p age addition that people start receiving at 80. The promise is an insult.

Mr. Butterfill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Taylor: I cannot give way to the hon. Gentleman; I have to get on. People will be able to read his comments for themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon said, Labour Members are all over the place on the pensions issue. Year after year in this Parliament, Liberal Democrat Members have campaigned for real increases in the state pension. Ministers, however, have said that they cannot agree to those increases, but must target assistance more accurately on those who need it, yet the Government have chosen to provide the heating allowance, which is not only indiscriminate, but not taxed. Pensioners who perhaps could have afforded to do without the allowance are beneficiaries of it. Therefore, Ministers' comments on targeting are absolute nonsense.

The Government do not want to increase the basic state pension, but are willing to allow it to wither away in the long run. Their long-term plan is to ensure ever more means-tested support and to withdraw support from those who they think can afford to be without it. Although that is a distinct policy, which is not dissimilar from that of the Conservatives, they do not want to talk about it.

The Government also believe that the arrival, just before Christmas, of a £150 cheque for the heating allowance is more effective politically than adding a few pounds a week to the basic state pension. The 75p increase, however, proved that they misunderstood the situation and got the spin wrong. It led to a revolt, and proved that pensioners care most about being able to feed themselves and to live in dignity week by week.

Tomorrow, there will be a pensioners' rally at Westminster, attended by pensioners who have supported all of the political parties. They are rising in protest at the way in which the Government have treated them in this Parliament. The Chancellor's attempt on Wednesday to retrieve the situation will be seen for what it is: a response to that campaign as the general election approaches, rather than a genuine commitment to long-term improvement in the basic state pension.

The Liberal Democrat proposals would ensure substantial increases in the state pension, targeted on those who most need it. If we were making Wednesday's announcement, single pensioners would receive an additional £7.25. Older pensioners and pensioner couples would receive even more, so that pensioner couples over 80 would receive an increase of more than £30 a week. However, we go even further than that.

Labour Members have asked about our long-term policy. Because we have underwritten our pensions policy with a tax policy to fund it, we can guarantee that we will be able to deliver those increases in addition to those made in the Chancellor's announcement on Wednesday. The difference is that our policies are underwritten and funded by a tax policy that is more progressive than that which the Government are willing to offer. We can fund a pension increase that will take pensioners out of means-testing, rather than forcing them into it, as the Chancellor will do on Wednesday.

Our policies give pensioners independence and dignity, rather than force them to ask for hand-outs from the state. They also guarantee that pensioners receive the increase, regardless of whether they can find their way through the means-testing jungle that the Government have imposed.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) was complaining that Conservative and Labour Members had been caught electioneering—as if that were a crime—but then went on to do a little electioneering of his own. Much to my surprise, however, he produced figures different from those given earlier by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb).

Undoubtedly, both hon. Members' expenditure will be financed by the same 10p increase in the top tax rate that they announced, and which my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) pointed out has already been committed elsewhere. Liberal Democrat Members really have to learn that they cannot keep spending the same tax increase over and over again. One may not be able to perceive that fact when in opposition, but one perceives it rather quickly when one gets into government.

We have had an interesting debate. All the major parties—I include the Liberal Democrats—fought the previous general election on the same basis: that there would be a link between pensions and prices, and that other action would be taken subsequently. I should quote the Liberal Democrats' 1997 manifesto, on which the hon. Member for Northavon was elected to the House. It stated:

> The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices.

It went on to say a little more about what they might have managed to do had they entered government in 1997. It stated:

> We will create an additional top-up pension for pensioners with incomes below the income support level. This will be indexed to earnings and tapered as outside income increases.

Does not such provision indexed to earnings describe the minimum income guarantee that the Government have introduced? I am not very sophisticated, but is not tapering that provision as outside income rises another way of describing a means test? I might have it wrong, but I think that that is how the Liberal Democrats' manifesto—on which every Liberal Democrat Member stood—would have been interpreted by those who read the manifestos in the previous general election.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady is obviously easily confused. The inflation figure for next April is £2.25 and I pledged £5 on top of inflation, making the £7.25 mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). The taper mentioned in the manifesto would mean a rate of less than the 100 per cent. tax that she applies to pensioners' savings. That would be better than what she has delivered.

Angela Eagle: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not address the point about the manifesto, which is on the record. All the Liberal Democrats promised to do is what we have done in government.

The Conservatives recently produced their pensions policy and, clearly, they also agree only with an increase in terms of prices. However, they would abolish winter fuel payments. They would abolish the Christmas bonus and the free television licences for the over-75s—even though those are arriving as we speak. They would abolish the age addition for the over-80s and, interestingly, the winter fuel payments to men over 60.

In her speech—which I enjoyed—the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) asked me why 1 million men aged between 60 and 65 were still waiting for their winter

[Angela Eagle]

fuel payments. What a cheek to ask me that, when the Conservatives have announced that they would abolish the payment.

Mrs. Lait: Does the Minister agree that the philosophical point is that people want to have their money in their own pockets to spend as they wish, rather than the gimmicks that the Government deliver? They want the dignity and self-respect of spending their own money.

Angela Eagle: The practical point is that, according to the Saga poll, 75 per cent. of pensioners do not want their winter fuel payments abolished.

The Tories' "Common Sense for Pensioners" policy would effectively give 42p extra to some people in certain circumstances. That is enough to buy a tin of Campbell's soup—very generous. The Tory document contains some questions and answers. For example:

> What about a man aged 60 to 64 losing his winter fuel payment?

The answer is:

> We faced a tough choice here . . . We decided it was more important to increase the state pension. The savings on benefits for this group help to finance better pensions which will, of course, benefit these men within a few years.

The reality is that men aged between 60 and 65 will not get winter fuel payments when they retire under the Tories.

Spending as a percentage of gross domestic product has increased and will be greater by April 2001 than when we came to power, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of State made clear. We must remember also that that is a higher percentage of a growing GDP because we have had a successful economy under the Labour Government. The cake is getting bigger and the percentage given to pensioners is also getting bigger. That is before whatever might happen on Wednesday, so part of the Liberal Democrat motion is inaccurate.

I have had some fun listening to the debate today. The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who is a doughty fighter—a shock trooper for Thatcherism in his time—gave us a history of the link. He said that it would be a good time to consider restoring the earnings link and that, because the Tories' economic legacy was so good, we could now afford it. What a cheek from the party that abolished the link in the first place. That was opportunism from the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention the £8 billion cost of restoring the earnings link and said nothing about how his sums would add up—particularly when the shadow Chancellor has already announced £8 billion in tax cuts. We know that the Tories plan £16 billion worth of cuts from our spending plans, yet the hon. Gentleman proposes to spend another £8 billion. I am not sure how much will end up in the national insurance fund when the Tories are through with it. However, there seems to be a lot of billions floating around for people to spend as they think fit.

This debate has come far too early this week for it to be meaningful. The Government have spent £6.5 billion more on pensioners over this Parliament than would have been spent under Tory spending plans. The key point is that half of that has gone to the poorer pensioners who were in poverty as a result of the Tory legacy. In those 18 years, pensioners' income distribution was stretched. Many pensioners did far better in that period because of occupational pensions and the original SERPS. There was a 64 per cent. increase in real terms in pensioners' incomes but, when we look at the details, we see that the income distribution stretched and that there was a huge increase in pensioner inequality. Given the structure of pensioner incomes that we inherited as a result of the Tories' ideology, we had to address pensioner poverty and the bottom end of income distribution first. This is what we have done with the minimum income guarantee.

There are those who may quibble with the minimum income guarantee, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn). But I say to them, "Please help pensioners who are eligible for the guarantee to claim it. You can have your own opinion of it but, on average, those who claim successfully are £20 a week better off. Your constituents who are eligible but not claiming will thank you for helping them to make a claim, rather than for rubbishing the system."

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Angela Eagle: No, I do not have long enough. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is helping his pensioners to claim the guarantee.

The key thing this week is the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday. To those who have been making pleas and looking at the structure of expenditure and the Government's record, all I will say is, "Wait for Wednesday to see how we will fulfil our promises to Britain's pensioners."

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 38, Noes 280.

Division No. 317] **[7.7 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John

Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones. Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 81.

Division No. 318] **[7.22 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary

Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Fabricant, Michael
Foster, Don *(Bath)*

Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Paice, James
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House endorses the Government's approach to pensions and other policies for pensioners; notes that the Government has already committed £6½ billion more to pensioner benefits during this Parliament than was planned by the Conservatives, while ensuring that this additional expenditure is funded prudently and consistently with the Government's fiscal rules; strongly agrees with the Government that the basic state pension should be retained as the foundation of pension provision, and that most should be done for those pensioners who need most help through the Minimum Income Guarantee; supports the additional help for pensioner households, including winter fuel payments, which now gives them the equivalent of a further £3 a week and free TV licences for the over 75s, which were introduced from 1st November 2000; also supports the wide range of other measures taken by the Government for pensioners, the record investment in the National Health Service, free eye tests, help with home insulation and concessionary public transport fares and reductions in income taxation; and further agrees with the Government that the next priority should be to help pensioners with moderate savings and small occupational pensions to ensure that their thrift is rewarded and that they are able to share in the rising prosperity of the nation.

Privatisation

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We now come to the motion on privatisation. I should announce to the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.31 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I beg to move,

That this House notes public concern about the effects of railway privatisation and about current plans to privatise National Air Traffic Services and London Underground and opposes the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in public services.

I am not surprised that Mr. Speaker chose to select the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister because—disappointingly, given that the Conservative party was responsible for many of the problems through its dogmatic approach to privatisation—it has not even bothered to table an amendment to defend its record. We tabled the motion because the privatised railways are in chaos at present and we are concerned that, if the Government follow their current proposals, we shall end up with exactly the same chaos in the London Underground and National Air Traffic Services.

When the Conservative party introduced many of its privatisation proposals, the Liberal Democrats warned it that privatisation simply was not the cure for all ills. At that time, the Labour party in opposition entirely agreed with us. The Labour party would accept that both our parties were correct in expressing our concerns. However, it appears that, in office, the Labour party has changed its spots. We are now in danger of seeing a Labour party introducing its own dogmatic approach to privatisation and the real possibility of putting lives at risk with its proposals for the part privatisation of NATS and the underground. It seems that the new Labour party has developed its own form of privatisation dogma.

The Liberal Democrats are certainly prepared to acknowledge that the private sector and the public sector can benefit from each other. We acknowledge that some of the privatisations that have occurred in recent years have had positive outcomes. Even if British Telecom has some way to go, the liberalisation of the telecommunications industry has undoubtedly brought significant benefits. We also acknowledge that the privatisation of gas and electricity has been instrumental in improving the standards of service offered, even though we were unhappy with the way in which and the price at which that was done.

It is interesting that some rather bizarre side effects have resulted from those privatisations. I suspect that the Conservative party did not anticipate that the electricity powering the lights in Parliament would come from an electricity company owned by the French Government. Therefore, rather bizarrely, given the views of the Conservative party, any profligacy on our part in this building will lead to a reduction of taxes in France—not what the Tories wanted.

There has been a growing acceptance that, in certain circumstances, some public services can be delivered by or in partnership with the private sector. A good example is the Government's recent announcement of the concordat between the NHS and the private health care sector. That seems to be a sensible form of partnership between the two sectors.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the hon. Gentleman bring pressure to bear on the French

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

authorities to privatise those moribund state organisations in France to ensure that British companies are allowed reciprocity so that they can buy French companies in France?

Mr. Foster: That is the most bizarre intervention that I have heard for a long time. It is extremely bizarre for the hon. Gentleman, whom I have heard speak passionately against our integration into Europe many times, to express any concern whatever about how industry is organised in France. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who supports a party that was so passionately committed to privatisation, is prepared to acknowledge that privatisation has involved many problems. I hope that he accepts that, where privatisation involving selling off the family silver and putting money into the Treasury coffers, very often the organisation was sold off far too cheaply and the nation sold short.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Would my hon. Friend care to comment on the Government's proposals to sell off the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency? Given that that sell-off has few friends in the Ministry of Defence or the American Department of Defence and, indeed, no friends at all on the Select Committee on Defence, is it not another case in which the only friends of the sell-off appear to be in the Treasury?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is interesting that that case follows the pattern of the way in which the Labour Government are now pursuing privatisation. Having opposed the way in which the railways were privatised, with massive fragmentation, the Government are proposing to split DERA in two and flog off three quarters of the total package to the private sector. That has implications not only for public safety, but for national security.

As we look back on privatisation, I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House accept that many mistakes were made, details were often not properly thought through and long-term consequences were often ignored for short-term gain. Many such examples abound. We have only to consider the way in which employees lost out, especially in early privatisations. For example, when local government services were privatised, it was ludicrous that the employees who worked in the public sector ended up doing exactly the same job as before, but their wages were lower and they had poorer pensions and conditions.

Protection was rightly introduced under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. However, equally bizarrely, transferees are protected, but new employees of the privatised service provider have poorer conditions, so there is a two tier system, which is not likely to raise morale.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is desperate to intervene, so I shall give way to him.

Mr. Bercow: Desperate is scarcely the word. The hon. Gentleman refers to the undervaluation of assets at flotation to the private sector. Would he care to cast his mind back and concede that the significance of the privatisation of the bulk of the state industrial sector was that industries which, in public ownership, were costing the Exchequer £50 million a week under the previous Labour Government now contribute tens of millions of pounds a week to the Exchequer?

Mr. Foster: I certainly do not accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. How did the Conservative Government manage to sell off the railway system? Their first act was to pay off £1.6 billion in debt. They ensured that the company's assets were widely spread, and they took various steps to make the company more attractive. If the hon. Gentleman examined the figures for many privatisations—the railways are a good example—he would appreciate that more state money is being put in to subsidise the various services than previously.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The hon. Gentleman appears to criticise the privatisation of the railways. I wonder whether he is aware that the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) asked:

> is not the answer to give BR access to the private markets to increase investment and to give private services access to the rail network to increase competition?—[*Official Report*, 15 October 1991; Vol. 196, c. 148.]

Does the hon. Gentleman agree with his right hon. Friend?

Mr. Foster: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that his point is a bit of a damp squib. I had been warned in advance by several Conservative Members that an exocet missile would be coming at me—I was told that a former leader of my party totally disagreed with the way in which the Liberal Democrats, and our predecessor parties, voted on the privatisation of the railways. Fortunately, I took the opportunity to check the record, which showed that my right hon. Friend voted in the same Lobby as the rest of my colleagues.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: So the right hon. Gentleman said one thing and supported another?

Mr. Foster: No. If the hon. Gentleman studied my right hon. Friend's comments, he would appreciate that my right hon. Friend suggested the possibility of a state-run sector becoming involved within the market. We have no problem with that—we have discussed it on several occasions. It is sad that the hon. Gentleman precisely illustrates my concern about the dogmatic approach that the Conservatives adopt in this context.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No. I want to make progress.

Many examples show that the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of public services has not been very smooth. For example, during the early days, Group 4 ran our prisons, and, more recently, there were failures in the administration of housing benefit.

Mr. Bercow: Group 4 was seven years ago.

Mr. Foster: I gave a more recent example. Even more recently, the private sector attempted unsuccessfully to

turn around failing schools. The allegedly incomparable business skills and entrepreneurial flair of the private sector have not, frankly, been a huge benefit. I suspect that few of us support the continued use of the skills and flair of, for example, Connex South Central. The tragedy of the Hatfield rail crash threw the dangers of inappropriate privatisation into stark relief.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: Not for the moment.

The public must wonder why, during the past fortnight, whole swathes of our rail network had to be closed at short notice, and whether benefits would result from an approach that fragmented the service into hundreds of parts, which competed against rather than co-operated with each other. They must also wonder how, in recent years, there has been a significant reduction in the number of people employed to check the safety of tracks, a reduction described by Railtrack as an efficiency gain. The public must wonder how Railtrack could put out to contract the safety checking and maintenance of the track and the supervision of that work. It appears that Railtrack wants to distance itself from any responsibility. The public will begin to wonder why the many different contractors, who are all busy trying to out-do each other, do not talk to each other about the crucial issue of rail safety.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does my hon. Friend find it bizarre that Railtrack's first action was to invest heavily in tarting up Britain's stations rather than in improving outmoded track and signalling systems? In other words, safety was compromised in order to create nice stations at Paddington, York or Leeds.

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, although I should go further. The Government recently introduced a safe stations award. We want stations not only to look pretty but also to be safe and to provide adequate protection to the people who use them. However, after two years, only 63 of 2,500 stations have reached the relevant standards.

Hon. Members may be particularly surprised by the fact that privatisation of the railways means that Railtrack is fined if it closes track to carry out safety work and fined if it keeps the track open and does not carry out safety work. One might say, "Heads, you lose and tails, you lose."

The public would be most surprised of all by a report in *The Daily Telegraph* on Friday, which stated that a busy commuter train had been deliberately driven over a broken track. Railtrack said that it was "standard practice" to pass a train over a suspected break at low speed to assess the defect's seriousness. I find that horrific. Surely Railtrack has more sophisticated testing equipment and does not need to roll a train with 200 passengers on board over damaged rail to assess whether it would be derailed. That is an appalling indictment.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend's speech. Does he agree that the situation is partly due to the incompetence of the contractors chosen by Railtrack to do that work, which has often allowed the track to get into that condition? Does he also agree that we need a major investigation into the way in which the railway system was privatised and into the involvement of people who are connected with the Conservative party and with companies that benefited from that privatisation?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. He may not be aware of the full details about the current contractual arrangements between Railtrack and its contractors. If hon. Members studied them, they might be very surprised. Some contractors are given the task of ensuring the safety of the track, and of determining how much work should be done on the track, but they are provided with the same amount of money regardless of how much work is done on the track. Clearly, there is at least a temptation for contractors to minimise the amount of work that is done.

The public's concerns about rail privatisation make them worried about the Government's proposals for public-private partnerships for the tube.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I sense that the hon. Gentleman is about to discuss air traffic. The central thrust of his remarks so far has been to suggest, in a slightly snide way, that somehow or other privatisation has led to a decrease in safety on the railways. If so, how does he account for the fact that the number of signals passed at danger are half what they were before privatisation and that the number of fatal accidents has been cut massively? Of course, we all have the recent tragedy in our minds. None the less, there has been a great improvement in rail safety since privatisation. How does he account for that?

Mr. Foster: I explain it by asking the hon. Gentleman to look again at some of the statistics. The number of broken rails is greater and the overall state of the track is worse than at privatisation. Those are the official figures and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept them.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, because we shall end up by batting statistics—

Mr. Gray *rose*—

Mr. Foster: Very well, I will give way.

Mr. Gray: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again, as it is most important to correct the point that he made. He must have listened carefully to the evidence given by Mr. Gerald Corbett to the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, last Wednesday. Mr. Corbett pointed out that Railtrack was checking 1,800 individual sites and that not one was in anything like the same condition as the broken rail at Hatfield. He said that the state of the railways was vastly better than it was before privatisation. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is wrong to say that the railways are worse.

Mr. Foster: This could become a rather silly argument between the hon. Gentleman and me. I hope that he will

[Mr. Foster]

agree that merely to judge the matter on whether bits of track are in an identical condition to that found at Hatfield is not a fair way to assess the overall quality of the track. It is generally accepted that, overall, the track is in worse condition than at privatisation.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to get technical, it is more difficult to understand why gauge-corner cracking appears in the new high-stress, steel rails that did not exist at the time of privatisation—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] The installation of those new rails may be leading to greater difficulties than occurred with the old rails. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) looks surprised, but he should be aware that, in the current programme of work, Railtrack is replacing the more modern rails with the softer type that was used previously. I hope that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) will not pursue the matter.

Because of the public's concern about safety as a result of the way in which the railway was privatised, they are understandably anxious about the Government's proposals for the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services and of the London underground. All hon. Members agree that the underground desperately needs urgent attention. Hon. Members may have heard an item on the "Today" programme this morning, which referred to a District line driver who, yesterday, told passengers in his train that

> if you have a camera handy, there's a chance to record a rare sighting of a Circle Line train in its natural habitat.

It is certainly true that there is overcrowding, delay, unreliability, dirt and discomfort. Decades of neglect have built up a huge backlog of faults and structural failings. We are all aware that at least £1.5 billion is needed to return the tube to a worthwhile condition.

Mrs. Laing *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I want to make some progress.

How can we deal with the problems? The Liberal Democrat proposal was clear and was well publicised during the London mayoral elections: to allow Transport for London to raise money through a bond issue. We envisaged Transport for London having access to the market at a far cheaper rate—at less expense—than the Government's proposed private sector borrowing arrangement. Under our proposals, the money could be raised more cheaply, with the additional benefit that it would remain under democratic control.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions agrees that the majority of candidates who stood at that election supported our proposals—including the present Mayor of London. Indeed, the only candidate who supported the Government's public-private partnership obtained only 13 per cent. of the votes—such was the popularity of the Government's proposal.

Yet again, the Government are making a proposal that would lead to the fragmentation of a service—in this case, the tube—allowing different people to buy the various fragments. It is somewhat worrying that the Health and Safety Executive notes that some of the potential purchasers are bodies and organisations which were implicated in some of the safety problems with the national rail network. We are deeply concerned about the Government's approach for London underground and equally worried about their proposals for NATS.

I hope that we all agree that the only purpose of NATS is safety. The Deputy Prime Minister said:

> Air traffic control is all about safety, which must be paramount.—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 535.]

In London and the south-east, at any time of day, thousands of aircraft are circling overhead, waiting to land. The demands on air traffic controllers increase monthly. There is little room for manoeuvre.

Despite all those pressures, NATS has an excellent safety record under its current arrangements. There can be no justification for anything that puts that record at risk. The PPP would provide an unnecessary and dangerous distraction and would put safety in conflict with profit—the same conflict that was so disastrous for our railways.

The Government claim that they have to adopt that arrangement, but they do not have to do so; it is not even necessary. We agree with the Government that it will be necessary to raise about £1 billion for investment in NATS over the next 10 years. Their proposal is to sell off 51 per cent. of NATS, possibly selling off more at a later date. The new partner will be expected to raise the money for that investment.

Our argument on raising money for the tube also applies to NATS. It would be cheaper for the Treasury to raise the money than if it were raised by a private sector borrower. Such a borrower would want a return of between 10 and 20 per cent. compared with the 8 per cent. needed by the Treasury. Something will have to go. Our concern is that the something will be safety.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Many of the hon. Gentleman's comments will strike the general public as scaremongering. Is he aware that air traffic control in the majority of Britain's airports is already in private or independent ownership? Is he really saying that those airports are less safe as a result?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman makes the same mistake as those who suggest that we should no longer be concerned about airline safety after the privatisation of British Airways. The reality is that there is a difference between safety under a monopoly supplier and under a regime of tough competition. The provision of air traffic control is subject to competition at individual airports, just as there is competition between airlines. However, NATS is not subject to compctition.

It is no wonder that so many people oppose the Government's proposals—pilots, air traffic controllers, the chair of the Transport Sub-Committee, and a large number of Labour Members and peers. It is not surprising that the Sub-Committee described the proposal as the worst of all possible options. However, the Government seem to refuse to listen. They are unable to listen to those who know what is at stake; unable to learn from the mistakes of rail privatisation and unable even to remember what they said four years ago.

Everyone in the House remembers the pledge given at the 1996 Labour conference by the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He was cheered to the echo for saying:

> Our air is not for sale.

Liberal Democrats agreed with him then, and we continue to agree with that sentiment. We have seen no evidence to justify changing our mind.

The wording of the Government's amendment to our motion is interesting. Labour Members should note that it states that the House should welcome

the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground.

Hon. Members should note the word "pragmatic".

Liberal Democrats certainly prefer a pragmatic to a dogmatic approach. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "pragmatic" as

dealing with things sensibly and realistically.

We certainly do not accept that the two PPP proposals are sensible or realistic. However—given the Government's apparent refusal to listen to anyone—they perhaps used in the amendment the 16th century definition of the word "pragmatic". That definition is, "busy, interfering, conceited." It is my contention that pressing ahead in the face of significant opposition based on the failures of similar moves elsewhere is conceited. It is not pragmatic; it is dogmatic.

We hope that Members on both sides of the House will join together to support our motion and to oppose the dogmatic approach to privatisation being adopted by a Labour Government.

8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"deplores the previous Government's incompetent privatisation of the railways which left the network fragmented, cost taxpayers billions of pounds and brought rail travellers hours of delays; welcomes the Government's creation of the Strategic Rail Authority to give direction to the industry from an industry-wide perspective rather than from the narrow interests of individual companies; recognises that the Government's 10-year plan is delivering the largest investment programme for the railways for generations to tackle the problems caused by years of under-investment in the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground, enabling much needed investment and private sector financial and management skills to be introduced to the public services while safeguarding safety and the public interest; and regrets the official Opposition's dogmatic pursuit of privatisation for the London Underground and the National Air Traffic Services."

I have frequently proclaimed my affection and respect for the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), but I fear that he has slipped from his normal high standards on this occasion. I found his speech both disappointing and disingenuous. I could think of another word with the prefix "dis" to describe it, but our parliamentary conventions preclude my use of such a word. However, we all know what is going on here—it is the technique of the big slur.

The hon. Gentleman begins by citing the widespread, and perfectly understandable, public dissatisfaction with the privatisation of the railways by the previous Administration—a dissatisfaction that has certainly been heightened by recent tragic events and the continued shortcomings of the railway network—but then seeks to tar the Government's wholly different proposals for the public-private partnerships in London Underground and National Air Traffic Services with the same brush. It is an attempt at condemnation by innuendo, or guilt by association. It is typical Liberal Democrat opportunism and, as usual, it will not work.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I do not remember whether the Minister held responsibility for transport issues in the previous Parliament, but does he recall that the Liberal Democrats urged Labour Members to set their faces firmly against the privatisation of Railtrack by making it clear that, if it were to be privatised by the Conservatives, it would be bought back by an incoming Labour Government, with Liberal Democrat support if that was the way that the country had voted? We could have then stopped privatisation in its tracks. I judge from his comments that he still believes that the privatisation of Railtrack was a mistake. Why did the Labour party at that stage not take up our proposal?

Mr. Hill: I am always rather amused by the Liberal Democrats' rewriting of history. I notice that it is always the Liberals who lead on the issues and the rest of the House seems to follow tamely. However, the Labour party came to a clear judgment before the election and we stated in our manifesto that the reacquisition of the privatised railway system was a cost that was simply not worth bearing when set against other demands on the Exchequer from the nation's priorities of health, education and law and order. That is why we are working to improve the privatised railway system that we inherited in ways that I hope, with the indulgence of the House, I shall be able to describe soon.

The motion before the House is unacceptable and ought to be rejected. It ought to be rejected not because, as is usually the case, an opposition motion is an expression of opinion that does not reflect the opinion of the majority of the House, but because this motion is—in its premises—quite simply factually wrong.

The motion describes the Government's proposals for London Underground and NATS as "privatisation". That is just plain wrong. If we were planning to sell off the public's stake in these concerns lock, stock and barrel and pass over ownership and control in their entirety and in perpetuity to the private sector, that would be privatisation. That is what privatisation meant for water, for gas, for electricity, for telecommunications, for coal, for buses and for the railways under the Tories.

Mr. Don Foster: Given that the Minister's definition of privatisation involves selling off the entirety of a service, will he tell us that, having sold off 51 per cent. of NATS, the Government have no intention whatsoever of selling off any of the remaining 49 per cent? Were he to say that, he would be saying something that totally contradicts what he said in Committee during our consideration of the Transport Bill.

Mr. Hill: If the hon. Gentleman gives me a chance, I shall come to that issue in due course. What I said with crystal clarity in Committee—as he knows, that is my style—was that any such decision would have to come back to the House for its democratic decision.

By contrast with the privatisation carried out by the Conservatives, in the case of National Air Traffic Services, the taxpayer will not only retain a major

[Mr. Hill]

shareholding in the public-private partnership. In addition, the Government will appoint "partnership directors" to protect the taxpayers' interest as an investor. Board unanimity will be required on dividends and reinvestment, and a special share will be entrenched in the new company's articles of association to protect the taxpayers' rights in key matters, such as the issue of new shares and dividend policy. Frankly, it is ludicrous to describe those arrangements as a privatisation.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Minister elucidate a little? Is he saying that selling 51 per cent. does not constitute privatisation and, therefore, that the previous Government's initial sale of 50 per cent. of British Telecom was not an act of privatisation?

Mr. Hill: I am certainly saying that the Government's proposals for NATS do not constitute privatisation. Indeed, if the right hon. Gentleman had not been so keen to make his point, he might have listened to the reasons that I adduced a little more carefully. If he had, he would have found out that the safeguards entrenched in the arrangements for NATS are totally distinct from, and contradict, any arrangements made for BT or any other privatisation under the previous Administration.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I shall wait for a moment before I receive the exocet that has been prepared for me by Conservative central office.

To return to my thread, it is equally ludicrous to describe as privatisation our proposals for London Underground. They will leave the new public sector London Underground with responsibility for operations and safety, and they mean that a modernised London Underground will return to public ownership at the end of the PPP period.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I take pity on the hon. Gentleman, so I shall let him have his moment of glory.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for letting me have my moment of glory. Does he agree with the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs? It says:

> The current proposal for a public-private partnership for NATS is, in our view, the worst of all the possible options.

Given that their lordships—with the assistance of Liberal Democrat peers and some Labour peers—defeated the Government on an important amendment to the Transport Bill last week, will he clearly state whether he intends to try to overturn that amendment in this House and to bring about a public-private partnership for NATS?

Mr. Hill: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, we do not agree with the judgments expressed in the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. We found them ill considered and ill thought out. On the question of support for the amendment carried in another place, our position is entirely clear. We do not intend to jeopardise the new investment that will flow from the PPP and the improved project management. That is why we shall seek to reverse the amendment in this House.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I do not wish to detain the House for as long as the hon. Member for Bath did. After this intervention, I shall seek to make some progress.

Mr. Syms: A second amendment carried by the Lords was designed to protect the pensions of NATS employees and to include provision for doing that in the Bill. Do the Government intend to overturn that amendment, too?

Mr. Hill: We want to look at that amendment very carefully, and we will return to that in due course.

The public-private partnerships that we are putting in place for London Underground and NATS are neither privatisations nor, as the motion would have it, remotely inspired by dogma. After all, by what stretch of even the Liberal Democrats' lurid imagination could the Labour party and this Government be charged with a dogmatic commitment to privatisation? On the contrary, those PPPs represent carefully devised, appropriate and pragmatic solutions that deliver the best possible outcomes for the underground and NATS. They are the solutions that the Government's amendment commends to the House.

It is indisputable that the British Rail privatisation was flawed. The Labour party spelled out its alternative approach in its general election manifesto—and we have delivered in government. We have set up the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to provide leadership and direction. The Transport Bill will establish the SRA proper and provide for stronger accountability and enforcement. Our 10-year plan provides the resources for massive investment in the railway: £49 billion over 10 years, including £7 billion of public money for a rail modernisation fund.

In the past few weeks, the Rail Regulator has published the results of his review of Railtrack's access charges for maintenance and renewal, including necessary expenditure on safety improvements. By the end of this year, Railtrack's industrywide safety responsibilities will be separated from its commercial operations. Next year, Lord Cullen will publish his report on the Ladbroke Grove accident and on the culture and management of railway safety. Those initiatives herald more investment, more public accountability and a better deal for passengers—including a safer railway.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I will give way, but after doing so I must make progress.

Mr. Öpik: On a non-confrontational point, the Minister is describing how he will try to make rail privatisation work. One very common and specific problem arises when companies such as Northern Spirit and Virgin Trains abandon passengers at stations other than their final destination. Customers often have to haggle with

station staff for a taxi or some other means of completing their journeys. Will the Minister give me a commitment that one thing for which the money and his legislative powers will be used will be ensuring that those companies make it easy for customers to get to where they need to go even if they are abandoned at a station on the way?

Mr. Hill: In a non-confrontational way, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that a very dissatisfactory situation all too often prevails in our railway system. Frankly, the train operating companies ought to be improving their act right now. We inherited some flawed franchising agreements. We are in the process of refranchising and certainly expect to wrest from those contracts much higher standards of customer care along the lines that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

I think that we can all agree on the scale of the financial problems faced by the underground, and the need for urgent measures to deal with them. The previous Government left a huge investment backlog on the tube, and their public expenditure plans envisaged still further cuts in funding.

We set about dealing with the underfunding immediately. In March 1998, we announced an additional £365 million of funding for London Transport over and above existing plans. In July 1999, we announced that we were allocating £517 million of additional resources to London Transport over two years, to help it deliver real improvements to passengers in the run-up to the PPP. In the Budget this year, we announced that a further £65 million would be allocated to London Underground in 2000–01—plus an additional £40 million to deal with claims on the Jubilee line extension.

The extra funding still does not provide a long-term solution to the underground's funding problems. Even with the increases, London Underground is left with changes every year to its funding arrangements, making it impossible for it to plan its investment efficiently. That is what the PPP is designed to transform. It is quite wrong to suggest that the PPP is in some way like rail privatisation, and that it will somehow undermine safety. In fact, the whole point of the London Underground PPP is to learn from the mistakes of previous privatisations, not to repeat them.

That is why the PPP structure is so different from a privatisation. It is based on fixed-term contracts rather than permanent transfers to the private sector. So assets will return to the public sector in a much improved condition. The PPP structure retains clear public sector accountability from the outset. Statutory safety responsibility for the whole underground remains with public sector London Underground. Indeed, the recent Industrial Society report that was commissioned by the Mayor of London on the PPP said that it

> recognises the special effort made by Government in ensuring that safety is managed centrally and rests ultimately in public sector hands.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Minister will appreciate how successful bond issues for funding public transport have been in the United States. Will he explain why it is such a bad idea here and why the Government will not consider it?

Mr. Hill: That is exactly what I intend to do. I noticed that the Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath, skated over the Liberal Democrat proposals. I intend to give them careful scrutiny and to explain precisely the reasons for rejecting them.

I return to the question of the proposed PPP for London Underground. Unlike on the privatised railways, there will be no separation between train and track infrastructure maintenance. London Underground will retain responsibility for all operational matters—from switching signals to driving trains and staffing stations. So it will be a far more unified system.

The PPP will also be subject to two key validation tests: safety and value for money. On safety, we have consistently made it clear that the PPP will not proceed unless it can be shown that it will make a substantial contribution to improved safety. As I have said, the safety regime for the PPP retains a structure in which statutory responsibility for safety of the whole network remains with public sector London Underground.

The transition to the new arrangements for the PPP requires three sets of changes to London Underground's safety case—to ensure that safety is maintained and improved both in the run-up to the PPP and when it is under way. Two of those revised safety cases have already been approved by the Health and Safety Executive. The transition process also requires a safety audit, which will begin shortly, and the submission and acceptance of the third set of changes to the safety case.

I am not making any new political commitment when I say that the PPP will not proceed unless and until the HSE has taken an independent view and has stated that it is satisfied with the revised safety case. I am simply stating the legal position. Our plans will deliver a network that is publicly run, publicly accountable and properly financed. It will reverse the increase in serious injuries that we have seen on the tube over the past 10 years.

The second key test for the PPP, after safety, is value for money. As the House will be aware, London Transport and its advisers have been devising a public sector comparator against which the bids for the PPP will be judged. Bids will be considered against not only traditional funding methods but a public sector bond option. We have published the methodology for that comparator, which has been independently audited by KPMG.

Most importantly, in August, the National Audit Office—Parliament's public expenditure watchdog—announced that it would bring its scrutiny of the comparator forward so that it could report on it before contracts were signed. That will ensure that the comparator represents a fair and rigorous test of the PPP bids.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I know that the hon. Gentleman has not yet intervened, but I hope that he will forgive me for not giving way because I need to make progress. If I feel that I have made satisfactory progress, I will of course yield to him in due course. After all, he used to represent me on Lambeth council—albeit not, I hasten to add, with the benefit of my vote.

The Liberal Democrats' alternative to the PPP is a bond option. Fair enough—we are not dogmatically opposed to bonds, but we do not believe they are the right solution for the underground. They would do nothing to bring management efficiencies to the system; they would

[Mr. Hill]

introduce a further delay in getting a financing regime in place; and, as the Industrial Society itself concedes, they would not be a realistic prospect without new powers to raise local taxes. We do not believe Londoners want more delay—perhaps of up to two years—in modernising the tube, nor do we think that they want to pay more taxes, or to confer tax-raising powers on the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly.

We are convinced that the PPP is the best option for NATS; let me explain why. NATS provides a world-class service, but air traffic is growing by more than 5 per cent. each year and increasing delays are inevitable unless significant improvements are made to the system. We are already addressing these needs: the £700 million Swanwick centre will open in the winter of 2001–02. However, NATS managers say that they also need more than £1 billion over the next 10 years to invest in safety. In particular, major investment is needed to bring the new Scottish centre at Prestwick on stream when it is needed, probably by 2007-08.

Under the PPP, we will bring in a long-term strategic partner from the private sector that will fund and deliver the next generation air traffic control system. Under the PPP, NATS will be freed from Government financial constraints. With stable and long-term funding provided by the strategic partner, NATS will be able to plan its investment to provide significant benefits to the United Kingdom, airlines and their passengers as soon as possible. Freedom from Government financial constraints will also put NATS in a good position to export its expertise at a time when there is an increasing realisation that international air traffic control systems must be consolidated if they are to be able to cope with continuing increases in air traffic.

We have rejected the privatisation of NATS precisely because we do not believe that it would provide the necessary safeguards that the travelling public deserves. Crucially, under the PPP, we are able to build in specific safeguards that would not be possible under a privatisation. For example, as I have already said, by retaining a significant shareholding, the Government will retain the right to appoint directors to the board of the company. Under the PPP, the main strategic decisions of the NATS board will require a unanimous vote of all directors, including those who will be appointed by the Government. Under that structure, the Government and the taxpayer will also be able to share in the future success of the PPP and to have a say in key decisions affecting the company. None of that would be possible with a 100 per cent. sell-off.

Air traffic control is all about safety. That will continue to be the overriding priority under the PPP. That is why we have amended the Transport Bill in another place to make it clear that maintaining a high level of safety in the provision of air traffic services must have priority over every other consideration when functions are exercised under the legislation.

Of course, setting up the PPP is also crucial in delivering the final and complete separation between safety regulation by the Civil Aviation Authority and the provision of air traffic control services by NATS. The mid to late 1990s saw a 35 per cent. increase in the number of risk-bearing air proxes involving commercial air transport. That is why we are determined to strengthen aviation safety by separating air traffic services from safety regulations, which is something that the industry, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and other aviation interests have sought for some years now.

It goes without saying that our proposals for a NATS PPP have proved contentious, but everyone, including the Select Committee and the unions, accepts that doing nothing is not an option. We have considered various other funding mechanisms, including trusts, bonds, and publicly owned companies, but we are convinced that none of those will deliver all the benefits that a PPP will provide.

The Liberal Democrats want a not-for-profit company to take over NATS. The reasoning behind this is, I assume, to establish that profit is not put before safety. Let me reassure the House that the PPP will not jeopardise safety: rather, it is designed to enhance the safety regime for air traffic control. Safety regulation will remain firmly in the public sector in a reformed CAA and, as I have just said, we have amended the Transport Bill to reiterate our commitment to safety. In short, I do not accept the profit-before-safety argument, and nor should the House.

I should stress that there is nothing in the PPP structure or in the Transport Bill that would prevent a viable not-for-profit company from becoming our strategic partner, but for us to take a view on what offers the best future for NATS, there needs to be a competitive process which allows rational assessment of the bids we receive. Any not-for-profit bid needs to stand up and be assessed alongside the others. Limiting the selection criteria in the way the Liberal Democrats propose would knock out potential candidates who might, at the end of the day, be a better partner.

Other funding mechanisms for NATS have also been mentioned in the past, including trusts, bonds and publicly owned companies. We have considered those options, but we are convinced that none of them will deliver all the benefits that a PPP will provide. Last week, we announced that we have three robust potential strategic partners for NATS. We shall now work with those world-class consortiums to find the best option for the future of the company and of air traffic control in the UK.

I have gone out of my way to set out the grounds for rejecting the alternatives for the future of NATS and the London Underground propounded by the Liberal Democrats. Given the deplorable terms of their motion, there are those who might take the view that I have been too generous and reasonable in my response. However, let us not lose sight of the real villains of the piece: the gung-ho privatisers of the official Opposition, who, despite all the evidence, still advocate the wholesale privatisation of the underground and air traffic services. Will they never learn?

The Conservatives privatised and deregulated the bus industry, with the result that bus passenger journeys went down by a third and bus services in the countryside were decimated. The Labour Government have stemmed the decline in bus passenger numbers: through our rural bus grant, last year, 16 million new passenger journeys were enjoyed by country people benefiting from new and enhanced rural bus services.

The Conservatives privatised the railway, broke it up into 100 parts and got an appalling deal for the taxpayer into the bargain.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, even though he has never allowed the facts to intrude on his private prejudices. Given that, this year, London Underground will receive an investment that is precisely £282 million less than was provided in the last year of Conservative Government, how does he justify the expenditure by his Administration of more than £60 million on consultancy fees in connection with a botched privatisation?

Mr. Hill: That is rich coming from a member of the Conservative party, which spent £450 million on a rail sell-off that will deliver less to the travelling passenger and the taxpayer than the London Underground PPP will achieve. Let me allow the facts to intrude on the debate: were the hon. Gentleman to take the trouble to look at the forward projections of the public expenditure figures produced by the last Conservative Government in 1996, he would find that projected investment by central Government in London Underground this year was zero. He is on pretty thin ice when he condemns the Labour Government, who have invested £1.6 billion in London's underground system in our three years in office.

When the Tories left office, Railtrack was £700 million behind in its investment programme. With Labour, rail investment is now 33 per cent. higher than in 1997, and we have announced plans for a massive injection of £49 billion into the rail system over the next 10 years. The Conservatives left a £1.2 billion investment backlog in the tube; they made a £400 million cut in tube investment in their last Budget; and, if they had stayed in office, they would by now have cut Government funding to London Underground to zero. Yet now the Conservatives have the effrontery to propose the full-scale privatisation of London Underground, breaking it up into five companies competing with each other, and they still want to sell off NATS lock, stock and barrel. If we are talking about dogma, they are the dogmatists. Like the Bourbons, they have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

We have learned from the mistakes of the dogma-driven programme of the previous Administration. We are working hard to put right the mistakes made on the railways, and we have developed innovative, custom-built solutions for the underground and NATS. That is the right way forward, and that is why the House should reject the disreputable and opportunistic motion tabled by the Liberal Democrats and support the Government's sensible and forward-looking amendment.

I commend the amendment to the House.

8.30 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): In the early years of the previous century, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the Fabians had high hopes that central planning and governmental control were the way of the future. By the end of the century, the overwhelming lesson was that that did not work and never had any chance of working. Around the world—not only in Europe, but in the far east and South America—most countries, whatever the political persuasion of their Governments, are privatising industries and looking to free enterprise to deliver the goods.

A free enterprise system is more likely to generate wealth, innovation and enterprise. It is more likely to devolve decision making to millions of people who are consumers and who, through the market mechanism, make choices. That mechanism has proved over the past century to be the one that delivered the best economic outcomes. Even left-wing politicians have concluded that free enterprise is best and that one can control an agenda without having to own an industry.

The one party that seems to have a problem with that notion is the Liberal Democrats. I know that the past century did not treat them well, and if they continue in their current vein, this century will not treat them well either. The social democrats in Germany dropped their Marxist tag in 1959, the socialists in Spain did so in the 1970s and became the Government throughout the 1980s, and even the Labour party, one of the most conservative institutions in this country, dropped clause IV, because it did not see the relevance. *[Interruption.]* I hear someone mutter, "Not all of us." That is a good point—only last week an hon. Member asked the Prime Minister about renationalising the rail industry. The Labour party still has not quite adapted to the changes that its constitution has produced, but it is going in the right direction.

Free enterprise brings home the bacon and is the system most consistent with democratic government, because it devolves decision making. The Conservative party has been a defender of free enterprise for most of the past century because as a party we realise that property and a diverse economy are essential for a healthy nation. We defended free enterprise even when the Labour party tried to nationalise and control. We have always been proud of that, but not for any great dogmatic reason.

One could probably say of the private sector the same as Churchill said of democracy: he said that democracy was the worst system, except for all the alternatives. Free enterprise requires a sensible competition policy, and capitalists must be prevented from taking advantage of people, because the natural capitalist tendency is sometimes to do that. Government have a role to play in setting parameters, setting rules and ensuring that fraudsters have no place in the system.

During its 18 years in office, the Conservative party found that a shake-up of the large state sector would result in substantial gains. The burden on the state was extensive in terms of taxpayers' subsidies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made clear, what has changed and what has assisted the current Chancellor's finances is that instead of the taxpayer being a contributor to many industries, many companies that were in the public sector are contributing through corporation tax and are more efficient organisations than they were.

Many industries that were privatised by the previous Government have been able to expand overseas, investing in other countries and creating great world-class companies. We are a great trading nation, and many companies have expanded and undertaken projects that they would not have considered in an earlier generation. We now have a worldwide perspective. The lessons of that Government have been learned not only in this country but abroad, where many Conservative policies have been adopted because of the benefits that have become apparent.

[Mr. Robert Syms]

The Conservative party is pragmatic in its approach and looks at each individual case on its merits. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency was mentioned earlier. It would be surprising to find my party in the same Lobby as the Government on DERA, because there are real concerns about our relations with the Americans and our defence interests. It would be wrong to suggest that we wanted to privatise everything in sight.

With regard to National Air Traffic Services, in principle we would prefer a proper privatisation, with a listing, to create a world-class company. However, NATS is a difficult matter. If it were an easy privatisation or a popular one, I expect that Baroness Thatcher or my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) would have privatised it when in office, but the issues are complex and the benefits of privatisation are a little less obvious than in some other areas, not least because most of the income derived from NATS comes from international treaties negotiated across Europe and across the world.

The ability of NATS to generate more income is dependent on the volume of air movements increasing. Unlike previous privatisations, such as that of BAA, which is a great retailing company that has expanded across the world and opened many stores, NATS cannot generate significantly more income, as the Government evidently expect it to do.

We should remind the Government that when they were in opposition, they said that our air was not for sale. They did not include their proposals for NATS in their manifesto. What the Lords have done is sensible—they have asked the Government to think again. In the case of the British Telecom flotation, we allowed the electorate to make its choice. We passed legislation and had a general election. Only after we were confirmed in office did we proceed with the flotation. It would not be unreasonable for the Government to accept the Lords amendment, put it in their manifesto, fight an election on it and, if Labour is successful in being re-elected, carry it through.

As I made clear in an intervention, I am also interested in whether the Government will reverse another amendment to protect the pensions of NATS staff. I hope that the Under-Secretary will give us more information on that.

The Government's solution for NATS is bizarre. They began with a proposal for 49 per cent. Government ownership, 46 per cent. private ownership and 5 per cent. of shares for NATS staff. That was to be done not through a listing but by negotiating with a private strategic partner. The Government have no clear idea about how employees can benefit. There has been talk of setting up a trust to enable the 5 per cent. shares that the staff own to be internally traded. I hope that the Under-Secretary can give us more information about the way in which staff could benefit from such trading.

We are also worried about the identity of the strategic partner, and especially about foreign ownership. There is a defence element to the topic that we are discussing. Anxiety therefore exists about foreign ownership, especially by a company that has substantial state ownership. Now that the Government have received some expressions of interest, I hope that they can reassure hon. Members that the strategic partner is not likely to be a foreign company with heavy state ownership.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile his worries about foreign ownership with his desire for wholesale privatisation?

Mr. Syms: We should do our best to protect an independent British company. A strategic partnership, possibly with a foreign-controlled company, which provides air traffic services, might skew policy. I would require substantial reassurance before entering into a relationship with a foreign-owned company, especially if it was owned by a foreign Government. There was talk about the French company Thomson CSF being one of the strategic partners. I should therefore like the Minister to tell us more about the number of organisations that have expressed an interest and with which the Government are currently negotiating. There is currently great uncertainty.

The Government believe in spending money on consultants and have spent £2.2 million on them. We had a short debate in Committee about the money that would be generated from NATS. There was some confusion about it. Perhaps the Under-Secretary can give us more information about the income that will be generated. He gave us an assurance in Committee that the money would be used by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, not the Treasury. On what will it be spent? If those questions are answered, we shall have a clearer idea of the Government's thinking.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend knows that NATS has outstanding loans of approximately £300 million. That money is urgently needed to pay for the new facility at Prestwick. Will my hon. Friend press the Under-Secretary to say when the proceeds from the public-private partnership are likely to be received? If there is a delay, safety could be jeopardised because the facility at Prestwick will not be built on time.

Mr. Syms: I shall not answer my hon. Friend directly because the Under-Secretary heard the question and will doubtless take it into account. Time is limited, and several hon. Members want to speak.

The Government presented an optimistic scenario about the results of their policy. They stated in Committee that they and many people believed that the number of air traffic control centres in Europe would be reduced to two and that one of the benefits of privatisation—or PPP as the Government call it—is that Britain would be in a strong position to provide them. I cannot envisage other nations allowing their aerospace to be controlled from Britain. There is a danger that we might be the loser in that competition, especially if there is some foreign ownership, control or influence over what happens in our aerospace. Our solution is better; the Government's is over complicated, but at least they will have an opportunity to reconsider when the Lords amendments are presented.

The target date for the strategic partner has been given as March 2001. I hope that the Under-Secretary will be able to tell hon. Members whether the date remains relevant.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of safety. There is a strong culture of safety in aerospace and in NATS, and I do not subscribe to the idea that following the route that we are considering is likely to be detrimental to safety. The Minister clearly set out some of the reasons for that. Nevertheless, there are anxieties, and reassurances should be given. The Select Committee has criticised the proposal, but I shall not go into that.

We have heard that the Government intend to overturn the Lords amendment that relates to delay. We hope that the Minister will give us more information about what the Government intend to do about including protection for pensioners in the Bill.

We have a general concern about aerospace policy, and particularly the role of Eurocontrol, which we spent many happy and productive hours debating in Committee. We have concerns also about the European Community's single sky policy and how that will impact on Britain's aerospace policy.

We privatised the railways, and not for any great political benefit to the Conservative party. I do not believe that there was any such benefit to be gained by doing so. We privatised them because we felt that there would be a benefit to the nation. Mainly, we wanted to attract substantially more private money and investment into the industry. During the 40 years from 1952, the share of journeys made by rail fell from 17 per cent. to only 5 per cent. The amount of goods moved by rail dipped dramatically from 42 per cent. to 7 per cent. British Rail had been allowing our railways to go into genteel decline over many decades. If we are to have a world-class economy—ours is the fourth largest economy in the world—we must have a transport infrastructure that delivers the goods. I believe that the Conservative Government were right to privatise the railways. The benefits of privatisation will be seen only over a number of decades because of the backlog of under-investment of a nationalised industry.

I say that we did the right thing, but that does not mean that we got everything absolutely right. There are many areas where there can be improvement and systems need to be worked better. As we have heard in the debate, in various interventions, there is some division about whether the current system is safer than the previous system. The figures show that the current system is safer. However, we must all be concerned that our railways are not as safe as those in continental Europe. We should try to prevent any accidents. We must do far more in terms of safety.

The Opposition have raised several concerns, especially about the interaction of the Rail Regulator and Railtrack and the fining network. That is one area where we should examine carefully whether the post-privatisation system is working as it should. It seems somewhat perverse that Railtrack is fined if it tries to repair certain stretches of railway, and the fine level suggested by the Rail Regulator has increased quite substantially. We have concerns about that, and that is why the other day we called for the new deal that the Rail Regulator announced to be risk assessed. The regulator has no direct role in terms of safety. That was our major concern.

Overall, I think that privatisation has been successful. There was a 5 per cent. increase in passenger journeys between May 1997 and September 1999, with rail patronage now the highest in 40 years. Domestic rail freight increased by 15 per cent. in two years. More than 1,300 more trains are being run daily to meet increased demands. Since 1997, 13 new stations and more than 50 new freight terminals have opened. Rolling stock worth £1.95 billion has been ordered for delivery by 2002. There were 480 safe station car parks on the national rail network with CCTV or video surveillance by the end of January 2000. Much progress has been made, but much more still needs to be done.

London Underground caters for 3 million trips per week day, including journey-to-work trips made by 35 per cent. of those in central London. About 90 per cent. of tourists use the tube during their stay in London. It generates more than £1.1 billion in fare revenue annually. With 3,954 railway cars travelling on more than 1,140 km of track, the underground now carries more passengers than the entire rail network in the UK. It is undoubtedly the only real method of rapidly transporting large numbers of people round London.

It is important to get things right. That is desperately important for our capital. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made it clear that when the previous Conservative Government left office, investment in the underground was substantially more than it is now. This year, the tube will receive £753 billion, which is a substantial reduction on the £1,035 billion that the Conservative Government were investing in 1996–97. Part of the problem is that the tube needs a great deal more investment. The delays and the Government's decision to go for such a convoluted public-private partnership have contributed to the rundown of the network.

In the Labour party 1997 election manifesto, the Prime Minister promised London:

> Labour will improve the Underground and guarantee value for money for taxpayers and passengers.

However, the Government are unlikely to deliver on that with the plans they have set out. Labour's PPP has been described as

> half baked and either naive or dishonest

by *The Economist*; a "convoluted compromise" by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs; and

> towards the bottom of the list of options

by Peter Ford, a former chairman of London Transport. It has not had the rave reviews that the Government would have wanted. The privatisation will be botched. My concern is that they will give privatisation a bad name, as they have with NATS.

Proposals for the tube include a one-off finance deal for a 30-year period to fund the investment and maintenance backlog. That cannot finance route extensions and new lines, which a privatised underground would be able to do. London Underground will still be run by a single state-owned company, and investment decisions will be dictated by politics. The nationalised industry culture will remain and there will be few incentives for higher standards and innovation. Furthermore, Maurice Fitzpatrick, head of economics at Chantrey Vellacott DFK, has estimated that fares will have to rise by 30 per cent. under Labour's botched privatisation. That is hardly value for money. At the start of the year, fares for a single journey in zone 1 increased by 7 per cent., but people have not seen much improvement in the service.

[Mr. Syms]

We want fully to privatise the underground, and we want to issue shares to generate badly needed funds for investment. We are also keen to give shares to Londoners, members of staff and season ticket holders, so that we give the tube back to Londoners. It is important that we get the policy right. Privatisation is one way in which we could improve the tube. It would certainly reduce traffic congestion in our capital. The Jubilee line—a fine Conservative project—has air conditioning, and it has shown how important it is that whoever takes over the tube spends money on air conditioning for the system and on building new underground lines. We do not want to stick where we are; we want to improve the network substantially.

The Conservative party is pragmatic. Conservatives believe in free enterprise. We are not ashamed of anything that we have done because we have delivered a more efficient economy. Its growth over the past few years—even under this Government—has, to a large extent, been due to the fact that it is more flexible and efficient, which is a result of many of the reforms introduced by the noble Baroness Thatcher and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon. Although we are concerned about the direction of the Government's policy on NATS, we are more concerned about their plans for the underground.

We are not complacent about the railways. We appreciate that there is a long way to go to improve the network, but we still believe that the direction that we took was right. If the Government believed that we were wrong, they would have tried to change the structure that they inherited when we spent six happy months together debating all the clauses—all the bits and pieces—of the Transport Bill. Apart from the Strategic Rail Authority and the regulator, the Government have, on the whole, run the system as they inherited it because they have accepted that they can work with the system that the previous Government left them. The Conservative party will be constructive. We certainly want to improve the safety record and, if the Government do what is right, we will back them.

8.54 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I am pleased to return to the House after a week of paternity leave. A week ago, in the midst of a storm, my wife gave birth to a daughter. For that reason, my mood is naturally one of benevolence towards the Liberal Democrats, and I would have loved to agree with the sentiments expressed in their motion but for three reasons: the motion is opportunist, it is irresponsible, and it is financially incoherent.

The proposals that we are discussing must be seen in the context of Labour's 10-year plan for an extra £180 billion of investment in our transport infrastructure, to build a new integrated transport infrastructure for Britain. If I may put it simply, £56 billion of that will be private money that is being levered in by private-public partnership. The first question to the Liberal Democrats must be, where will that £56 billion come from? Will it come from another 2p on income tax?

While I am on the subject of financial incoherence—

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is prepared to acknowledge that the £56 billion of private investment is not spelt out in detail anywhere in the Government's proposals. Surely it is an indicative sum, with no backing whatever.

Mr. Davies: As I proceed, I shall isolate specific amounts of private-sector investment. Perhaps the Liberals will let us know where they would get the money.

As well as the extra 2p on income tax that the investment would inflict on the public, we must bear in mind the recent Liberal U-turn on fuel tax. Only a year or so ago, the Liberal Democrats were saying that their promised extra billions of expenditure would be predicated on environmental taxation, especially fuel taxation. They now say that for five years there will be a freeze on fuel duty, irrespective of the world price of oil. If the world price of oil falls from its current level of $34 a barrel to $10, and everyone suddenly starts driving more and doing a lot of environmental damage, the Liberals will apparently retain the freeze. That is sheer opportunism, and I fear that the leader of the Liberal party is on the waiting list for a spine transplant.

Mr. Don Foster: It does the House a great disservice to misrepresent the position of any political party. I know that the hon. Gentleman missed a debate on this subject, but he will, I hope, be well aware that the Liberal Democrats have changed their policy because they have now found better ways of targeting the key issues of congestion and pollution. When a better way can be found, it is sensible to change.

Given that we have changed, it is interesting to note that all independent commentators say that only the Liberal Democrats have transport policies that are likely to solve the country's transport difficulties.

Mr. Davies: That is false. In fact I did attend the debate that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I ask him to set the record straight.

If, for argument's sake, the world price of oil dropped to $10 a barrel in two years' time, would the hon. Gentleman's policy enable him to increase fuel duty? I think the answer is no.

Liberal policy is based on the assumption that fuel duty will not change, irrespective of the world price of oil. As I have said, that is an incoherent and opportunist position; what is more, it shoots a big black hole in the Liberal finances, ripped even deeper by the latest proposition that private money—it seems—is dirty money in today's Britain. That is an outdated and outmoded view.

Mr. Foster: I do not wish to go into the difficulties experienced by the hon. Gentleman and his party when the Prime Minister is not even prepared to support such moves as congestion charging. I simply ask the hon. Gentleman this: if on Wednesday the Chancellor of the Exchequer announces proposals to freeze fuel duty, as is widely predicted in the newspapers, will the hon. Gentleman vote against the Chancellor?

Mr. Davies: I will not support the proposal to freeze fuel duty for five years regardless of the global price of oil, as that would be foolish. I accept that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor may, in the short term, choose to

freeze duty or change it in any way that he sees fit. However, he will give himself the flexibility to alter our tax position in the light of world conditions, the environmental threat and problems faced by this country. People listening to our debate should be aware that while we have slightly higher fuel duty than the rest of Europe, we have much lower tax overall. Our tax position is correct, not the European one. We will find that harmonisation is moving towards the Labour way, not the running-scared Liberal Democrat way.

As for privatisation versus PPP, it has been suggested that privatisation and the Government's position are precisely the same. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which, in July 1999, received a report on the privatisation of our railtrack system, which took place just before the 1996 election and which, in my view, was an appalling act of robbery. The British taxpayer saw our railtrack system sold for less than £2 billion but, by July 1999, when we received the report, it was worth £8 billion. People will not witness that sort of situation under this Government. The Tories take the same position on the tube, and believe that we should sell it off cheap so that, before anyone knows it, the private sector owner will have jacked up prices and reduced the number of people who use the tube. That would serve neither the public purse nor the passenger and would be a Tory rip-off that, like the privatisation of the railways, would lead to a fragmented and incoherent shambles.

We inherited such a position, which is why we introduced the Strategic Rail Authority, which has a co-ordinating role. We shall invest an extra £60 billion through our 10-year-plan, much of which will be private money. On the issue of PPP and Railtrack, hon. Members may not know that the SRA has 1 million shares in Railtrack. If there is increasing subsidy from the public sector, one wonders whether the public think that we should take a greater equity share in getting feedback and having a proper PPP. That should be part of the future debate about the restructuring of Railtrack, not least because a greater Government stake would enable Railtrack to borrow more money for investment from the City. A greater stake would mean less public investment and more investment from the private sector.

Our debate is about how we maximise the leverage of private sector money in our transport infrastructure. That is a precondition for safety, as investment is the first thing that safety needs. The Liberal Democrat motion does not allow for the approach of trying to maximise partnership, investment and value for money for the taxpayer. The Public Accounts Committee will examine that matter when it looks at its options.

Before coming to this grand place, I was the leader of the largest local authority in London and oversaw the introduction of Tramlink. I very much hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will come and visit Tramlink, which, in six months of operation, is already the most successful tram system in Britain. It is more successful than the system in Manchester and has levered in £100 million of private money, as well as £125 million of public money. Unlike the Jubilee line, which was heralded by the Tories as a great Tory success, Tramlink was not delayed for a year and billions of pounds over-budget because we managed the contract correctly. In fact, Tramlink was delayed, which shows that the public sector does not have a monopoly in delays. However, the cost of that delay—or the risk—was transferred to the private sector.

The issue is therefore about finding value for money and transferring risk. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) to say that it is cheaper for the Treasury to borrow money, but is that so? One must look at cost and time overruns and consider their price. The matter is not just about the cost of capital, so the Liberal Democrat position is rather naive. There is a choice between Liberal Democrat dogma, Tory failure and the success of this Government.

The first question that has to be asked is—I have been asking it throughout—do the Liberal Democrats rule out a public-private partnership? If they do not, what sort of PPP do they rule in? Then we are in a different debate.

Someone asked me specifically for examples of extra cash. The channel tunnel is levering in an extra £3.3 billion, the tube £8 billion and National Air Traffic Services £1.3 billion. That is £12.6 billion. Where is that coming from? "Another few pence on income tax," is the normal response from the irresponsible Liberal Democrats.

Then we get into, "We will not do that. We will take the Canadian trust model, we will do tube bonds or whatever." The Minister has made it clear that the Public Accounts Committee will analyse the value-for-money options objectively. As a member of that Committee, I am open-minded about the different vehicles. The issue is how to get the best value for money in the right amount of time to deliver the standards that the public demand after years of neglect from the Tories. It is about independent regulation, risk transfer and investment in safety.

The next question that was posed is: can the private sector deliver safety? The dogmatic presumption of the Liberal Democrats was that private means unsafe because of profit-grabbing capitalists. We only have to compare British Airways with Aeroflot. What are the issues? They are investment and regulation, not simply ownership.

After all, let us face it: one of the reasons why there is underinvestment in NATS is because the Tory Government had other priorities for expenditure. If they wanted to spend more on tax cuts, the national health service or whatever, they could squeeze NATS. PPP gives a guaranteed cash flow and certainty for investment. It enables NATS to invest in innovation in safety, rather than leaving the situation static.

Air traffic is growing year on year at 6 per cent. To a great extent, the challenge in terms of safety is an information technology challenge: how do we get the computer systems, the IT technology, to manage the system? The question is: where are the skills in the marketplace? As a member of the PAC, I have seen many reports on public sector management of computer systems for national insurance, immigration or whatever. It is not a very good record. The skills are in the private sector. That is another reason why we need a PPP—to ensure investment, smart purchasing, smart operation and safety.

Safety is a cost—it is true—but it is also a product for sale. It needs innovation. People who give me lectures but who have never been in a business in their life might not understand that.

Again, it is about skills and technology. Who knows about that? What is the right structure? "How much public, how much private?" is not an a priori dogmatic question. It is an empirical question about what is right—what is the right mix in a certain situation. What can be tried and tested, rather than rejected through dogma from

[Mr. Davies]

the Tories, who say simply that private is right, public is wrong, or the Liberal Democrats, who also seem to have a dogmatic approach?

This country is moving from years of neglect into a new era—£180 billion, a 22 per cent. real terms increase, of investment in rail, road and all our transport to deliver a modern, safe and integrated transport system for the new millennium. I support the Government's bid to do that.

9.8 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies). I am pleased that he has had a new child, but in that case, he might have followed what I believe is current Government policy and taken two weeks' parental leave, rather than one.

It is my pleasure to focus on just one aspect of the debate: the part privatisation of London Underground. The tube is the lifeblood of our capital city. Just last week, a report by Business Strategies said that

> poor transport is jeopardising strong jobs growth in central London,

so having a smooth-running tube is not optional. It is a vital service for Londoners and visitors to London. It needs to be safe, clean, affordable and reliable. The way in which London Underground is funded is vital in ensuring that those objectives are met.

After 18 years of underfunding that left the tube with a £1.2 billion investment backlog, privatisation is the best option that the Tories can think of. Conservative Members' ideological commitment to privatisation is very reassuring. It shows that they are incapable of change, and that they will be flying the tube privatisation banner high as they lose their seats at the next general election.

Privatisation will not work for the underground. It would be a repeat of the railways disaster. Gerald Corbett said that railway privatisation was designed

> to maximise the proceeds to the Treasury. It was not designed to optimise safety, optimise investment or, indeed, cope with the huge increase in the number of passengers.

—and he should know about the effect of railway privatisation.

In view of their priorities, we can only hope that Conservative Members never get their hands on our public services again. They have already made their intentions, including at least £8 billion of cuts nationwide, very clear. That amounts to a cut of £24 million in my London borough.

If underground privatisation follows the Tories' past record of stunning business acumen, the underground will be sold off for much less than it is worth. As we have heard today, privatisation and undervaluation of Railtrack lost taxpayers £6 billion. Additionally, privatisation does not even guarantee that the private sector will invest in the tube. Railtrack has had to be dragged kicking and screaming to deliver its investment programme.

Labour's public-private partnership may seem better than privatisation, but in an attempt to get the best of both worlds, Labour runs the risk of getting the worst of both. There are a number of problems with the public-private partnership. The Minister quoted the Industrial Society, but he did not quote its statement, as reported on BBC news in September, that the Government's plans to modernise London Underground represent "poor value for money" and could put passenger safety at risk.

The Government can no longer dismiss those safety concerns—

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman should read the whole report.

Mr. Brake: The Minister should read it again.

Fragmentation of the railway industry led to deteriorating communications. How can the Government guarantee that a similar break-up of London Underground will not lead to an identical breakdown in communications? We have heard nothing from the Minister on that point.

PPP does not make sense financially. Glaister, Scanalon and Travers suggests that over a 30-year period, a bond issue would work out at about £80 million cheaper per annum. That would be a very significant saving.

PPP could also cost travellers more. Under the Government's current expenditure plans, grant funding for London Underground is to be withdrawn and the underground is to be funded by fares revenue alone, with the possible exception of major extensions to the network. I have heard rumours that the Government may cave in and accept that grant funding will remain necessary in 2001-02 and beyond. If that is correct, I hope that the Minister will confirm as much, as it would set many Londoners' minds at rest. If he cannot give us that reassurance, the public-private partnership and the withdrawal of grant, taken together, could mean that investment costs are shifted even more on to passengers.

Additionally, public-private partnership could mean that one of the problems with our tube system—affordability—is exacerbated. If fares continue to increase at current rates—the figure of 30 per cent. has been mentioned today—the tube will be out of the reach of many of London's citizens.

PPP is also about standing still—maintaining and upgrading the current system and dealing with the repairs backlog, but ignoring the desperate need for expansion and new lines.

The infrastructure charges that London Underground will have to pay to the PPP companies are expected to increase almost annually as more work is done on the network. Once contracts are signed, London Underground will have to meet those charges regardless of whether revenue increases. Responsibility for meeting any shortfall will rest, ultimately, with the Mayor and the Greater London Authority. The shortfall after two years of the operation of PPP has been estimated at around £175 million—a substantial sum.

On accountability, Labour is to bring in a system that the GLA members—London's elected representatives—do not want. They will be the ones left to pick up the pieces if it all goes wrong.

The Minister was worried earlier that he was not going to get his fix of Liberal Democrat public interest companies; he was wondering why no one had referred to them. I can reassure him that I am about to do exactly that. We believe that public interest companies provide a true alternative to the PPP fudge. Allowing those companies to raise their own capital, freed from the public sector requirement constraints, would provide a far

cheaper means of finance than the private sector—a point the Minister did not respond to. We will be happy to put up this proposal for analysis with the public sector comparator—something that the Government have still to use on PPP. Incidentally, their plans could still unravel at this very late stage.

Public interest companies can work to public sector objectives; this has been done in New York. As we know, New York's successful tube supremo Mr. Kiley has been drafted in to London Underground. He must be somewhat disillusioned with his scope for action, as he is stuck with PPP. It is as if that other foreign import, the England team manager, had been asked to put together his best team but could only use left-footed players.

With public interest companies, the tube would not lose all Government-supplied revenue, which would run the risk of raising ticket prices. Additional sources of future funding, such as congestion charging, could be used later to top up the investment fund. Public interest companies do not carry the safety problems caused by fragmentation into different parts—another point that the Minister did not respond to. He has not explained how he will address the risks of a fragmented system under PPP—risks that we have already seen following rail privatisation.

Public interest companies would provide a financing system that truly would be in the public interest—bringing in desperately needed finance, but also safeguarding the public interest, not just businesses.

The Minister talks about the delays that would arise if a public interest company if were introduced now. The PPP was expected to be completed in April this year, yet no contract has been signed for the two deep tube lines. For the sub-surface line, the fiasco of attempting to cobble together an agreement between London Transport and Railtrack—which many felt was anti-competitive—means that a deal is not expected until April 2001 at the latest, four years after the Labour Government came to power.

The Government have inherited one of William Hague's Conservatives' least attractive features—obstinacy. However, it is not too late for the Government to abandon PPP—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should know by now that we do not refer to Members of this House in that way.

Mr. Brake: Thank you for pointing that out, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is not too late for the Government to abandon the public-private partnership. The Minister should think again, learn the lessons from railway privatisation, hear the voices of millions of Londoners and dump PPP.

9.18 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The Liberal Democrats' motion is opportunist, and much of what the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said was inconsistent with their own manifesto. If we compare the manifesto with what he said tonight, we will see whether this is a case of the Liberals being consistent—or, as usual, facing both ways at the same time.

In the manifesto, the Liberal Democrats said that they would

> retain London Underground in public ownership and give it the right to seek private finance for new investment without an assured government guarantee.

We have not heard much from them today about how they propose to bring in the £7 billion that the Government will raise on the public-private partnership for London Underground. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) criticises the lack of investment in London Underground without giving us any clues about how his party proposes to raise the money.

The Liberal Democrats said that they would

> Treble the freight and double the number of passengers carried on Britain's railways by the year 2010.

Again, they did not tell us how they would raise the money. They vaguely said that they would

> require Railtrack to meet targets for greater investment and increased passenger and freight traffic

but we heard nothing from their spokesman about what that really means. It is pure words.

The only point in their manifesto with which I can agree is when they said that they would

> strengthen the powers of the rail regulators.

I must give the Government credit: the Strategic Rail Authority brings into one pot a number of different authorities, and that is badly needed for the railways. However, I will not let the Government entirely off the hook on safety, to which I shall return.

The Liberal Democrats said that they would

> withhold public subsidies from Railtrack if the targets are not met.

Goodness knows what that will do. It will surely make matters worse. If Railtrack cannot increase its own investment and there is no public subsidy, the railways will suffer.

The motion is opportunistic and the Liberal Democrats have failed to explain their policies, but this is still an important debate, in which we must get one or two facts on the record. Much has been made of the failure of my party's privatisation of the railways. Let us look at the facts. Between May 1997 and September 1999 there was a 5 per cent. increase in passenger journeys, and we now have the largest number of passenger journeys on the railways for 40 years.

Privatisation can hardly be called a failure if we have that record number of passengers—which has, of course, given rise to some of the problems that we now face. The rails are simply not standing up to the huge increase in traffic, and are suffering from metal fatigue. We want to encourage more freight and passengers onto the railways, but we must be extra vigilant on safety.

Despite what the Liberal Democrats want, domestic rail freight increased by 15 per cent. in the two years to March 1999, to a record 17.4 billion tonnes moved. There are 1,300 more trains being run daily to meet increased demand since privatisation. Since 1997, 13 new stations and more than 50 new freight terminals have opened and £1.95 billion of rolling stock has been ordered. That is not a bad record.

The Government claim the credit for increased investment in the railways, but in the next breath they

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

criticise us for privatising them. They cannot have it both ways. Their own spokesman, Lord Macdonald, said:

> I acknowledge readily that credit must be given to the railway industry for the advances made in safety management in recent times. Indeed, the number of signals passed at danger has been reduced significantly. I am pleased that Railtrack felt able to announce earlier this month that the number of broken rails in the half year in question, compared with the previous period, had declined by 32 per cent.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 October 2000; Vol. 617, c. 1201.]

To listen to some of the scaremongering, one would think that the whole system was falling apart.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that many of the achievements that he cited have happened since 1997. Does he agree that the new Labour Government brought a different ethos and attitude, and that the combination of encouragement and pressure for improved standards and better and more frequent services has come from this Government, and not from the Conservative Government, whose tactics were simply to privatise?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Government have been able to build on the investment put in by Railtrack to improve the railways as I described. That simply would not have been possible under the old public sector ethos. We all remember the dirty and delayed trains under British Rail. The system was crumbling and getting worse by the year. Now at least we are getting significant sums invested in the railways, which is exactly what they need. I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing that out.

I follow the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington in echoing my concerns for the people of London, the tourists and others who use the London underground system. There is a significant problem—we all acknowledge that London Underground has been suffering from underinvestment for many years. What worries me is that the Government have planned for a huge amount of income from the public-private partnership, yet it seems that there will be a considerable delay if ever they manage to get the scheme off the ground. Their own figures prove that: last year London Underground received £338 million in public sector grants, while this year the figure is only £89 million, and next year it is planned to be £102 million. I suggest that the reason for those significant reductions is that the Government were planning for the income to come from the public-private partnership. If that money is not forthcoming, and if the public subsidy drops, the passengers of London Underground will continue to suffer considerably more pain yet before things get better—if they ever get better under this Government.

Whatever happens, I call on the Government to get on with their public-private partnership. We would prefer a full privatisation, but whatever the outcome, there needs to be a significant increase in investment in the London underground system for all the passengers who travel on it. I have travelled on it recently—*[Interruption.]* I have travelled on it ever since I was a small child. I remember when I was five years old being stuck on the underground for two and a half hours with my mother. That was in the 1958 floods, as it happens—but not many people can remember that far back. That demonstrates that we need more investment. I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will be able to explain what will happen in the interim before the money comes in from the public-private partnership.

The privatisation of National Air Traffic Services is also an important part of the debate. How will the Government fund the £300 million needed for the new investment at Prestwick? Everybody who is involved with air traffic control agrees that the facility at Prestwick is urgently needed. As I understand it, the Government were relying on the proceeds of the NATS privatisation for that £300 million. When are the Government confident of getting the Bill through the House, and when are they likely to receive the money from the NATS privatisation? Will that pay for the Prestwick facility, and can they give an assurance that it will be built on time?

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the previous Government's plans for a private finance initiative delayed the Prestwick centre by several years?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: This Government have been in power for almost four years. They have had more than sufficient time to sort out any problems regarding Prestwick. The previous Government introduced the PFI for the new facility at Swanwick, and that facility will come on stream, as the Minister said, by the end of 2001 or the beginning of 2002. I am quite certain that had the Conservative party been elected by the British people in 1997, we would have sorted out the problems and the hon. Lady would have had the facility in Prestwick by now. I do not think that there can be too much criticism there.

What do the Government propose to do about the golden share? The Minister said quite emphatically that this was not a privatisation. However, the Government are selling off 46 per cent., with another 5 per cent. being sold to the employees. They are keeping a golden share and retaining 49 per cent. Is that compatible with European law? Will the European Commission allow the Government to keep the golden share? If not, they may have to sell off a majority stake. In that case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) said, how can they prevent a French company from purchasing NATS?

I should also like the Minister to tell us whether the Government are in favour of the European skies policy, and how it will affect the public-private partnership of NATS. That policy has not been mentioned this evening. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister would listen instead of laughing and talking all the time, he might learn something. That policy is of considerable concern to the military, which will not, as it does now, have reserved airspace over Europe, and which is worried about operational safety.

The Liberal Democrats, who tabled this evening's motion, favour some sort of bond issue.

Mr. Don Foster: Some have.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Are the Liberal Democrats in favour of a bond or not? My understanding was that they were. PricewaterhouseCoopers, the well known firm of accountants, has estimated that assuming an AA rating—if that can be assumed—a bond issued by London transport would have to pay 1.2 per cent. more than a

Government gilt. If one has to pay over the odds to issue a bond, why not let the Government borrow the money in the first place? Even better, the money could be raised far more cheaply by privatising London Underground and relieving the pain that commuters on the underground have to suffer under this Government. At the next election, the commuters of London will give their verdict on having had to suffer that pain.

9.31 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I have listened to some of the debate with increasing incredulity, partly because the Liberal Democrat motion does not distinguish privatisation from public-private partnerships. Conservative Members claim credit for the improvements in rail usage, saying that it results from privatisation. That is fantasy. The reality is that privatisation left the legacy of disinvestment and disrepair in our railways that we have all seen in the past few weeks. The Government's determination and pressure has resulted in increased rail use and greater investment by Railtrack.

Let us get the facts straight. We inherited from the previous Government a huge investment backlog, ever increasing traffic, crumbling roads and 20 years of public transport neglect. Rail privatisation broke the network into 100 parts, and we know that it was a bad deal for taxpayers. Between 1986 and 1996, the proportion of public transport journeys fell by 11 per cent. and the number of car journeys increased by 21 per cent. Bus journeys outside London fell by 31 per cent. in the last 10 years of Conservative Government, who left us with a funding backlog of £1.2 billion for London Underground.

Comments that Railtrack's increased investment was due to the legacy of privatisation do not bear scrutiny. By May 1997, Railtrack was £700 million behind in its rail investment and maintenance programme and—day by day, week by week—we see the effects of that legacy. The proportion of freight carried on our rail system has decreased; congestion on our road has grown by 66 per cent., and there are 70 more cars per mile of road since 1979.

Conservative Members have elaborated a fantasy; it is a myth to suggest that privatisation has somehow enhanced the experience of the travelling public and those who use public transport and our railways. Let us consider what was the intention of the Tories. In 1994, the right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) said:

> Increases in fuel duty, and motorway tolling, will help people to make . . . informed choices—[*Official Report*, 30 March 1994; Vol. 240, c. 930.]

We were told:

> Private enterprise given its head to build toll roads could get Britain back on the move.

That is what Conservative Members told us then. Their agenda is purely one of privatisation, and their call for the privatisation of London Underground does them no credit.

The Liberal Democrats argue that we should not take the public-private partnership route, but their approach contains a significant gap of £56 million in public transport investment. Where do they intend to find £8 billion for London Underground, £3.3 billion for the channel tunnel rail link and £1.3 billion for the National Air Traffic Services? Those sums would be needed for a significant improvement in our public transport system, and they would have to come from private sector investment. That approach is similar to the usual Liberal method of funding: it involves fairy-tale politics and returns us to the 1p—the longest 1p in history—or, in this case, 2p or 3p, on income tax.

I shall recount two examples, with which I have been directly involved, that show how PPPs can work well. The first involves the docklands light railway extension to Lewisham. Lewisham council, of which I was leader, joined with the private sector—we produced money from our resources in local government and from central Government—to extend that railway to Lewisham. That brought significant benefits, including reduced risk, on-time delivery of the network and regeneration of the local economy in Lewisham. I am proud to have been involved in that PPP. The extension brought immense benefits to a part of south-east London that has suffered severe transport difficulties, not least because of the appalling rail service that goes through south London to Lewisham.

My second example is London Luton airport, which I am pleased to have in my constituency. I want to put the record straight—a PPP will not undermine the safety of airways. London Luton airport has never been run through NATS; nor were other airports, including Birmingham, and Sheffield. More airports are run under private arrangements than are covered by NATS. Do the Liberal Democrats truly believe that the skies over those airports are unsafe? That is nonsense.

If we had not entered into a PPP for London Luton airport, the massive increase in passenger throughput during the past few years would not have occurred. Significant investment in a new air terminal and rail interchange has brought life to the notion of an integrated transport policy. The Government advocated and implemented that approach—a combination of commitment and investment and a determination to lever in private sector investment that would not otherwise have been available. *[Interruption.]* Despite the protestations of an Opposition Member from a sedentary position, Luton airport benefited significantly from a PPP. The airport has increased its passenger throughput by several million; the figure should rise to 5 million during the next few years.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Moran: Time does not permit me to accept an intervention.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I gave way to the hon. Lady.

Ms Moran: The hon. Gentleman did not give way to me, and time does not allow me to give way to him. I hope that I will be able to let him intervene another time.

For every million passengers who pass through the airport, 1,000 extra jobs are created in my constituency. That is good news in terms of investment and new infrastructure, and it is excellent news for the travelling public, my constituents' employment and the local economy. The evidence clearly shows that PPPs work. The airport is retained under local authority control, but with a PPP that enabled the investment to occur. The effort will continue during the next few years.

[Ms Moran]

Those are just two examples of the benefits that PPP can bring to our transport system and to our local economies. I wish that Liberal Democrat Members were a little more clear-headed as to the difference between privatisation and PPPs. The way in which they intend to end PPPs does them no service whatever.

9.40 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a few, brief points in relation to the closing words of our motion, on the dogmatic privatisation of public services in general.

No one has yet mentioned the health service. In my constituency, it is of considerable concern because our lovely, new cottage hospital, which is just about to be built, will be of the type that deals only with minor operations and day surgery. We have heard from several Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen that, in future, such procedures will be carried out only in the private sector. That means that the privatisation of the new hospital in Newbury would be almost inevitable, were the Conservatives ever to come to power again.

That is a considerable worry to my constituents. I hope that Ministers agree that if that were to happen, it would be simply awful and that, if the Conservatives continue with that policy, they deserve to lose every vote in west Berkshire.

9.41 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): The debate has been interesting—except for those of us who served on the Transport Bill Standing Committee, for whom it has merely been a repetition of many, old arguments. Although Liberal Democrats might have been accused of opportunism on a few occasions, such accusations come ill from members of two parties that have shifted position so quickly—albeit in a heavy-footed way—during the past few years and especially during the past few months.

I shall focus on the privatisation of NATS. There is mounting public concern about privatisation in the transport sector. As there is raging uncertainty across the sector, the ill-conceived plans to privatise air traffic control should be scrapped. There is no public support for the proposal and little need for the Government to sell any NATS shares.

Frequently, the Government advance their case for privatisation by highlighting investment requirements and the need both to involve private sector expertise and to separate safety regulation from practitioners. As we have often pointed out, we do not dispute those objectives but the route proposed to achieve them.

Our proposal for an independent, publicly owned corporation or trust satisfies each of those requirements, but—crucially—retains public sector control. That means that it will retain public confidence.

Since our previous debate on NATS privatisation, two significant developments have occurred. First, the Civil Aviation Authority produced proposals for the regulatory regime after privatisation. Secondly, the shortlist for the strategic partner has been published and has already been whittled down.

Our central concern about the privatisation of air traffic control is the nature of the market in which NATS operates. Competition—rightly—does not exist and revenue is heavily regulated; thus profit-driven corporations will be forced to cut costs to deliver their objectives. Cutting costs sits uneasily beside the paramount importance of safety. That is at the heart of public concern about the privatisation of NATS.

It is especially alarming that the first attempt by the CAA to set out a post-privatisation regime for economic regulation of air traffic control has been condemned by NATS itself. NATS described the proposals as "totally inappropriate", not least because

> the severe cuts in operating costs and investment are inconsistent with the proper carrying out of its functions—

especially its—

> prime duty . . . the safe provision of air traffic control.

The criticism is breathtaking—in civil-service-speak, perhaps even brave. Equally breathtaking is the silence that followed. To date, there has been no ministerial comment and no resolution of the conflict at the heart of privatisation. How can any bidder seriously prepare to take on the role of strategic partner next March when the market rules after privatisation are still unknown? It is a real mess.

We now know the final three bidders in the beauty contest to become NATS' strategic partner. The list of bidders exposes the serious problems at the heart of the NATS privatisation proposal. I shall briefly highlight the conflicts of interest that each bidder involves.

Novares is a partnership principally between Lockheed Martin and the Airways Corporation of New Zealand. Lockheed Martin is a huge multinational corporation with many different interests but, as we know, it is the prime supplier at Swanwick and it is believed to have lost between £150 million and £300 million through the delay and ineffective control of that project. It has more recently won the contract for the new Scottish centre, and the blunt truth is that it has a great interest in controlling the paymasters of that project. The Airways Corporation of New Zealand is an overseas air traffic control outfit which has also run into controversy recently, because it has changed its two-centre strategy—which has been the core of many concerns, not least in Scotland—to a one-centre strategy with very little public support.

Nimbus is another bidder and one of the main components of that, Aeronautical Radio Inc.—ARINC—is an equipment supplier for NATS and falls foul of the same conflicts of interest as Lockheed Martin.

The final consortium is the Airline Group. It is interesting that it specifies that it is a not-for-profit organisation. Perhaps that reveals what it thinks of bringing the profit motive into this sector. However, it cannot escape from the basic reality that eight airlines—including British Airways, Virgin and British Midland—are in the consortium and that they generate the vast proportion of NATS' revenue. It is no wonder that they want to get their hands on it if it is to be privatised. Sitting beside the airlines as advisers are three air traffic operators from overseas. They are all on board, but it is not clear what relationship they would have with NATS after privatisation. In particular, we do not know the implications that there might be for national security. It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us what the Ministry of Defence says about that.

Our motion rightly condemns the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in public services while the Government amendment

welcomes the Government's policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground.

However, bereft of principles and bereft of arguments, the Government have raised pragmatism to the status of the dogma, doggedly pursuing an agenda out of touch with public opinion.

In the privatisation of air traffic control, the bidders are riddled with conflicts of interest. NATS does not believe that the Civil Aviation Authority's proposals will work and the public have no confidence in the plans. They should be scrapped.

9.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): This has been an interesting debate. I am not sure that those of us who are veterans of proceedings on the Transport Bill have heard many new arguments, but we have heard one or two old arguments presented in a slightly different way.

As I listened to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) huffing and puffing about the wickedness of privatisation, the thought idly passed through my mind that there might have been no privatisation at all if the Liberals had not voted with the Tories to bring down the Callaghan Government in 1979. I hope that the House will forgive a little trip down memory lane, but the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) took us back as far as Beatrice and Sidney Webb, so I thought that I would chance an outing back to 1979. We all change but, at that time, the Liberals preferred a Government led by Mrs. Thatcher to a Government led by Mr. Callaghan. That had consequences that we can all vividly recall.

I am opposed—and so are the Government—to the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in the public services. Such a pursuit of privatisation was a characteristic of the previous Government. I exempt the hon. Member for Poole since, as he explained, he is pragmatic. Most members of the previous Government believed as a matter of principle that the public sector was bad and the private sector was good—and some of them said so in such stark terms. Tory Ministers believed at the time that privatisation was a panacea, and that has led us to all sorts of problems—not least the mess following privatisation of the railways that they have left us to clear up.

The Government's approach has been entirely different—*[Interruption.]* Stay with me. We are seeking to combine the strongest features of both the public and private sectors. We want to work together for the public good.

Mr. Don Foster: It says here.

Mr. Mullin: Yes, it does say here; I wrote it.

As the Under-Secretary said in his opening remarks, the public-private partnerships that we are putting together for the London Underground and National Air Traffic Services represent carefully devised, appropriate and pragmatic—yes, there is that word again—solutions to problems that have arisen from years of under-investment and poor project management in the two services.

The Government will retain a major stake in NATS, allowing it to retain a significant degree of influence over the management of the business. If the hon. Member for Bath will forgive me for saying so, he made several irresponsible points about safety. Safety, far from being undermined, will be enhanced. It will remain with the public sector—the Civil Aviation Authority—and will be entirely separate from day-to-day operational control. As for London Underground, strategic control will remain with the public sector, reporting to the Mayor. In 30 years' time, the assets, far from being permanently privatised, will revert to the public sector.

The advantage of a public-private partnership is that it is the best way in which to lever in private sector investment and project-management expertise while preserving the safeguards that the travelling public rightly demand. Various alternative models have been proposed. The Government have examined them all and concluded that PPP is superior.

The main alternative—I am sure that it is one that would find most favour on the Liberal Democrat Benches—is for the Chancellor to write out a cheque. I have lost count of the number of times during the past three years that the Liberal Democrats have spent their extra penny on income tax—a point made by my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) and for Luton, South (Ms Moran). We have not heard so much about it recently. Now they want to help the Chancellor spend his surplus—a surplus, incidentally, that he would not have had but for his sound management of the economy.

As you may have noticed, Mr. Speaker, the Chancellor has not been short of advice from a variety of quarters in the past few weeks on how he might spend his surplus. Even the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) has been at it. He wants tax cuts and more public spending. Well, life is not like that. It is folly to pretend that everyone can have more of everything.

The plain truth is that if we are to cope with all the demands for more investment in public services, we must make some choices. Where investment can be raised from the private sector without jeopardising the public interest, it makes sense to do so—quite apart from which we need some of the private sector project-management skills that some parts of the public sector so obviously lack.

I turn to some of the points made in the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) and for Luton, South rightly pointed out the little-known fact that, at more than 30 small and medium-sized airports around the country, air traffic control is in private hands, and has been so for many years. We have all been landing and taking off at those airports without even noticing the fact—whether it be at East Midlands, Bristol, Luton or Newcastle airport, where I took off this morning. If it were true that only the state can manage industries where safety is essential, we would all travel on Aeroflot rather than British Airways. *[Interruption.]* I know that that is an old joke, but I am sure that not everyone has heard it before.

The hon. Member for Poole made a thoughtful speech. He comes from the civilised wing of his party and is not one of the true believers who sit on the Conservative Back Benches, not that there are many of them present tonight. He said that the Conservative party is pragmatic—he can say that again. Had he attended our previous debate,

[Mr. Mullin]

he would have heard his hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) call for the restoration of the link between earnings and the state pension—a link that the Conservative party broke many years ago. That is pragmatism for you.

The hon. Member for Poole asks whether March 2001 was still the date for the sale. Yes, the Government intend the sale to go ahead on that date. He asks whether we intend to reverse the Lords amendment relating to pensions. Yes, the position of existing employees is already adequately protected. He asks about overseas ownership, and the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) mentioned the three companies on the final shortlist. We do not accept the argument that only a British strategic partner can be the right one. The right partner will be the one that provides the best solution and future for NATS; that is the basis on which we shall assess the bids. Incidentally, we have some plans to protect the Tory party from foreign ownership: part IV, chapter II of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will prevent foreign donations, and not before time.

The hon. Member for Poole made a serious point about safety. He expressed concern about the interaction between the rail regulator and Railtrack and about the fact that Railtrack could be fined for not meeting punctuality targets and for delays to trains. We recognise the seriousness of that issue, so we have asked Sir Alastair Morton to consider with the industry the contractual and regulatory regime. The framework was created at the time of privatisation, but we shall have to consider what revision is needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked what effect a delay to the PPP of the sort proposed by the Lords would have. We intend to reverse that Lords amendment. Were it to stand, it would jeopardise the PPP.

Ms Osborne: Will my hon. Friend confirm the implications for the new Scottish centre of the Lords amendment standing and the NATS' PPP being delayed until after the general election?

Mr. Mullin: As I say, the programme for the new Scottish centre, which, after initial difficulties, is now going quite well, would be jeopardised.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) quoted the Industrial Society report and suggested that it said that passengers would be put at risk. In fact, the report stated that the society did not subscribe to the view that the PPP was inherently unsafe, and it welcomed the Government's efforts to ensure that safety was kept in public sector control.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) asked whether the Government were confident of being able to retain a golden share. Yes.

In conclusion, the Government have no desire to repeat the mistakes of Conservative privatisations, in which public assets were simply looted. Our aim is to channel badly needed private sector funding and management skills into our transport infrastructure for the benefit of all. Ours are not the "flog it and forget it" exercises that the Conservatives continue to advocate. We are retaining a significant Government presence precisely for the purpose of protecting the public interest.

The London Underground PPP enables us finally to reverse the historic decline of the tube. It offers billions of pounds of investment—

Mr. Tyler *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 43, Noes 272.

Division No. 319] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Heath and Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*

Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 68.

Division No. 320] **[10.11 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin

Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Day, Stephen
Fabricant, Michael
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Damian
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. David Heath.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House deplores the previous Government's incompetent privatisation of the railways which left the network fragmented, cost taxpayers billions of pounds and brought rail travellers hours of delays; welcomes the Government's creation of the Strategic Rail Authority to give direction to the industry from an industry-wide perspective rather than from the narrow interests of individual companies; recognises that the Government's 10-year plan is delivering the largest investment programme for the railways for generations to tackle the problems caused by years of under-investment in the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground, enabling much needed investment and private sector financial and management skills to be introduced to the public services while safeguarding safety and the public interest; and regrets the official Opposition's dogmatic pursuit of privatisation for the London Underground and the National Air Traffic Services.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

SOCIAL POLICY AGENDA

That the House takes note of European Union Document No. 9964/00, a European Commission Communication on a European Social Policy Agenda for the next five years; and supports the Government's welcome for the Commission's analysis of the challenges facing employment and social policy in the next five years and for the emphasis placed on increasing employability, on combating social exclusion, on promoting entrepreneurship, whilst opposing proposals that impose unnecessary burdensome new legislation particularly upon business, and remaining convinced of the need for proposals to codify, adapt or improve existing legislation or for new legislation to be made clear and workable; and notes the Government's intention to negotiate to this end, and to ensure that the proposals take proper account of the legitimate concerns of employers and the need to raise employment rates across the Community.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Pensions and Pensioners

10.23 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Many of my constituents have asked me to present a petition on the same theme as the debate that my party called earlier this evening. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members leave the Chamber quietly? An hon. Member is presenting a petition.

Mr. Taylor: My constituents declare that

last year's increase of 75p in the basic state pension is derisory and is keeping pensioners in poverty.

The issue is particularly important in my part of the world, where so many elderly people live and have lived on low incomes throughout their lives.

The petition continues:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security—

as we did in tonight's debate—

to reconsider and give all pensioners an increase in their basic state pension that reflects a real share of the nation's wealth.

Liberal Democrats have campaigned with the petitioners for increases on top of inflation, ranging from £5 a week for single pensioners to £15 for single pensioners over 80, and nearly £30 for pensioner couples. I hope that on Wednesday the Chancellor will finally listen to the huge campaign that has been run for such increases, first by pensioners alone and then with the support of Liberal Democrats around the country.

To lie upon the Table.

Horticulture Research International

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10.24 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Stockbridge house near the village of Cawood is a horticultural research facility in my constituency. Like everything else in Selby at the moment, it is very wet indeed, and it would be remiss of me not to begin this debate by noting that, last week, the whole site and, indeed, the whole village of Cawood were under imminent threat from flooding. The products of years of research at Stockbridge house were threatened but, fortunately, owing to the heroic efforts of many villagers, led by parish council chairman David Jones, the flood waters were kept at bay. However, many of my constituents further downstream were not so lucky.

For years, I have been accustomed on Thursday morning to seek out as my first read of the day a copy of the *Selby Times*. Since Horticulture Research International's shock announcement in September that it was closing Stockbridge house from the end of March 2001, my reading habits have changed. At Thursday breakfast time, I now turn first to a paper called the *Grower*. As chronicled in the *Grower*, the normally classy world of horticulture has been in turmoil in recent weeks.

I want to do three things in this debate. First, I want to outline the importance of the horticultural sector and the current programme of research. Secondly, I want to discuss and examine the restructuring plan of Horticulture Research International and, finally, I want to suggest a way forward that will preserve the integrity of the restructuring plan—which, after all, Ministers have approved—while giving a new future to Stockbridge house.

Horticultural output has risen steadily over the past few years. The farmgate value of horticultural produce is £2.5 billion and makes up more than 15 per cent. of the UK's total agricultural output. A recent study by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food indicated that, of 11 autonomous sectors studied, horticulture is the most important for value added. The UK horticulture industry is characterised by many small and medium-sized businesses, which is why our research capacity is important. Many horticultural businesses find it hard to get the information that they need to develop their products, protect them from disease and find new markets.

Our debate will focus on the role of Horticulture Research International, a non-departmental public body, and it is worth noting that it is one of only 28 contractors for MAFF's programmes. In 2000-01, 80 per cent. of planned spending on horticultural research and development is expected to go to HRI. HRI's health is crucial to the industry, but it is essential that it has strong competitors to keep it honest. As the recent report of the Select Committee on Agriculture vividly described, HRI is, to put it bluntly, in a bit of a financial mess. Since 1990, MAFF has pledged £125 million of research and development contracts to HRI and invested £60 million in restructuring plans.

The Select Committee discussed the recent failure of the HortiTech business unit that was launched with a fanfare by the current HRI chairman, Mr. Peter Siddall, in 1998. The unit was designed to generate commercial income by transferring technology to industry and creating a commercial philosophy throughout HRI. HortiTech income is about £2.7 million, compared with a target of £4.35 million. The relative failure of HortiTech is the root of HRI's financial problems. The restructuring plan announced in September by Mr. Siddall involved a loss of about 150 posts—including about 50 at Stockbridge—which is more than 20 per cent. of HRI's total work force. Jobs will be lost as a result of the failure of the board and its chairman to balance the books.

Stockbridge house, to the astonishment of the industry, was chosen for closure. Of all the development sites run by HRI, Stockbridge house seemed to be in the strongest financial position, as Colin Harvey, chairman of the Horticultural Development Council, observed. Fifty per cent. of HRI's £22 million annual income comes directly from MAFF. However, MAFF funds only 10 per cent. of Stockbridge house's costs, with 47 per cent. coming from the Horticultural Development Council—in effect, the growers who pay the council a levy—and the remaining 43 per cent. from commercial organisations.

HRI's website boasts that "over the years" Stockbridge house

> has built up a worldwide reputation as a practical centre for horticultural research and development.

The SOLA—specific off-label approval—programme of pesticides research is particularly important to smaller growers. That is based at Stockbridge house. It provides them with the crop protection products that they need to remain competitive. Indeed, the programme is funded largely by the HDC. Mr. Siddall's plan depends on closing Stockbridge house, but transferring the contracts to other sites. There are practical difficulties in doing that.

Other criticisms of HRI's plans are as follows: first, there was a complete of lack of consultation with the industry. The management tactics employed might have been learned by studying a National Coal Board management manual from the 1980s. As the Tomato Growers Association put it in its press release:

> The Tomato Growers Association views with dismay the announcement by HRI of the intended reduction of more than 20 per cent. in its staff numbers and, in particular, the closure of its Stockbridge House site. Had HRI consulted the industry over its plans, it would know that Stockbridge has recently enjoyed the closest working relationship of any HRI site with glasshouse salad crop growers, and not just those in the north of the country.
>
> The TGA has no confidence that HRI can maintain or replace the expertise which is threatened by the closure . . . As an example, research on the control of spider mites, which is led by Stockbridge staff, is seen as pivotal to the achievement by growers of their objective of eliminating all pesticide use in UK tomato crops.

There is a strong feeling that HRI is turning its back on its original objectives. When it was set up in 1990, its brief was to

> carry out horticultural research and development and to transfer the results to the UK horticultural industry—

very much an applied practical brief, the sort of work that Stockbridge house excels in and that growers throughout the country, particularly in the north, find so useful.

I quote *The Commercial Greenhouse Grower* editorial of last month:

> The industry has made its voice very clear on the Stockbridge House closure.
>
> It feels badly let down that it was not consulted, but if you read the evidence submitted by HRI's chairman Peter Siddall . . . to the House of Commons Agriculture Select Committee you get the answer.

In his evidence Mr. Siddall aptly made clear that re-shaping HRI meant "more science and less development." And just in case we are accused of taking phrases out of context he also said "It is about focus, focus on science and the higher value end of the spectrum."

On consultation, it was shameful that, when Mr. Siddall announced his plan, no one had bothered to check with MAFF about the future of the tied cottages at Stockbridge house. Families who had given their working lives to the site were left for weeks wondering whether they would lose not just their jobs, but their homes. Thankfully, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has intervened to secure those homes.

There is an element of civil service politics about all this, which reveals the limitations of the model of a non-departmental public body. When I was invited to an extremely useful meeting with the Minister to discuss the matter, sitting on his left was one Mr. Tony Burne, his chief adviser on research. Wearing his other hat, Mr. Burne is on the HRI board. In effect, he was advising the Minister on a restructuring plan costing the taxpayer more than £4 million. As a member of the HRI board, Mr. Burne had already approved that plan and committed himself to it.

I draw three conclusions from that evidence. First, as regards the status of HRI, there is wide consensus on the immediate way forward. As long ago as 1993, the HRI management statement referred to intended primary legislation which will establish HRI as a statutory corporation with functions and powers to carry out its remit and define its relationship clearly with MAFF. Who knows? Given my new found knowledge on the subject, I might be persuaded, if I am successful in the forthcoming ballot, to introduce a private Member's Bill on the subject.

That brings me to my second conclusion. I will want first to see a new chairman of HRI. Mr. Siddall should emulate Kevin Keegan and not seek reappointment to the role when his three-year term is up in January 2001. No one in the industry has been impressed by the aggressive attitude that Mr. Siddall has adopted, most notably at a recent meeting with the National Farmers Union and the HDC, which he needs to win over. Apparently, he banned the chief executive from attending a previous meeting with the HDC.

Mr. Siddall is a management consultant by trade. His website, Siddall & Company, reveals the following philosophy:

With our clients we act as catalyst, coach and safety valve so that groups can work together more effectively.

Our clients regard us as trusted thought partners.

Enough said—HRI is too important to be an experiment for a management consultant.

The final conclusion is on the future of Stockbridge house and HRI. Earlier, I mentioned the fact that, for HRI's restructuring plan to work, HRI has to keep on-side the seven key research scientists at Stockbridge house and the HDC. None of the key research scientists are prepared to move, because of family reasons. The HDC has expressed concerns about HRI's ability to fulfil the SOLA contract at another site.

Last week, a very constructive meeting was held between representatives of HRI, the National Farmers Union and the HDC. There now seems to be a real and shared commitment to ensuring a viable and effective approach for HRI. Chief executive Professor Michael Wilson is now adopting a more pragmatic approach, making it clear that he does not rule out in the future employing the services of some of the seven key research scientists at Stockbridge house, perhaps on a contractual basis. The HDC is particularly keen that some of their skills should be employed in fulfilling the extremely important SOLA research programme.

Last week, I spoke to Professor Wilson on the telephone. He told me that he would not stand in the way of another body—perhaps the Central Science Laboratory, in York, which is another arm of MAFF and in need of glasshouses—taking over the site, and that it was up to that body to draw up a business plan. Indeed, if Professor Wilson is to contract work for the SOLA programme to some of the current research scientists, they will need continuing facilities at Stockbridge house. It is possible that some or all of the staff based at Stockbridge house could be transferred to CSL, saving some of the redundancy costs. There are also moves among local growers to establish a Stockbridge house trust to fund work on the site. I formally ask Ministers for a meeting within the next month to discuss those ideas.

Last week, I also asked Professor Wilson what he thought of accusations that HRI would implement a scorched earth policy at Stockbridge house so that no one else could take on a viable site. He assured me that the glasshouses would remain untouched, but made no commitment on the tractors and other equipment.

It is also a little unclear to what extent HRI is willing to provide financial and personnel information on Stockbridge house to enable CSL, or anyone else, to prepare a business plan for the site. Perhaps Ministers will consider dispatching the ubiquitous aforementioned Mr. Tony Burne, chief research adviser to MAFF and HRI board member, to encourage all the parties involved to give a fair chance for alternative plans for Stockbridge house to be prepared and to be carefully considered by Ministers, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food promised to do in his most recent press release on the subject.

10.38 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on securing this debate. I certainly understand why he has chosen to raise this particular issue; it is not only important, but of enormous concern to Horticulture Research International staff, to its many customers and to my hon. Friend's constituents. I very much appreciate that in securing this debate, my hon. Friend has been motivated both by concern for the jobs of some of his constituents and by the concern to secure a viable horticulture industry, and horticultural research industry, in the United Kingdom. Like officials and other Ministers in my Department, I hold very dear those concerns about the horticulture industry and the horticultural research industry.

My hon. Friend began by referring to the danger of flooding at the site in his constituency. I join him in paying tribute to the efforts of those who have worked so hard in trying to ward off the problems caused by flooding in his part of the world.

The Government very much regret that HRI is having to take the action that it has announced, including the closure of its Stockbridge house site and the redundancies

[Ms Joyce Quin]

across the organisation. Indeed, it is important to stress that all HRI's sites are affected by the restructuring programme, not just Stockbridge house—although I fully accept the severity of the impact on Stockbridge house, as outlined by my hon. Friend.

I know that HRI's board and senior management are committed to providing every possible assistance for staff who are being made redundant. That includes career consultancy, resettlement training and access to independent counselling. MAFF has made available its own personnel and welfare services. That in turn includes doing our best to identify suitable vacancies at the offices of MAFF or our agencies. When my hon. Friend met my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, they discussed some of these concerns.

The Government believe that however difficult HRI's restructuring measures may be, they are necessary to redress a very difficult financial situation and to ensure that HRI can continue to provide an efficient and cost-effective service into the future.

My hon. Friend mentioned some of HRI's financial problems, and it is true that it is forecasting an annual deficit for the four years ending March 2004 of about £2 million, falling to £1.3 million. Some £3 million must be cut from operating costs, and assets must be brought into line with foreseeable income streams. That is why the board and management had to review the financial strategy, and to take difficult decisions as a result. The horticulture industry and the farmers' unions share the view that to maintain HRI and provide for its crucial work for the sector, the restructuring is necessary.

The Government believe that HRI's board and senior management have assessed all the options and identified the one which, in their view, can best secure the organisation's future and maintain its service to the UK horticulture industry. HRI is a non-departmental public body, and decisions about the day-to-day operation of its business are, of course, matters for its board and senior management. It has an experienced board, which includes senior representatives of the horticulture industry, the scientific community and business.

I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that, as HRI's sponsor Department, the Ministry has scrutinised the plans very thoroughly. We have agreed to provide a grant of £4.5 million to enable the restructuring to be implemented. My right hon. Friend the Minister met my hon. Friend with a delegation from the industry on 21 September, to listen to their concerns directly and to discuss the restructuring plans, including the closure of the Stockbridge house site.

One of the points arising was the industry-funded work at Stockbridge house and its future. Not surprisingly, my hon. Friend referred to the arrangements that HRI has in hand to ensure that it can continue to deliver the important project work currently based at Stockbridge house, and its chief executive has given the Minister an undertaking that those arrangements will be fully discussed and explained to the industry.

To that end, HRI has had lengthy and detailed discussions with senior representatives of the industry to explain the rationale behind the restructuring plans and the arrangements for managing work currently carried out at Stockbridge house. I am pleased to be able to report that on 2 November HRI, the National Farmers Union, the Horticultural Development Council and the East Malling Trust for Horticultural Research issued a joint statement, in which they all committed themselves to moving ahead together for the benefit of the UK's horticulture industry. In particular, they have agreed to seek a satisfactory continuation at HRI of the important SOLA—specified off-label pesticides approval—work currently carried out at Stockbridge house.

The statement affirmed all those bodies' belief in a healthy and vigorous HRI, and in the need for all the stakeholders to work together to ensure that its valuable programme of work continues in such a way as to benefit the horticulture industry directly.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that the horticulture industry is a major contributor to the economy and to the nation's diet and health. My hon. Friend and I must have read similar briefing information before this debate, as I, too, want to refer to the fact that the farmgate value of produce exceeds £2.5 billion, which, as he said, is more than 15 per cent. of total UK agricultural output. That is a significant contribution. Horticulture receives very little support from the common agricultural policy, and has one of the freest markets in operation in agriculture.

Consumer preference has been a strong driver and the sector has shown itself to be tough, competitive and resilient. I want to stress the importance that Ministers attach to the future of the horticultural sector. As a Minister with a particular interest in the sector, I have had discussions with various people in the industry, as well as seeing for myself many of our excellent horticulture establishments. I am convinced that the sector can expand and can take the place of some of the produce that is currently imported, ensuring that in future we provide more of our produce domestically.

Current levels of public funding represent a firm commitment to HRI and to its work in support of the UK horticulture industry. MAFF continues to account for about 50 per cent. of its income. Since 1997, the Government have invested about £58 million in the organisation. HRI has also been awarded £2.26 million from the capital modernisation fund to create a new European centre for organic top fruit and nursery stock at its East Malling site.

I spoke of some of our imported produce being replaced by domestically grown produce, and that is especially relevant to organic production. There is considerable room for more such production here. The commitment to the new European centre was part of the action plan for farming launched by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the farming summit on 30 March. In addition, HRI has been awarded £151,000 from the invest-to-save budget for collaborative projects with other public sector research establishments, and has recently been granted more than £11 million for capital investment and other purposes, including £4.5 million to enable the present restructuring plans to be implemented.

My hon. Friend, quite understandably, concentrated on plans for the future of the Stockbridge house site. May I respond directly to his request for a meeting with Ministers and officials about the developing situation regarding the future of the site and of HRI's work? I am happy to give him the assurance that we will have a meeting with him to deal with the issues about which he is concerned. He knows, however, that our intention is

that once HRI vacates the site we shall sell it, so that the receipts will partly offset the cost of financing the restructuring plans, including redundancy payments to staff who are not transferring to other sites.

I know that there has been speculation about a possible role for MAFF's central science laboratory at York. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced on 6 October, CSL is considering the business case for consolidating some of its own research work at Stockbridge house when HRI leaves.

My hon. Friend referred to a scorched earth approach to the Stockbridge house site. I assure him that that is not the case. The discussions will include consideration of some of the facilities that already exist on that site, about which I know he is concerned.

My hon. Friend also referred to HRI's science activities. I do not believe, as some allege, that HRI is expanding its "high science" activities at the expense of its development role. Indeed, HRI's chief executive has given Ministers an assurance that it will continue to cover the full spectrum of research and development from basic research to the dissemination of research and development findings and good practice direct to the industry. I know that he is keen to strengthen further HRI's links with the horticulture industry, something to which I also attach considerable importance. The chief executive is also seeking additional funding schemes through public-private partnerships so as to stabilise HRI's financial position and ensure that it continues to benefit all its stakeholders.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the role of Tony Burne, who is on the board of Horticulture Research International. He is one of 10 members of the board, and although he also has a role advising Ministers and considering issues affecting research in this sector through his work at MAFF, he does not derive financial advantage from that role. It is important to say that. There has been a representative from MAFF on the board of HRI from the outset. In that sense, Mr. Burne is fulfilling a normal responsibility, which has existed from the beginning.

The Government believe that HRI has a good reputation for providing high quality research and development and services to its customers. As such, it is rightly—and should continue to be—the premier horticultural research establishment in the United Kingdom. Obviously, we intend the restructuring plans to reinforce that position and maintain the ability to service the United Kingdom's horticulture industry. The Government hope that all HRI's customers will rally round the organisation and give it their support. We believe that we have to look ahead, through this difficult restructuring, to the industry's ultimate benefit.

It is important to see this research work in terms of the wider research work that can benefit horticulture and agriculture. I also believe that it is important to consider such issues in a national and a regional context to see the role that horticulture can play in the development of regional economies as well as in the economy of our country as a whole.

I accept my hon. Friend's point when he stressed the importance—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at six minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 14 November.

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER GROUP TREASURY PLC (TRANSFER) BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 14 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

IGC Agenda

1. **Mr. Christopher Gill** (Ludlow): If he will make a statement on the agenda for the current intergovernmental conference regarding Community law. [135160]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The intergovernmental conference is about making the institutional reforms necessary to allow enlargement to proceed. The issues remain those set out at the beginning of the conference; that is chiefly the size and composition of the Commission, the reweighting of votes in the Council of Ministers, the extension of qualified majority voting and closer co-operation between individual member states.

Mr. Gill: I know that you, Mr. Speaker, prefer brief questions, so will the Minister simply tell us whether the Government of whom he is a member will, at Nice, veto article 280A which seeks to create the position of a European public prosecutor?

Mr. Vaz: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have made it quite clear that we do not support the idea, the concept or the proposal of an EU public prosecutor.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Is my hon. Friend aware that double standards are to be found in the position adopted by Conservative Members given that it was a Conservative Prime Minister who went the furthest to abolish the right of veto and introduced majority voting? Is it not a fact that, in any enlargement of the European Union—which the Opposition claim to support—it would be necessary to have an extension of qualified majority voting; otherwise the whole institutional framework would came to a grinding halt?

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. As he correctly said, what is important is that the European Union and the Commission operate efficiently. As I have said to the House before, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude)—St. Francis of Maastricht as I have described him—signed the Maastricht treaty and agreed to qualified majority voting on 42 occasions during the passage of the Single European Act and the Maastricht treaty. In 1996, 80 per cent. of the votes taken at the European Council were taken on the basis of qualified majority voting. The right hon. Gentleman will also know that in 1998 Britain was on the losing side only twice. Therefore, we want an extension of qualified majority voting when that is in our interests.

I say to my hon. Friend that the issue is not a question of double standards, but of treble standards. Conservatives have so many different views on Europe that I have lost count of them.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): May we have an assurance that the Government, in any consideration of the expansion of the European Union, will not contemplate smaller countries being treated as second-class nations within the European Union?

Mr. Vaz: I certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. We believe strongly not in a two-speed Europe, but in a Europe where all the member states are treated equally. That is why we have said on several occasions that we support enhanced co-operation. However, we support it only on the basis that the decisions to be taken do not undermine the single market and treat all states the same. We will not tolerate a Europe with a hard core of countries; all countries should be treated equally.

EU Modernisation

2. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What support has been received from other EU member states for the ideas on modernisation of EU institutions expressed in the Prime Minister's speech in Warsaw. [135161]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): My right hon. Friend's speech in Warsaw has been widely supported throughout EU member states and was warmly welcomed by the four Prime Ministers of candidate countries who were among his audience. My right hon. Friend set out a vision of Europe that harnessed the economic and political strengths of its member nations to achieve more together than they can alone, but which respected the separate identity and democracy of each member state. Yesterday, President Prodi said:

I agree entirely with the British Prime Minister. I do not want Europe to become a superstate.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will take this opportunity to welcome that clear support for British policy from Romano Prodi.

Dr. Ladyman: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be aware that my constituency of South Thanet receives objective 2 aid and, because it is in east Kent, most local businesses look to the continent as their natural trading area. Both those benefits would be put under threat if the British public continue to feel disconnected from the institutions of Europe. In that context, does my right hon. Friend not agree that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's idea of a second Chamber in Europe where national parliamentarians can be heard is not only exciting and innovative, but might be exactly what the British people need to make them feel connected again to Europe?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend states one of the great truths about our membership of the European Union, which is that almost 60 per cent. of our exports go to other EU members. That is why it is so important for us to make a success of that membership. Part of that success will be reconnecting the democracy of Europe with EU institutions, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister proposed that there should be a place in those institutions for British democracy and the democracy of other states through their national Parliaments.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): As part of the modernisation of the EU, how many of the 50 British vetoes will have to be surrendered to pursue the national interest as the Foreign Secretary is suggesting? Will not the British veto and our right to self-government disappear into the Bermuda triangle that is the Government's European policy, and that they are not in line with the EU and their colleagues, but are struggling from the rear?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman will be relieved to hear that we are confident that we will keep to our bottom line of having no extension of majority voting to defence, taxation, social security, treaty changes or border control. Those will remain subjects for unanimity, and I am sure that he will welcome that.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will be disappointed to hear that the Government could not, even if we wished, increase majority voting and abolish the veto to the extent that the previous Government did when he was in the Cabinet.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way to protect the democracy of member states is to preserve the veto, and that any erosion of the veto erodes that democracy?

Mr. Cook: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend that any erosion of the veto is necessarily against British interests. We are pressing for majority voting on a number of matters in the treaty. For example, it would be in our interest to have majority voting on the rules of procedure of the European Court of Justice to get round those who impede its effectiveness and efficiency. It would be in our interest to remove the veto on the site of the European Parliament which enables France to insist that it continues to sit in Strasbourg.

Majority voting would be in our interest in several matters. In the past two years, we have succeeded in majority votes more than any of the other large countries, which could have exercised their vetoes on proposals that we supported if they were subject to unanimity.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Why does the Prime Minister still refuse to press for the flexible, multi-system European Union that the mainstream majority of the British public want? If he is serious, as he says he is, about wanting to make way for enlargement, why does he not press for reform of the biggest single obstacle to enlargement—the common agricultural policy? Why have not the Government even asked for that to be on the agenda at the Nice IGC?

What is the difference between the European Union becoming a superpower, as Mr. Prodi and the Prime Minister have suggested it will, or becoming a superstate? How reassured is the Foreign Secretary that the President of the Commission, who has talked about the Commission becoming the Government of Europe, says that he agrees with and supports the Prime Minister?

Mr. Cook: On the issue of a superpower, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in his speech that we want Europe's economic strength to be harnessed, but not in ways that create the mechanism of a superstate. In Nice, we will be preparing for a treaty that will pave the way for enlargement by making reforms, so that Europe will be ready to receive a record increase in membership.

The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) has pledged that his party will demand a referendum on that treaty and campaign strongly against the treaty. Would he care to go to Warsaw and make a speech explaining to the countries of central Europe why the Conservative party will block steps that are necessary to enlarge the European Union?

Mr. Maude: I make it very clear that nothing in the Nice treaty that is controversial is essential for enlargement. The right hon. Gentleman well knows that the biggest roadblock to enlargement is the common agricultural policy, and the Government are not even discussing that.

On the charter of fundamental rights, which is part of the modernising agenda, does the Foreign Secretary agree with the Commission, which has said that the charter will become mandatory through the courts' interpretation of it, whether or not it is incorporated in the treaty, or does he agree with his Minister for Europe, who says that it will be no more useful than the *Beano*? Will he confirm that whatever the treaty of Nice contains, it has already been agreed that another intergovernmental conference will be held to discuss further treaty changes when the ink is barely dry on the last?

Mr. Cook: If the right hon. Gentleman is insisting that I choose between the Commission and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, I will happily choose the view of my Minister of State, who expressed himself robustly and clearly.

Returning to the right hon. Gentleman's position on the treaty of Nice, is he now telling us that there is nothing controversial in the treaty? If so, why do the Tories continue to resist it? Has the right hon. Gentleman dropped his demand for a referendum on that treaty? Has he dropped his commitment to campaign strongly against it? Is that because the penny has dropped that it would make the Tory party as totally unpopular among the 12 applicant countries, as they are already with the 15 member states?

Telecommunications (Gibraltar)

3. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): If he will make a statement on telecommunications in Gibraltar. [135162]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): As we made clear in our response on 31 October to the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Gibraltar, we have stayed in close contact with the European Commission, emphasising the urgency of the situation and our expectation that the Commission will uphold Gibraltar's rights in the European Union. We have informed the Commission that we consider the complaints made by operators in Gibraltar to be well founded. In consultation with the Government of Gibraltar, we are continuing our efforts with the Spanish Government and the Commission to resolve this important issue.

Mr. Hoyle: I am sure that my hon. Friend shares my concern at the fact that Spain still refuses to recognise the international code for Gibraltar and that businesses in Gibraltar are being held back by the lack of available telephone numbers. That has been highlighted recently by the failure of the Spanish Minister of Defence to telephone the Chief Minister over a visit to the submarine HMS Tireless. We are all aware of the difficulties, and I look forward to an early resolution of them.

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. I know of his great interest in these matters as a member of the Gibraltar parliamentary group and owing to his many visits to the country. The issue is important. As he knows, 30,000 telephone numbers have been allocated through the Cadiz exchange, and they will run out next year. Therefore, for the people of Gibraltar, the issue is very serious. I have discussed the matter with Chief Minister Caruana, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle). I spoke yesterday afternoon to the Governor of Gibraltar. I assure my hon. Friend that we have raised the concerns with the Commission and expect it to do something positive to resolve the situation; otherwise, my hon. Friend will not be able to ring his friends in Gibraltar and they will not be able to ring out.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): These soothing bromides simply will not do. What is the precise nature of the renewed efforts to which, in their response to the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report, the Government committed themselves? Did the Prime Minister raise the matter at the Anglo-Spanish talks last month? What exactly was the result?

Mr. Vaz: I shall not rise to the challenge to appoint the hon. Gentleman as our special envoy to sort out the problem because it requires very careful dialogue. That dialogue has continued over the past few months. Of course the matters have been raised. The Prime Minister raises issues concerned with Gibraltar on every occasion when he meets the Spanish Prime Minister; my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has done so with the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs; and I have done so. We will continue to work carefully and appropriately in order to resolve the issue. That is a better approach than that suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

Kosovo

4. **Mr. Robert N. Wareing** (Liverpool, West Derby): If he will make a statement on the situation in Kosovo. [135163]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): We welcome the successful and peaceful conduct of the local elections in Kosovo on 28 October. It sends a clear message that Kosovo is making further progress towards democracy and tolerance. We look forward to working with the newly elected members of the municipal authorities in tackling the many tasks ahead.

Mr. Wareing: The Defence Committee has reported that 98 per cent. of the unguided bombs dropped by the Royal Air Force on Kosovo and the rest of Yugoslavia during the recent conflict missed their target. Would it therefore be an appropriate gesture at this time for Her Majesty's Government to send an apology to President Kostunica and to offer compensation? How many times has the Minister visited Kosovo and other Balkan countries?

Mr. Vaz: I am surprised at my hon. Friend. Here is a golden opportunity to welcome the elections and to look forward to a period of peace, democracy and stability in the Balkans. We are not in this House to be apologists for Milosevic. We believe firmly that the people of Kosovo deserve our support—not empty gestures, but practical support, such as that the Government have put into KFOR and UNMIK. We shall continue to provide the people of Kosovo with such support, so that there is real peace and stability in the region. I would have thought that my hon. Friend would support that process.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): What progress is being made with the Balkan stability pact, with special reference to Albania, Kosovo's neighbour?

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister will continue to work with the stability pact. The Government have a duty to ensure that it is a success. We receive reports from time to time at the General Affairs Council and will continue to support the work of the pact. It is not just a matter of individual countries in the region. The pact is intended to bring peace and stability to the whole region, and to make sure that the people of the Balkans, and Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, have a stable future.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): What would be the impact on the delicate situation in Kosovo, were George W. Bush ever to have the opportunity of carrying out his threat to withdraw United States forces from the Balkans?

Mr. Vaz: I do not have a vote in the election today. I understand that the report has been denied.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Does the Minister realise that on the ground in Kosovo there is considerable concern about the apparent lack of co-operation between certain of the military forces and, even worse, as I tried to expound in the defence debate last week, there is uncertainty about where and how the United Nations is carrying out its mandate? Will the Minister look into that? The last thing that we want is to let the people down by not ensuring that what we are doing is helpful to them.

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian. He will know that that is an agonisingly difficult problem. We give full support to the work that is being undertaken by UNMIK, which is there to implement resolution 1244 and bring communities together. There are 4,200 civilian police officers trying to keep the peace between the communities and rebuild the confidence that was destroyed by Milosevic. It will take time, but the way forward is to make a contribution and to support the work of KFOR and UNMIK, which the Government will continue to do, following the work of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and the initiatives that they have taken.

International Criminal Court

5. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will make a statement about progress on the establishment of an international criminal court. [135164]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Good progress is being made. Twenty-two countries have already ratified the treaty, out of the 60 needed for establishing the international criminal court.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that a Bill in the Queen's Speech to ratify the international criminal court would have cross-party support? Does he also agree that whoever is the new President of the United States, that country should take a greater role and ensure that those who commit crimes against humanity are brought to justice?

Mr. Hain: We would, indeed, like to see the US sign up to the treaty and give the international criminal court its agreement, as its participation would be important. My hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on the contents of the Queen's Speech, but I hope that when the Bill is introduced into Parliament, which we hope to achieve as soon as possible, it will receive all-party support. I hope that the official Opposition, and in particular those on the Front Bench, will not obstruct the Bill, but will allow it a quick passage, so that Britain can become one of the first 60 countries to ratify the treaty and bring it into force.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Given that the Minister believes in an ethical foreign policy, can he tell the House what active steps he has taken to encourage Libya and China to sign up to the international criminal court?

Mr. Hain: We encourage all countries, including Libya and China, to sign up to the international criminal court. In our bilateral diplomacy with all countries in the world, we consistently pressure them to do so. We are committed to the court. It is a way of catching war criminals and ending the situation whereby the Pol Pots, Pinochets and all the dictators of the world continue to act with impunity. It is part of our agenda for human rights, of which we are proud. Our record is a proud one.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): In common with many other hon. Members, I welcome the publication of the Bill to ratify the Rome statute and look forward with optimism to its inclusion in the Queen's Speech. Does my hon. Friend accept that as long as the Bill remains silent on the issue of state immunity, there will remain a potential legal loophole through which past and serving Ministers who may seek refuge in this country may be able to escape?

Mr. Hain: I sympathise with my hon. Friend's point. We have listened closely to representations made to us during the consultation period on the draft Bill. I think that he will be encouraged by the response when he sees the Bill published in its final form.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I endorse everything that the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) set out in his main question? When the war crimes tribunals sit, there should be retribution for the past and a deterrent to obscene atrocity in future. I express some concern that it is taking as long as it is for Britain to ratify the process and to get it under way.

Mr. Hain: We are committed to achieve ratification as quickly as possible. I am delighted that we shall have the hon. Gentleman's support. It is a unique experience for me, but I am delighted to agree with virtually everything that he said.

Israel

6. **Mr. Bob Laxton** (Derby, North): If he will make a statement on the situation in Israel and the occupied territories. [135165]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I visited the countries of the middle east peace process last month. In the course of three days, I twice visited Prime Minister Barak and twice visited President Arafat. In all my meetings and in every public statement, I appealed for an end to the bloodshed and a return to the negotiating table.

Britain continues to press these two urgent priorities on all parties to the peace process. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister received the Foreign Minister of Israel. This afternoon, after Question Time, I shall meet Nabil Sha'ath, the foreign spokesman for the Palestinian National Authority.

No one should underestimate the challenge to the peace process from the bitterness and hostility created by the recent bloodshed. Both Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat have agreed to visit Washington over the next week. We hope that this can pave the way for substantive talks on a peace settlement, without which there will be no secure peace for the peoples of the middle east.

Mr. Laxton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that what has happened over the past five weeks clearly demonstrates that the Palestinian people want the removal of 33 years of military rule over the occupied territories? Does he agree also that the Camp David agreement appears not to be working? Will he join with me in calling for a peace negotiation that is based upon UN resolutions 242 and 338, and following from that the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the west bank and Gaza?

Mr. Cook: The peace process, which was launched at Oslo, is built upon those resolutions. Britain played a key part in the drafting of resolution 242, and is cognisant of its terms. Unfortunately, no agreement was reached at Camp David. However, we came much closer to it at Camp David than we have ever been during the other eight years of the peace process. The area of territory that was still in dispute at the end of the Camp David talks was down to 2 or 3 per cent. I hope that the bloodshed of the past two months will not prevent us from returning to where we were after Camp David and completing the task. If we do not, it is difficult to see an outcome in which there can be any permanent guarantee against future bloodshed.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the right hon. Gentleman, acknowledging the great difficulties that exist, nevertheless, with all his support and authority, impress upon the Israelis the essential nature of a more proportionate response to these difficulties? Will he agree that all of us who understand the awful history, difficulties and tragedies of the Israelis over the years, find it impossible to understand how they can use heavy guns, machine guns and heavy weapons on children?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the sensitive way in which he has approached a difficult issue. I can assure him that we have already raised in our high level meetings with leaders of the Israeli Government our concern about the need for a proportional response to crowd control. We will continue to do that.

Many people throughout the world, whatever their view may be of the peace process, have been moved by the death of, and injury to, young children, often those who may not have been taking part in the throwing of rocks. It is important that we find a way forward in which we do not escalate the violence. Every fresh funeral breeds another crowd and breeds also further bitterness, which prevents us from securing a peace settlement.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons for the current situation has been the failure to increase the living standards of the Palestinian people? How much of the blame for that does he attribute to the Palestinian National Authority, and Yasser Arafat in particular, for diverting aid intended for education and economic development to other activities, including training terrorists?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend correctly draws attention to the fact that, during the peace process, the living standards of residents of Gaza and many west bank towns went down, not up. There are many reasons for that.

Israel has to accept its role in the development of Gaza and the west bank. An immediate problem involves the closure of access to the Israeli labour market—more than 100,000 residents of Gaza have been put out of work. If the residents of Gaza and the west bank are to move away from violence and street demonstrations, it is important for them to find a way back to employment and to give them the opportunity to have an occupation.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Although the security of the state of Israel is of paramount importance, does the Foreign Secretary agree that equality of treatment between the Palestinian state—the Palestinian authority—and the state of Israel is critical? In my view, the Palestinians believe that they do not get a fair deal.

Whatever the outcome of today's United States elections, will the United Kingdom Government contact the new President with a view to steering peace back on to the real agenda in the middle east?

Mr. Cook: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall of course make early contact with the new Administration, who will not take over until the end of January. President Clinton will remain in office until then, and I am sure that any incoming President will support his work in the middle east peace process. His knowledge of and commitment to the peace process is wide and deep. During his remaining two or three months in office, I hope that both sides will use his commitment and expertise to find a way forward.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I support all my right hon. Friend's efforts in the peace process. Does he agree that Israel's determination to dominate, control and set out the future of the Palestinians is the biggest obstacle to peace in the region? Does he also agree that if there are to be future negotiations, the Israelis should treat their partner in those negotiations—the Palestinians—as equals? That failure to do so made it clear to Palestinians—young and old, and angry and moderate—that what was achieved at Sharm el-Sheikh, Camp David and Oslo was not good enough. A successful future must be based on the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) and,

in particular, on Israel's acceptance in the peace process that Palestinian refugees have the right of return. If not, there can be no peace.

Mr. Cook: I have already discussed with the Israeli Foreign Minister the importance of including refugee return in any overall package. I stress that good progress was made at Camp David. I strongly suggest to the House that we return to first principles in the peace process—we should pick up from the progress that was made and appreciate how far we got at Camp David. In the immediate future, we must try to secure an absence of bloodshed, which will enable the negotiations to recommence. That is why it is important for both sides—not simply Israel—to honour the commitments that they made at Sharm el-Sheikh to put an end to violence.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The whole House will share a common concern about the recent, tragic turn of events in Israel and the occupied territories, and the Foreign Secretary's hope that the agreements made at Sharm el-Sheikh will be implemented. We of course recognise Israel's right to live in peace and security and the right of Palestinians to self-government.

Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that one lesson of the past few weeks may be that it might be unhelpful to press impracticable issues—I refer in particular to the final status of Jerusalem—further and faster than the parties feel able to move? With hindsight, the situation may have moved too far, too fast, with the result that events have moved decisively backwards and the peace process has taken a turn for the worse.

Mr. Cook: In reality, the peace process has reached the stage of final status talks, to which all the difficult issues were reserved, including that of Jerusalem. It is important for Israel that any peace settlement should include a statement of an end of the conflict by the Palestinian side, but it is difficult to see a Palestinian leadership making such a statement without a resolution of the division of Jerusalem. That is why we may now be in a position in which those difficult issues have to be resolved as part of a package, and both sides will have to recognise that they will not necessarily obtain everything that they want on every element of the package, but that the package itself offers them security, stability and peace for their people, which is the greatest prize of all.

Iraq

7. **Mr. Donald Anderson** (Swansea, East): If he will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Iraq and those items which the Iraqi Government are currently allowed to import. [135166]

12. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): If he will make a statement on the impact of sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Iraq. [135171]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We continue to take the lead in alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people at the hands of a ruthless dictator who cares nothing for their welfare. Under Security Council resolution 1284, the oil for food programme will provide more than $16 billion for the Iraqi people this year alone, paying for a wide range of civilian imports from food and medicine to equipment to improve water and sanitation facilities, to spare parts for the oil industry.

Mr. Anderson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the solution to sanctions is in the hands of Saddam Hussein himself by his taking the comparatively simply step of complying with the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. An hon. Member is censuring me for the way in which I call Members. I will not allow that, and the hon. Gentleman should take himself from the Chamber.

Mr. Anderson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the solution to sanctions is in the hands of Saddam Hussein by his complying with the relevant United Nations resolutions in respect of informing the international community of his weapons of mass destruction? My hon. Friend has mentioned the sums available to Saddam Hussein, but to what extent is that being spent for the benefit of the people or on self-aggrandisement and palaces for the dictator himself?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend. Britain wants to see sanctions suspended, but the only vehicle for achieving that is the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1284. In return for allowing in arms inspectors—a new team headed by the widely respected international diplomat Hans Blix—who will check on the capabilities in nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, sanctions could be suspended within a matter of months. We should all unite—critics of sanctions as well as supporters of the United Nations policy in international law—in achieving that, rather than playing Saddam Hussein's game and allowing him to score cheap propaganda victories by humanitarian flights. We should also bear in mind that, while his people have been suffering over the years, he imports thousands of bottles of whisky, wine and beer and cigarettes by the million, and surrounds himself in obscene luxury.

Mr. McCabe: I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) that Saddam Hussein must bear considerable guilt for the suffering experienced by the poor people of Iraq, but does my hon. Friend the Minister believe that it is right for Britain to pursue an open-ended sanctions policy against Iraq, which results in suffering for innocent children and others, while simultaneously pursuing a preferential trade arrangement with the authorities in Iran? Is my hon. Friend aware of the extent to which the mullahs in Iran are acquiring weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Hain: We are concerned about Iran's capability in weapons of mass destruction, especially its acquisition of large numbers of missiles, and we continue to press the Iranians on that matter. But I do not think that my hon. Friend will compare the Iranians' relations with their neighbours and with their own people with Saddam Hussein's record, which is uniquely brutal.

I must disagree with my hon. Friend on sanctions. Our commitment to sanctions is not open-ended. We want to see the sanctions suspended. We spent eight to nine months at the United Nations in New York achieving the new resolution which provides for that very opportunity.

All that is required is for Saddam Hussein to sign up to that resolution and the sanctions could be suspended within six months. Everyone should work together to achieve that objective.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not it obvious that policy towards Iraq is based on containment by utilising the deterrent effect of credible military force? What possible contribution do non-military sanctions make to that policy? They do grievous harm to the ordinary people of Iraq, they have no effect on Saddam Hussein, his whisky or his brutality, they give him an enormous propaganda advantage and they cause grave disquiet throughout the Arab world. Ten years after the end of the Gulf war, is not it time for the United Nations to lift the non-military sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I respect the right hon. and learned Gentleman's record on the matter, and his broad support, which I acknowledge, for the policy of the Government and the United Nations. However, $16 billion of oil for food money is now available to alleviate and end the suffering of the people of Iraq. That sum, per Iraqi, is equivalent to three times the amount that each Egyptian spends on food and medicine each year. It is a massive amount of money, and we must work to ensure that Saddam Hussein stops blocking it and allows all of it to reach his people.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about targeted sanctions, lifting commercial sanctions could allow the entry of dual-use goods, and allow Saddam Hussein to re-equip his infrastructure and rebuild the weapons of mass destruction, which he has used against his people in the north—the Kurds—and his neighbours.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): The Minister said that sanctions could be suspended provided that United Nations weapons inspectors were allowed back into Iraq. Will he confirm that that is the unanimous view of the Security Council?

Mr. Hain: It is the policy of the Security Council, which Britain will work extremely hard to implement. There is no hidden agenda; if we can get Saddam Hussein to comply with admitting the arms inspectors, we shall work tirelessly to implement the full Security Council resolution. I am confident that we shall be able to achieve that.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): What methods do we use to harm Saddam Hussein that do not harm his people?

Mr. Hain: We implement sanctions that contain his ability to threaten his people. He has done that repeatedly, for example, by inflicting chemical weapons on the Kurds. He has also threatened his neighbours by invading Iran and Kuwait. From oil smuggling—equivalent to a small proportion of his total oil production—he has been able to surround himself with a considerable security blanket and amass considerable wealth. However, like Slobodan Milosevic, all dictators learn that they cannot survive for ever.

In retrospect, our sanctions policy will be perceived to have worked to achieve our objective.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that Iraq's humanitarian predicament must be viewed in the light of its treatment of 605 mostly Kuwaiti prisoners, including women and students? What pressures can be brought to bear to get the Iraqis to provide information, even information such as whether those prisoners are dead or alive? Does he agree that humanity and decency demand that?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I pursued it with the Kuwaitis when I visited Kuwait last week. Hundreds of Kuwaiti families are in the dreadful position of simply not knowing what has happened to their relatives who have disappeared. The Iraqis have shown no accountability. We continue to take all opportunities to press them to deal with the issue, and to discuss with Ambassador Vorontsov his work on behalf of the United Nations to resolve the problem.

Sweden

8. **Mr. Martin Linton** (Battersea): What assessment he has made of the state of relations between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of Sweden. [135167]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Relations are excellent. A month ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had talks in London with Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Sweden in May, and I visited in September. There have been 25 other substantive ministerial visits in both directions so far this year, covering most Departments, as well as ministerial contacts in the margins of the European Union and other multilateral forums. The main aim has been policy co-ordination on European Union issues, especially with a view to the Swedish European Union presidency, which begins on 1 January.

Mr. Linton: Is the Minister aware of the Swedish Government's determination, forcefully expressed to me in Stockholm last week, to drive forward European Union enlargement during their presidency? Will he ensure that the United Kingdom Government do all that they can to support them in their desire to make clear progress on broadening European Union membership and negotiations with applicant countries?

Mr. Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his highly successful visit to Stockholm last week. As he knows, the United Kingdom is the best friend of enlargement. Through the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary in Budapest and Warsaw, we have set out clearly our desire for the European Union to be enlarged as quickly as possible. That is why we need to complete the intergovernmental conference on time. It is essential that we give a message to those countries that we want them in.

As my hon. Friend knows, there are three Es to the Swedish presidency: employment initiatives, environment and enlargement, to which I add a fourth—Mr. Sven Goran Eriksson. I am sure that his appointment will build on relations between our two countries.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is not Sweden our natural ally in securing major reform of the common agricultural policy? Is it not a tragedy that, over many years, we have failed to build effective coalitions of like-minded nations which would have secured that reform much earlier?

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is right. We failed to build those alliances because we had a Conservative Government until May 1997, but, since then, British Ministers have been out there in the European Union fully engaging with their European counterparts, ensuring that Britain's interests are put first and foremost on the agenda of Europe. We will continue to do what we have to do to reform the CAP.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): May I point out that the enthusiasm for the success of Mr. Eriksson is not universally shared in the Chamber?

The Swedish Government intend to push the creation of employment as one of the objectives of their presidency. If they are successful, it will clearly demonstrate that employment generation does not depend on a single currency throughout Europe.

Mr. Vaz: I thought hard before adding the fourth E, for the reasons that were outlined by my hon. Friend.

I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to work with the Swedish Government on a range of issues. On the single currency, he knows that our position is absolutely clear. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members may laugh, but the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) has recently resigned from the No Turning Back group. He cannot, however, turn his back on the likes of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and the hon. Members for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), whose policy is completely different from the policy of Conservative Front Benchers.

Our policy is very clear. In principle, we are in favour of joining the single currency. In practice, we will do so only when the economic conditions are right. We will assess those conditions early in the next Parliament in the interests of this country and this country alone. In the final analysis, the people of Britain will decide whether we join the single currency.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Has the hon. Gentleman discussed how Sweden's traditional neutral defence posture can be reconciled with the proposed EU defence structure, given its concerns? I remind him that the Prime Minister described plans for a merger between the Western European Union and the EU as an "ill-judged transplant operation". What has changed?

Mr. Vaz: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, we on the Government Front Bench have to deal with real Ministers and have real bilateral contacts. We do not have to quote selectively from documents. I assure him that we are totally at one with the Swedes on those initiatives. They are fully involved in the initiative that was put forward by the Government, with the support of the French. We will continue to work with them as EU partners to ensure that the common security and defence policy is a success.

Sierra Leone

9. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the situation in Sierra Leone. [135168]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I spoke to President Kabbah of Sierra Leone at the weekend. He warmly expressed his people's strong welcome for Britain's continued commitment to building a safe future for them.

We have completed the initial training of the first three battalions for the Sierra Leonean army. We will continue our programme to equip the Government of Sierra Leone with an army that can defeat the rebels. In the past week, we have confirmed that we will provide the United Nations headquarters with a British chief of staff. We will pursue with determination our goal of a Sierra Leone free from fear and rid of the rebels.

Mr. Brake: The Foreign Secretary will know that 1 million people in Sierra Leone are not receiving humanitarian aid because they happen to be in rebel-led areas. He will also be aware of the risk of the conflict spreading to neighbouring countries. Will he confirm that the United Kingdom will adopt a higher profile in Sierra Leone, that it will commit itself to UNAMSIL, and that it will remain committed in Sierra Leone until stability is achieved in the region?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman has raised real concerns about the gravity of the situation, and I strongly agree with him about the humanitarian position. I should point out, however, that the Government have done more for humanitarian aid to Sierra Leone than has any other country: in the past year alone, we have provided £30 million worth of such aid. We will, of course, continue to do all that we can to get it to the people who need it.

As for UNAMSIL, I stress to the hon. Gentleman that Britain is already making a bigger military commitment to Sierra Leone than any other western nation. We have more troops on the ground there than many contributors to UNAMSIL. We are performing a task that no one else is performing: we are equipping the Government of Sierra Leone with an army that can take the fight to the rebels. We have also committed ourselves to a rapid reaction response in the event of its being needed by the UN forces. We cannot do all that and also contribute to UNAMSIL. I am confident that ours is the right priority, and it has been agreed to by President Kabbah.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My right hon. Friend is right in saying that this country has done more than any other western nation to support the legitimate democratic Government of Sierra Leone. If, however, we are to create a climate in which people throughout Sierra Leone can live without fear, what more pressure can be brought to bear on those who profit from its diamonds—

neighbouring African countries—on those who are happy to provide the rebels in Sierra Leone with arms without asking any questions about their use, and, in particular, on those who seek closer relations with the European Union while at the same time providing weapons with which the people of Sierra Leone are being murdered?

Mr. Cook: Speaking from experience, my hon. Friend draws attention to an important dimension of the problem: the extent to which some neighbouring countries—one in particular—support the rebels, and profit from the conflict and atrocities in Sierra Leone. Britain has taken the lead in proposing a scheme to monitor the diamonds that are leaving Sierra Leone, and we have UN backing for it. I hope that that will make it increasingly difficult for the rebels to sell their diamonds, and to acquire the weapons that they need to maintain the conflict.

I assure my hon. Friend that, together with the United States, we are increasing the pressure on countries in the region that are assisting the rebels rather than assisting peace.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the Foreign Secretary provide a clear statement of purpose, telling us exactly what we are trying to achieve in Sierra Leone, what resources—both military and civil—we are putting towards that, and when he expects the task to be completed?

Mr. Cook: The House has been given a number of statements explaining precisely what military commitments we are making.

The hon. Gentleman asks what we are trying to achieve. I will answer that very simply. I went to Sierra Leone in the summer, and visited a camp for amputees where I saw 2,000 people whose arms or legs had been lopped off by the rebels—including babies who were unable to crawl before their arms were lopped off by crazed rebels. My objective in Sierra Leone is to prevent anyone else from having arms lopped off by the rebels.

Conflict Diamonds

10. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): If he will make a statement about conflict diamonds. [135169]

14. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): If he will make a statement about conflict diamonds. [135173]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): The Government have led the way in the creation of an international certification scheme to deny conflict diamonds access to world markets, and help to protect the legitimate trade on which so many livelihoods depend.

Judy Mallaber: I welcome the hard work done by my hon. Friend and the Foreign Office in cleaning up the diamond trade; but does my hon. Friend accept that sanctions-busters are still taking diamonds from Revolutionary United Front rebels in Sierra Leone and from Unita in Angola, and supplying them with weapons that are used to perpetuate these murderous wars? Does he agree that Victor Bout is a major supplier of arms to the rebels? What action is being taken to stop him breaking UN sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend that sanctions-busters are continuing to perpetuate the conflict in Sierra Leone and Angola, with the result that countless lives are being lost and mutilations are taking place. Victor Bout is indeed the chief sanctions-buster, and is a merchant of death who owns air companies that ferry in arms and other logistic support for the rebels in Angola and Sierra Leone and take out the diamonds which pay for those arms. All the countries that are allowing him to use their facilities and aircraft bases to ferry that trade in death into Sierra Leone and Angola are aiding and abetting people who are turning their guns on British soldiers, among others, in Sierra Leone. It is important that they stop doing that.

Mrs. Williams: Will my hon. Friend tell me what pressure has been put on the Governments of Liberia, Rwanda, Togo and Burkina Faso to stop sanctions-busters dealing in illicit diamonds and operating in their countries in blatant defiance of United Nations sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised that matter, as one of the cruel ironies and tragedies of the appalling conflict in Sierra Leone and Angola is the fact that fellow Africans are allowing sanctions-busters to operate within their boundaries, and carry in arms and take out diamonds. That practice perpetuates such conflicts. All the Governments named by my hon. Friend, including some Presidents and senior Ministers, have been complicit in that barbarous trade, and it is vital that they cease it immediately, comply with UN sanctions and help end those wars

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Is not it essential that the conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone cease to be such as soon as possible, and that the areas affected are returned to the control of the Government? Would it not have been better if that had been achieved by a British-led UN force or, indeed, a British-led Sierra Leonean force in the first instance, so that the Sierra Leonean Government had regained control of those diamonds early on? How long will it take us to train the Sierra Leonean army to achieve that task on its own?

Mr. Hain: We have already helped to train 3,000 members of the Sierra Leonean army and another 3,000 will receive further training in the coming months. One will not end the conflict, win the war or create peace unless one takes control of the diamond-mining areas, and the hon. Gentleman is right to point that out. The way to achieve that is for the Sierra Leonean army to go in, with UNAMSIL filling in behind, to take control of those diamond mines and stay there permanently, or at least for the foreseeable future.

The new national certification scheme that the Sierra Leonean Government have introduced will allow the proceeds from those diamonds to make the people of Sierra Leone rich, instead of poor and torn apart by war.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Although I welcome the initiative on conflict diamonds, will the Minister explain what happened to joined-up government? He will be aware of the civil war in the Congo and the problems there, and know that the Zimbabwean army is operating in the Congo. I am sure that he is also aware that a British Army team is training the Zimbabwean army that has gone to the Congo, where its sole purpose is to protect the diamond trade that is lining the pockets of Mugabe and his henchmen.

Mr. Hain: I agree that it is intolerable that the Zimbabwean army is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo helping to perpetuate that war, draining Zimbabwe's own budget and assisting with the collapse of that beautiful country. However, the British military advisory and training team in Harare is not contributing to that effort. It is not there to train the Zimbabwean army, but to support a regional peacekeeping initiative and work with the UN to bring stability to the region. That is the purpose of that British team's operation.

Yugoslavia

11. **Mrs. Alice Mahon** (Halifax): What help the UK will be giving the new Government of Yugoslavia to further advance its integration into Europe. [135170]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We warmly welcome the powerful rejection of Milosevic by the people of Serbia. We acted immediately to lift European sanctions. We have admitted Yugoslavia to the European stability pact for the Balkans. Britain is also supporting Yugoslavia's admission, at the ministerial meeting later this month, to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Since the fall of Milosevic, the European Union has allocated 200 million euros for immediate aid and reconstruction. We promised that if the people of Serbia voted for democratic change, we would bring down the barriers between them and Europe. We are delivering on that promise.

Mrs. Mahon: I welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks on aid for Yugoslavia. One of the main consequences of the war was the blocking of the Danube, because bridges over it were bombed. I am therefore glad that the Secretary of State has made it clear that aid and not loans will be made available. However, does he not agree that circulating planted questions—in the hope that a hapless Back Bencher will stand up and call those of us who opposed the bombings abusive names—will do nothing towards achieving peace and reconciliation in the Balkans?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the House that I did not plant the question that my hon. Friend asked.

Far East Prisoners of War (Ex Gratia Payment)

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): With permission, I should like to make a statement.

In April this year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister held a meeting with representatives of the Royal British Legion to discuss the British groups who had been held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war. He subsequently initiated a reconsideration of the longstanding policy of the Government towards those far eastern prisoners. The review took time to conduct because of the complexity of the issues involved, but it has now been completed.

I am very pleased to be able to inform the House that, as a result of the review, the Government have decided to make a single ex gratia payment of £10,000 to each of the surviving members of the British groups who were held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war, in recognition of the unique circumstances of their captivity. In cases in which a person who would have been entitled to the payment has died, the surviving spouse will be entitled to receive it instead.

As hon. Members will recall, on a number of occasions in recent months, in debates in which many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken, the House has debated the situation of those who were held prisoner in the far east during the second world war. We had those debates because what happened to those prisoners was often so appalling that, for many, it has remained with them for the rest of their lives.

Many hon. Members will be aware of the stories told by now frail constituents about that terrible time, and members of the public will be familiar with the books and films about it. However, if we look back at the histories, we come across a simple, stark fact that makes clear to everyone the enormity of what happened: of the 50,016 British service personnel who were reported captured by the Japanese, 12,433 died or were killed in captivity. In other words, conditions were so bad that one in four did not survive.

We are all very thankful that such a situation did not occur anywhere else during the second world war and has not recurred since. The unique nature of Japanese captivity in the far east was recognised in the 1950s, when those who had been held became eligible for modest payments from Japanese assets, made under the provisions of the 1951 San Francisco treaty of peace with Japan. As hon. Members are aware, the maximum payment available at that time was £76 10s.

In the intervening years, the former far east prisoners pursued the issue of additional compensation with Japan. More recently, they have also campaigned for the British Government to make a payment. However, as hon. Members on both sides of the House will be well aware, it has been the policy of successive Governments over many years not to make payments in such circumstances.

We are now making an exception for the British groups that were held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war in recognition of the unique circumstances of their collective captivity. Those who will be entitled to receive the payment are former members of Her Majesty's armed forces who were made prisoners of war, former members of the Merchant Navy who were captured and imprisoned, and British civilians who were interned. Certain other former military personnel in the colonial forces, the Indian army and the Burmese armed forces who received compensation in the 1950s under United Kingdom auspices will also be eligible. As I said earlier, in cases in which a person who would have been entitled to the payment has died, the surviving spouse will be entitled to receive it instead.

We estimate that up to 16,700 people may be eligible for the ex gratia payments, which will accordingly cost up to £167 million to make. I will not go into detail about the new payment scheme now, except to say that this single ex gratia payment will not be taxable, nor will it be taken into account for benefits purposes. We intend to make these payments as quickly as possible, although it will take a little time for the appropriate regulations to be made. We expect everything to be in place by February.

Further details of the scheme are being published today in a leaflet by the War Pensions Agency, which will be administering it. A copy will be placed in the Library of the House. The leaflet and a claim form will also be available on the agency's website.

The Government recognise that many UK citizens, both those serving in the armed forces and civilians, have had to endure great hardship at different times and in different circumstances, but the experience of those who went into captivity in the far east during the second world war was unique. We have said before that we believe the country owes a debt of honour to them. I hope that I am speaking for everyone here when I say that today something concrete has been done to recognise that debt.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): On behalf of the Opposition, I wholeheartedly and without reservation welcome what is frankly a generous settlement. As the Minister knows, we support the inquiry and the settlement and there is no question but that he has our support today. I also congratulate the Royal British Legion and far east prisoners of war on conducting a dignified and successful campaign that has finally brought their case to the Government's attention and resulted in a settlement.

The Minister was clear about the appalling death rate and special circumstances that apply to all those who were Japanese prisoners of war, and on that basis we all welcome his statement today. The settlement applies to all service men, to those who served in the merchant marines as well as to civilians. That was a key area of concern and I welcome the Government's generosity.

I particularly welcome the Minister's reference to widows. There is no question but that war widows occupy a very special place in the hearts and minds of the British public for the privations that they suffered, first not knowing what had happened and then discovering the terrible circumstances under which their husbands suffered. I also welcome the generous inclusion of those who served in the ex-colonial forces—the Indian army and the Burmese forces. It is a generous gesture and quite right and proper. The fact that the settlement is not being taxed and will not affect benefits is also a welcome gesture.

This week of all weeks, it is absolutely right that the Government should make a proper and final settlement. During the war, those who served in the far east became

[Mr. Iain Duncan Smith]

known as the forgotten army. Sadly, after the war, they became known as the forgotten heroes. It is so right that we have remembered them today.

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words and associate myself with everything that he said. I am glad to say that this is not a party political issue. Governments of successive hue have held a consistent line on the issue for many years. I am glad to say that today we have changed that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): This is indeed good news, including for the widows. Are we not today recognising our debt of honour to these very brave people who suffered so much? Obviously, compensation should have been paid by the Japanese; failing that, we have done our duty and rightly so. Would it not be appropriate at this stage for us to remember again all those who were held as prisoners—military and internees—who were never to return home and who suffered and died as a result of the starvation diet, the slave working conditions, the cruelty and often the torture? It would be a sad day if this country ever forgot them or forgot to honour their memory.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. He, with other Members on both sides, has played a major part in keeping the matter at the forefront of our attention. We shall take on board all that he has said about recognition.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): This has been a victory—if victory it be—for Back Benchers, and I congratulate those on both sides who have pressed the case with vigour and robustness over a long period. Does the Minister agree that, welcome though £10,000 may be, the true measure of his announcement for many of those who will receive the money will be the public recognition, albeit belated, of the terrible privations that they had to endure? I hope that that will help the recipients, if not to forget, at least more easily to come to terms with those terrible experiences.

Dr. Moonie: I entirely agree. No financial sum can be adequate compensation for what those people suffered. This token ex gratia payment will, I hope, go some way to relieving their distress.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): Will my hon. Friend pass on to our Government the congratulations of my constituents, particularly ex-service men? Does he agree that we, as a civilised and decent society, should recognise all the—often young—men and women who have put their lives or health on the line for their country? Does he agree that they all deserve recognition of this nature? That said, I do not wish to spoil today's events, and I congratulate the Minister and thank the Government.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend. The announcement will clearly be welcome in all parts of the country, and I join him in paying tribute to all those who have given their lives or suffered for their country.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): On behalf of the all-party group, I thank the Government for the announcement. When the Government come to organise the detail of the payments, will they consult the Royal British Legion and POW groups so that we can be sure not to miss any individual who may be entitled to claim compensation?

Dr. Moonie: I pay tribute again to the work of the all-party group on this subject. I guarantee absolutely that we shall consult all those involved to ensure that no one misses out on the payment.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I am delighted to participate in a rare moment of unanimity in a defence-related debate. On behalf of my constituents and the Select Committee on Defence, which I chair, and in my role as honorary adviser to the Royal British Legion, I am delighted to express my gratitude to all the Departments that participated in this welcome statement. The Government appear to have covered all possible angles of criticism by including widows, merchant seamen, civilians and those from the Commonwealth and empire who fought on our behalf.

I ask the Minister to pass on our rare collective congratulations to the many organisations that fought through all adversity and overcame every obstacle to achieve justice. Finally, and without ringing a note of disharmony, I hope that the Japanese Government are hanging their heads in shame at the fact that it was left to the British and Canadian Governments to repair the damage caused by something that was not their fault and to take the responsibility for it.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend. It has taken us a long time to come to this decision, largely because of its complexity and the need to ensure that all those who are properly due the payment will receive it. A lot of hard work was done by our officials, and I am happy to say that it has paid off.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank and congratulate the Government, but must ask the Minister to ensure that the old and frail are not faced with filling in complicated forms before they can have the money.

Dr. Moonie: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall do all in our power to ensure that compensation is as simple and easy to understand as possible. I am well aware of the difficulty that elderly people have with filling in forms.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I join my hon. Friends and other hon. Members in expressing a heartfelt welcome for the statement. Many of us have hoped for such a move for a considerable time. Can the Minister confirm whether compensation for civilians who were prisoners will be paid to those who were children at the time, or whether it will apply only to their parents? Does he join me in hoping that there will be no move in the House to condemn the Japanese Government at this time? Demands have been made for an apology from the Japanese and I understand the feelings behind those demands, but at this time we should welcome the move by the British Government, and that of the Canadian Government previously, to give some—[HON. MEMBERS: "Question!"]

Does my hon. Friend agree that, today, we should simply be glad that the veterans and former prisoners of war will now at last receive some compensation?

Dr. Moonie: I can confirm that all the prisoners are entitled to the payment. Of course, those who were children then are no longer children now. The position of the Japanese Government has been clearly stated and recognised in international law. They have expressed regret for what happened and, today, I think that I should leave it at that.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I congratulate this Labour Government on taking a courageous decision—a decision that was deferred for far too long by successive previous Governments. In congratulating the Government and welcoming the announcements, may I ask whether the Minister agrees that the decision, which will be widely welcomed by all who were affected, would be greatly enhanced if, even at this late stage, the Japanese Government had the decency to apologise?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. There is little that I could say to disagree.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): In welcoming this announcement, for which many of us have campaigned, I must mention Arthur Titherington and Keith Martin, who have steadfastly maintained the campaign for many years. We must also have regard to the Prime Minister's victory. For 50 years, Foreign Office lawyers said that the money could not be paid, Ministry of Defence bureaucrats said that it should not be because it would set a precedent, and Treasury officials said that it must not be because it would cost money. While those wonderful people resisted the Japanese army for five years, this Labour Prime Minister has defeated Whitehall—and for that we should all give thanks.

Dr. Moonie: I am certain that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will have listened closely to my hon. Friend. Something was needed to break the logjam of many years and my right hon. Friend provided it.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): May I underline the comments of the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), including those on the Japanese? I congratulate the Government. This announcement will be very welcome in Kent among members of the Buffs, the Royal West Kents and other elements of the armed forces who served in the far east. Finally, as the grandson of an Indian army officer, may I say how welcome are the provisions on certain members of that army?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He has for some time been associated with the efforts of Labour Back Benchers in this matter and I recognise his contribution.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): May I add my congratulations to the Government on behalf of the many far east prisoners of war in my constituency who were caught up in the surrender of Singapore, in particular Mr. Ian Mitchell and Mr. Bill Griffiths, both of whom have written moving books on the subject? On top of all the generous tributes that have rightly been paid to the Government for removing a logjam of 40 years, as has been said, this may be an occasion at least to press the Japanese Government, however gently—even if they feel incapable of offering a formal apology at the moment—to make more effort in their schools, education and curriculum to tell the truth about the second world war and the situation of those prisoners of war.

Dr. Moonie: We are well aware of the situation, and recognise what my hon. Friend says.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): On behalf of the Japanese Labour Camp Survivors Association, of which I am president, I thank the Minister for the announcement. It is a debt of honour, long overdue, paid to a band of British heroes to whom we owe so much for their service and sacrifice. As politicians generally—because this is not a party political issue—perhaps we might reproach ourselves that it has taken so long.

Dr. Moonie: I pay tribute again to the sterling work undertaken by the hon. Gentleman on this matter. After his three and a half years in this place, he will realise that it is sometimes difficult to move Governments from their chosen path—especially when the Government are trying to do that to themselves. I am happy that we have managed to succeed on this occasion.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): May I add my thanks on behalf of many of my constituents? I also congratulate those organisations and individuals involved in the matter. I add personal thanks because my father fought in Burma and never lost the fear that he might be taken prisoner.

As we prepare for the weekend when we shall honour the dead of those wars, is this not the best way in which we can repay our debt of honour to many of those survivors who are still living, and to surviving spouses?

Dr. Moonie: It is significant that we have managed to do so at a time when we shall be returning to our constituents at the weekend to join them in remembering those who died in successive conflicts.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The Minister will remember our exchanges over the years on this subject. I offer my unreserved congratulations on his announcement today. The statement was comprehensive; he and his right hon. and hon. Friends are rightly to be complimented on it.

I remind the Minister of the remarks made by Members on both sides of the House—his hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) was the first to mention the matter: a Japanese Government should have been making this gesture. If the Government of Japan want to see their country join the full community of civilised nations, they will hang their heads in shame that we have had to make this gesture today.

I have a question on one detail—not to carp, but to ensure that no problem arises. After the Minister's statement today, it will inevitably take several months to see the whole matter through. Am I right to assume that the announcement refers to those survivors or widows of survivors who are alive today? Unhappily and inevitably,

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

some of them will no longer be alive by the time the process is complete. If the Minister cannot clarify the matter now, will he write to me?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to pay tribute to the passion with which the hon. Gentleman fought his case during several debates. I am also happy to assure him that what he says is absolutely right. All those alive today will benefit. We shall do everything in our power to make the payments as quickly as possible; we do realise that some people will die before we can make them.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I thank the Minister for his statement. For many of my constituents who were Japanese prisoners of war, the Japanese Government's expression of regret is still not enough.

It must be recognised that, despite the Minister's modesty in pointing out that the issue is not party political, it took a Labour Government to deliver the settlement. For many of the survivors, the £10,000 is not the real point; it is the fact that they carried a psychological burden for many years and that society has now recognised the trauma that they suffered. This is a day of celebration for those former prisoners of war, because they have finally received that recognition.

Dr. Moonie: Yes, I am happy to associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend about the many people who suffered during that conflict.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I thank the Government and I congratulate the Minister on the announcement. After hearing the graphic account of my constituent, Arthur Christie of Porthmadog, who suffered with many of his colleagues at unit 731 in Manchuria, I know why the statement was necessary; it should have been made a long time ago.

The Minister mentioned that widows alive today will all—quite rightly—benefit. Does that include widows who have subsequently remarried?

Dr. Moonie: That is the case.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): The announcement is welcome not least because it is inclusive and generous and also because it is based on an ethical decision rather than on the expediency of the past.

Will my hon. Friend join me in regretting that it has taken so long? In fact, it has taken so long that my constituent, Mr. Ian Mason-Summers, who waged a long and futile battle with the War Pensions Agency for some recompense, has died. I am glad that his widow will now benefit.

Will my hon. Friend give the House a clear assurance that the Government will continue to put pressure on the Japanese Government to issue an apology to those who were subject to such persecution that we had to make this payment? For those who survived, it is a matter not of compensation but of principle. That principle demands that in due course—indeed, the sooner the better—there should be an apology from the Japanese Government.

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance that I will be bringing his views and the views of many here to the attention of my colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Given that a number of the far east prisoners of war will have died since the 1951 treaty of San Francisco, either unmarried or without a surviving spouse, will the Minister—I accept the generosity of his statement and congratulate him on it—consider making a payment to a suitable military charity or charities in memory of those prisoners of war and to assist with their work?

Dr. Moonie: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes an interesting point. We have managed to be generous today and to recognise the unique suffering and the unique collective experience of those who were in Japanese prisoner of war camps during the second world war.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): As one of those who have pursued this issue with the British Government and the Japanese Government in the past 17 years, I welcome what my hon. Friend the Minister has said this afternoon; but is it not important that we remember that, for former prisoners of war and their families, money can never compensate for what they endured in the wartime years? Should we not recognise that most of them believe that the Japanese Government should be paying the money, not the British Government, and that Japan's financial position now is very different from what it was at the time of the San Francisco agreement in 1951?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to take full note of what my hon. Friend says.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I welcome the fact that all members of families who were interned will receive the payment, and that there will not be just one payment per family. May I bring it to the attention of the Minister that it is in the nature of such families that many have not returned to Britain or may not live here? Will he assure me that where they are living will make no difference to whether they receive the payment?

Dr. Moonie: I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is certainly the case.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): In welcoming this good news, may I relate to the Minister my experience of only this morning? I spoke with four constituents of mine who are survivors of the far east prisoner of war camps. When I spoke about the announcement, it was telling that not one of them asked, "How much?". What was important for them was that the statement was taking place at all. While £10,000 may change the financial position of some of the survivors, my conversations with them reinforced for me the fact that what was important was that at last a Government of whatever political persuasion had recognised their unique suffering, and for that I thank the Minister.

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to accept what my hon. Friend has said and to recognise the quiet dignity with which

people have borne over many years the suffering that resulted from their captivity. We all know that money is no full recompense for that, but we have at least marked our recognition of what they went through.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I wish to call every hon. Member who is standing. I will be helped if the questions are brief.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I thank the Minister and the Government for the statement. I, like the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), am the son of someone who was lucky enough not to be captured, but did serve in a far east theatre. May I ask for a couple of points of clarification? Will the Minister's colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office request that the money be repaid to the British taxpayers by the Japanese Government? Where someone is the surviving widow of a far east prisoner of war, will she still receive compensation even if she has remarried, perhaps after nursing her first husband for many years?

Dr. Moonie: It is not a matter of making a request to the Japanese Government. They are well aware of our views. They have been repeated many times. I am happy to say again that if someone has remarried following the death of her husband, she will still be eligible.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the announcement and I hope that he accepts the congratulations of my constituents who are surviving POWs and their relatives. I have to say that the Japanese Government should be making the payments. Does my hon. Friend accept that on days such as this I realise how important it is to be a Labour Member of Parliament, because it has taken a Labour Government to make this announcement and make the payments?

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and I recognise what he says on the subject.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): As the daughter of a Japanese prisoner of war, may I on behalf of my mother and my constituents, particularly the civilian internees, thank the Government for the announcement? Will the Minister clarify whether the War Pensions Agency's records on pensioners will enable it to pay the £10,000 without their even asking for a claim form? May I double-check that the £10,000 will not be taken into account under the capital rules for benefits?

Dr. Moonie: As a point of amplification, I confirm the latter point. One of the reasons it has taken so long to make the announcement is that we have had to ensure that we get the regulations watertight.

On the hon. Lady's first point, clearly, not everyone will be registered with the War Pensions Agency. Although to some of us it might appear to be a simple form, many elderly people might require help to fill out what they regard as a complicated form. I am sure that many organisations are ready to give a hand to identify all those who are entitled to the payment and to ensure that they receive help in filling out the necessary forms. We shall also ensure that additional staff are available at the War Pensions Agency to cope with the extra work.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My hon. Friend the Minister will probably be aware that people from Norfolk were disproportionately represented among those imprisoned in Japan. I probably have met, know and represent disproportionately more former prisoners of war than any other Member. I therefore thank my hon. Friend wholeheartedly for this decision. However, given that the one thing that will be said almost universally about the decision is that it is late, will he ensure that, whatever computer hiccups there are, everything will be done so that, in the weeks to come, we do not have to apologise for any further delays? Will he ensure that, having made the right decision, it is followed through and payments follow rapidly?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance, but it will take a little time to make sure that the regulations are properly in place to allow us to implement our decision. However, we shall do that with all possible expedition.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's announcement and thank him on behalf of my constituents, including Mr. Yerbury, who came to my surgery in Frome soon after I was elected and expressed to me in no uncertain terms just how bitterly the view that these prisoners had been ignored and perhaps actively misled by successive Governments was held.

I have one specific question. I very much welcome the extension of the provision to civilian prisoners of war, but do we have adequate records to ascertain the whereabouts of those of them who do not receive war pensions and are therefore much more difficult to trace?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He has put his finger on a problem. We do not know where all these people are; it would be impossible for us to do so. Initiative will be required by the people involved or by their relatives and friends, who, I am sure, will know who might be eligible for the payments. As I said, we are happy to employ extra staff to deal with the matter and to ensure that all inquiries are properly answered. I am certain that the decision will be widely publicised, and we shall do everything that we can to ensure that everyone who is entitled to the payment receives it.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): On behalf of my constituents—in particular, Brian Brown, James Miller and Hugh Irvine—I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the statement and congratulate the Government on the decision. Those constituents were former Japanese prisoners of war and they have campaigned for decades for this day; thankfully, they have lived to see it. However, will my hon. Friend take this early opportunity to lay to rest the speculation in today's

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

press that some of the money may be creamed off the top to pay the lawyers who have represented far east prisoners of war in litigation in Japan?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that the payments will be made to the individuals concerned and not to the lawyers.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I thank the Minister for the announcement. Although he said that it can be only a token payment, it is more than a gesture; it is a recognition of the sacrifice that so many have made for us.

On a practical note, in the search for the former prisoners of war and their relatives, will special targeting be carried out, with the assistance of the Royal British Legion and other associations, of the nursing and residential homes where former prisoners of war and their relatives may now be?

Dr. Moonie: That is an excellent idea and we shall follow it up.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): In expressing my appreciation of this thoroughly welcome announcement, may I ask to what extent Her Majesty's Government have been able to discuss the matter with the Governments and service authorities of India, Pakistan and Nepal, to identify potential recipients? People in those countries served the empire, shared the sacrifice and, as the Minister said, are equally entitled to the benefits.

Dr. Moonie: I am not sure of the exact mechanisms involved, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will take steps to ensure that all those people in the categories that I mentioned receive the payments for which they are eligible.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In welcoming what the Minister said, I note that he referred to the appalling conditions in which far east prisoners of war were held. Will he confirm for the record that many thousands of people did not come back because they were deliberately executed, including several members of Her Majesty's Fleet Air Arm who were killed after the war had ended? Will he also confirm for the record that, as the late Lord Cheshire VC explained, the Japanese would have murdered all remaining prisoners of war in their captivity, but that that was pre-empted by the dropping of atom bombs? Will he also consider a small group of members of the British services who were incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps? They have not been mentioned, but they underwent similar experiences and suffered similar privations.

Dr. Moonie: I recognise that other groups suffered. Today's announcement recognises the unique collective nature of what happened in the far east, as the hon. Gentleman's remarks graphically illustrate.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that the payment will also apply to the widows of those who died in captivity before the end of the war. In dealing with the veterans of the Indian army who have properly been included in the statement, will he make it clear that it would be wholly unacceptable if members of the Indian army who deserted in captivity to join the Indian national army received the payment?

Dr. Moonie: I should point out that only a relatively small number of people who served in other armed forces are eligible for the payment. As for widows, we have tried to be as inclusive as possible.

Points of Order

4.7 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I correct a comment that I made yesterday following the statement on floods? I am delighted to say that Yorkshire Electricity has assured me that it will not levy any charge on victims of the floods who have had to be reconnected. My constituents at Stockbridge should refuse to pay any future reconnection fees and should report such requests to the West Yorkshire police.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it not totally out of order for a Member of the House to stand by your Chair and harangue you in the middle of Foreign Office questions, thereby disrupting a very important question on Iraq? For how long will that Member be banished? Will you make it plain that you will no longer stand for such bully-boy tactics?

Mr. Speaker: I have dealt with the matter.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. With reference to the forthcoming business, some hon. Members find the motion on the business of the House somewhat opaque. It would help the House enormously if you could give an idea of how business will be conducted. Irrespective of whether the House agrees to the business motion—I hope that it will not—do you propose that debates should be structured, or should different elements of the motions and the amendments be dealt with separately?

Mr. Speaker: I have been very good to the right hon. Gentleman—two of his amendments have been selected for consideration. I intend to make a statement that will explain the structure, which will be fair to all concerned and will, I think, satisfy the right hon. Gentleman.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That at today's sitting the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Programming of Bills and Deferred Divisions not later than Ten o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and those Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

4.9 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This motion is yet another attempt by the Government to truncate debate on—arguably—one of the most important matters that has come before the House, perhaps in its history, but certainly for a very long time. It proposes to alter the balance between the Government, the Executive and the House of Commons. Given that, one would have thought that even this Government would want the House of Commons to have sufficient time to consider properly the matter in its totality, including the amendments to the motions, which you, Mr. Speaker, have kindly selected.

However, we find that the opposite is the truth. In what can only be a calculated insult to the House, the Government have had the gall to suggest that such vital matters, affecting, as they might if hon. Members agreed them, the very balance between the Executive and the House, can be disposed of at an arbitrary hour—in this case 10 o'clock. That strikes me as gratuitous and completely unnecessary—and, might I add, insulting.

That is even more true given that the Order Paper on Thursday and then yesterday revealed that the Government were to attempt to cut this business even shorter, by finishing it at 8 o'clock. That is notwithstanding the fact that we have had an important statement today, and therefore time is even shorter. That cannot be right. One would have thought that agreeing such radical and fundamental changes to Standing Orders, and therefore the relationship between the Executive and the House—and, in the matter of deferred Divisions, the basis on which the House has been used to debating and voting for many centuries—required proper time for consideration.

Under the motion, the House is asked to agree that justice can be done to such matters by 10 o'clock, even though we have started to consider them after 4 o'clock. Indeed, the situation is worse than that, because, subject to your guidance in due course, Mr. Speaker, the Government are suggesting that we debate all matters at once and then vote on them in a group after 10 o'clock. In other words, the House will not be able to consider its decision on one matter before it moves to another. That is unnecessary and highly irregular.

Surely it would have been appropriate, in this of all debates, to have given Members, as has happened in debates not just in this Parliament but in many previous Parliaments, proper and ample opportunity to deliberate these matters until whatever time we think appropriate, rather than presenting us with what can be described only as a guillotine on the ending of the traditional role of the House of Commons.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does my right hon. Friend think that it is particularly ironic that the Government should be seeking so to undermine

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 356

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

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AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
6 November—17 November 2000

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6 November 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 356**

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 6 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the Greenham and Crookham Commons Bill shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next session of Parliament, provided that notice of their intention to do so is lodged in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present session and that all fees due up to that date have been paid;

That on the fifth sitting day in the next session the bill shall be presented to the House by deposit in the Private Bill Office;

That a declaration signed by the agent shall be annexed to the bill, stating that it is the same in every respect as the bill presented in this House in the present session;

That on the next sitting day following presentation, the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay the bill on the Table of the House;

That in the next session the bill shall be deemed to have passed through every stage through which it has passed in the present session, and shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having passed those stages;

That no further fees shall be charged to such stages;

That all petitions relating to the bill which stand referred to the committee on the bill, shall stand referred to the committee on the bill in the next session;

That no petitioners shall be heard before the committee unless their petition has been presented within the time provided for petitioning or has been deposited pursuant to Private Business Standing Order 126(b);

That, in relation to the bill, Private Business Standing Order 127 shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against bill)" were omitted.—[*The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Theatres (Market Towns)

1. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What proposals he has to support theatre venues in market towns. [135336]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): This is a matter for the Arts Council of England—as the main funding body for the arts in England—in collaboration with the regional arts boards, to decide within the context of its current review of regional theatre. The Arts Council has already announced additional theatre funding from 2002-03 and decisions on how this will be distributed will be made in the near future.

Mr. Heath: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply. I am thinking of the Merlin theatre in Frome, which is excellent but which failed, unfortunately, in a recent lottery bid. Does he agree that the lottery process is not necessarily the right way of providing for capital improvements to smaller theatre venues, precisely because it is a lottery? We need a mechanism to ensure

that funds are made available not only to the big—the regionally important—venues, but to those that provide an essential service to local people.

Mr. Howarth: I would counsel the hon. Gentleman and his constituents who are involved with the Merlin theatre and arts centre not to despair of the lottery. I appreciate the disappointment felt by Merlin when it was unsuccessful in the previous lottery application to the Arts Council. I know that the South-West Arts Board tried to give helpful advice, and I understand that Merlin is putting together a new bid to South-West Arts—that organisation now has more resources to distribute under the regional arts lottery project. I wish Merlin well in that application. Of course, from 2002, the Arts Council and the regional arts boards will be able to start to use the extra £25 million revenue funding—the huge increase that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has provided for theatre.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my hon. Friend consider visiting the new theatre at Milton Keynes? Within a year of opening, it is achieving 85 per cent. occupancy and is a splendid example of the use of public money in extending regional theatre. Will he spread the lessons to be learned from the Milton Keynes theatre to other less successful regional theatre venues?

Mr. Howarth: It would give me nothing but pleasure to accept my hon. Friend's invitation. I greatly look forward to having the opportunity to visit Milton Keynes. I am sure that the lessons that can be learned from the success of that project will be eagerly followed by others elsewhere, as she suggests.

Digital Television

2. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): What action he is taking to promote the take-up of digital television. [135337]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 31 October that we have been working closely with broadcasters, manufacturers, retailers and consumer groups to ensure that viewers get accurate and sensible information. A set of clear and simple messages has been agreed and will be used to promote and encourage take-up.

Miss Begg: Does my hon. Friend agree that internet access is an important part of digital television? Hopefully, it offers a mechanism to ensure that there will be a narrowing between the information haves and have-nots. Will she ensure that internet access forms part of the standard digital package on offer to consumers?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. She will be aware that the Government are most anxious to ensure universal access to the internet and also to ensure that we do not end up with an information-rich/information-poor society. Currently, we know that one in five homes already have digital television, which, of course, gives them access to the internet. Perhaps most interestingly, 50 per cent. of homes where there are children have digital television.

However, the Government continue to monitor the situation closely. We have set up a viewers panel, which will meet for the first time at the end of November. We shall certainly take into consideration the point raised by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The hon. Lady will be aware that the United States has set an analogue switch-off date of 2006, while Italy and Germany have set a clear date of 2010. Does she agree that her conditional date for analogue switch-off will not encourage the growth of digital technology in this country? Furthermore, is she aware that the provision of internet television cannot be a reality until we have broad band throughout the United Kingdom? We certainly do not have that at present.

Janet Anderson: I hope, Mr. Speaker, that you and the House will bear with me if I set out our proposals for analogue switch-over. The matter is very important to us all.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have set out two crucial tests that must be met before the analogue signal is fully switched to digital: availability and affordability. Under the availability test, almost all viewers who can currently receive analogue television must be able to receive the main free-to-air channels digitally. Under the affordability test, consumers must not face unacceptable switching costs when converting to digital services for either their televisions or their video recorders.

As I said in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), we have set up a viewers panel constantly to review the position. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport set a target date between 2006 and 2010, and we will constantly keep it under review. However, the countries to which the hon. Gentleman referred are having second thoughts about the dates that they have set.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Rapson.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): My question has already been answered, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): That was a very rare piece of honesty.

Conservative Members will support any sensible measure to enhance the take-off of digital television, but is not the demand for news an important spur to the take-up of digital services? Has the Minister seen the article by John Kampfner, the former BBC political correspondent, in *The Guardian* today, in which he blows the whistle on the bullying tactics of Government spin doctors? I hope that the Minister will join me in condemning such tactics.

Does the Minister think that it is part of the Government's remit in the digital age to tell broadcasters how to organise their news schedules? Does giving the green light to a major hike in the BBC licence fee to pay for digital services give Ministers the right to ordain

when programmes are transmitted? We know that the Government want to dictate the content of news bulletins. Do they also want to dictate when they are scheduled?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I think that the hon. Gentleman has been on uppers again.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right.

I never cease to be amazed by the way the hon. Gentleman tries to manoeuvre his current pet subject on to the back of a question that is not really about it. I shall however try to answer his points. The Government do not think that it is part of their remit to dictate what broadcasters should put in their news bulletins. However, it is perfectly reasonable and acceptable for individuals to express their views. As to the future of public service broadcasting, he will have to wait for the White Paper that will be published at the end of the year.

Sports Coaching

3. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What steps he is taking to give schoolchildren greater access to qualified coaching in the major sports. [135338]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We announced earlier this year that we would double the funding available for the school sports co-ordinators programme. The additional £60 million that we are providing over the next three years means that the 1,000 co-ordinators whom we will have in place by 2004 will also have funding to buy in coaches and officials. High-quality coaching goes hand in hand with our desire to see more competitive sports played in schools and between schools and to give many more pupils the chance to play sport.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that, if we are to harness the talents and sporting enthusiasm of every child, we need more sports co-ordinators and fully qualified coaching staff in our schools as well as new and improved sporting facilities? Will he confirm that the money for the co-ordinators that he has just told us about will not be taken from the additional money announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for extending school sports facilities?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of ensuring that good-quality coaching is available to pupils. One of the great tragedies of school sport in this country is the decline that came about as a result of the dispute that the previous Government had with teachers in the mid-1980s. We are now in the process of putting that right.

I can indeed confirm to my hon. Friend that the revenue funding that we announced to double the schools sport co-ordinators programme is revenue from the Exchequer. It is not the same fund as the prospective lottery money that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced at the end of September. We will provide £750 million to improve school sport facilities from the new opportunities fund, and we are proud to propose today, in the consultation document that we have launched, that that money should be spent. We asked Conservative Members whether or not they would cut that money if they came into government.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Although I welcome the Secretary of State's comments about improving sports coaching in schools, does he not recognise that the biggest decline in school sports came about because, for about 30 years, Labour spokesmen and Labour activists were against all competitive sport in schools? The Government are now trying to go two steps forward when he and his predecessors took us three steps back.

Mr. Smith: No, I would not agree. The two major reasons for the decline of sport in our schools over the past 20 years are, first, the withdrawal of teachers from after-school sporting activity as a direct result of their dispute with the previous Government, and secondly, the previous Government's presiding over a bargain-basement sell-off of school playing fields.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Although the interest given to sports in schools is encouraging and, indeed, welcome, quality coaching in some sports is done away from school—I am thinking of swimming. I have constituents whose children are making a wonderful grade in swimming but need assistance. Can we have some advice on how such people can obtain specialist coaching away from school in sports that are part of the school curriculum?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which, together with Sport England, we are addressing. Swimming, along with games, gymnastics, dance, athletics and outdoor-adventure activities, is a national curriculum entitlement for school children at key stages 1 to 4. That means that those activities are a statutory part of the education of every child in this country. We must ensure that that education, training and coaching are as good as possible.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that fitter children get better examination results? If he does, does he further agree that it is unacceptable that children aged between 11 and 16 receive on average only 20 minutes' physical activity a week? If he agrees that that is so, as statistics show, will he explain how in an already overcrowded national curriculum more time will be found for children to undertake physical activity?

Mr. Smith: I certainly agree with the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question. Fitter children who engage in sport undoubtedly perform better in their academic work. That has been proved by study after study. Engaging in sport also makes children healthier and, incidentally, helps to curb anti-social behaviour. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I are determined to increase the amount of sporting activity available to children, both within the curriculum and after school and at weekends. Both are important objectives. The school sports co-ordinators programme that we are implementing will help to achieve them.

Football Supporters' Trusts

4. **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): How many mutual football supporters' trusts have been set up with the help of Supporters Direct. [135339]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Supporters Direct has assisted in the establishment of seven supporters' trusts to date, and has helped set up a further six trusts that are agreed in principle. Supporters Direct has received inquiries and requests for advice from groups representing supporters at a total of 85 football clubs in the FA premier league, in the football league and in non-league football. It is also in discussion with supporters' groups in other sports. That is not bad for two months' work.

Mr. Love: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. One of the seven trusts that he mentioned is at my local club, Enfield Town, which has also elected a supporter-director to the board. The chairman recently called the trust unrepresentative, which I believe reflects its growing influence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such a structure should be spread throughout sport? If he does, what measures will he take to publicise it further?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend rightly points to the progress at Enfield. As he points out, not only has a supporters' trust been established but a supporter-director has been elected to the board. Most football clubs at which supporter-directors have been elected and supporters' trusts have been established have warmly welcomed the formal participation of supporters in the running of the club. I certainly hope that football clubs and, indeed, clubs in other sports will recognise that the direct involvement of supporters in the running, decision making and financing of their club is only to the clubs' benefit, because, after all, supporters are the lifeblood of a great football club.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): We welcome the right hon. Gentleman's news and we wonder whether he has also sought football supporters' views regarding the European Commission's attempt to invade our pitch by ruling that the football transfer system is illegal. Does he agree that supporters' loyalty to their football team applies equally to players, that fans are unhappy when good players leave, and that fans will lose the most if their team is impoverished or ceases to exist because the current system is scrapped? Does he agree with our Football Association, football league and premier league that any new transfer and contracts system must ensure that players honour their obligations, that opportunities to break contract are strictly prescribed, and that smaller clubs are properly compensated for the transfer of talented young players to bigger clubs?

Mr. Smith: For once, I agree absolutely with everything the hon. Gentleman says. The matter is one that we have discussed with football authorities and supporters, as well as with our fellow European Governments. We believe that, although the current transfer system is by no means perfect, rewarding clubs for the investment that they make in players and ensuring that money cascades down from larger, richer clubs to smaller, less wealthy clubs are important aspects of the system and values that we should try to retain.

Millennium Dome

5. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What discussions he has had with local authorities in east London and the Greater London Authority about the future of the millennium dome. [135340]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The matter is, of course, one for the competition team. Throughout the competition process, the competition team has involved and informed east London and Thames gateway organisations, including local authorities and community groups. Frequent consultation with the London borough of Greenwich has featured throughout the competition process. Following the withdrawal of Dome Europe from the competition process on 11 September, my noble and learned Friend Lord Falconer, sole shareholder of the New Millennium Experience Company, has met representatives of the London borough of Greenwich. The Greater London Authority and the London borough of Greenwich will be fully involved in any future planning application for the dome's future use.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful for that reply. Will the hon. Lady provide an assurance that, if the dome has to have recourse to yet more public money, not only will there be full consultation with the borough of Greenwich and the Greater London Authority, but Parliament will be fully informed in advance? Will she give a further assurance that, if a wind-up takes place and more public money is needed, she will come to the House and make clear how much is required? Furthermore, will her noble and learned Friend Lord Falconer do the honourable thing and resign?

Janet Anderson: Before he made his final, cheap, point, which I shall treat in the manner it deserves, I was beginning to think that the hon. Gentleman was approaching the subject in the spirit we expect of all parties. I assure him that we shall continue to keep the House fully informed. The New Millennium Experience Company is satisfied that it has sufficient funding to carry through trading until the end of the year. He will know that we are engaged in discussions with Legacy plc about the future of the dome. I am sure that he does not expect me to predict the outcome of those negotiations; however, I can say that we hope to be able to make an announcement very soon.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives' constant attempts to make political capital out of the dome ring hollow, given their part in setting it up? Does my hon. Friend also agree that although all alternatives for the future of the dome must be considered, it is essential that the dome remain

in existence? We must find an alternative that will ensure that. Does she agree that it has already become almost an icon building, and one that should be maintained?

Janet Anderson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I remind the House that the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) who, sadly, is not in his place today, said:

> Our task is to maximise the national gain and recognise that this is a non-party-controversial issue; it is an all-party endeavour.—[*Official Report*, 28 January 1998; Vol. 305, c. 271.]

I only wish that Opposition Members would take the same view.

My hon. Friend is right. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's official spokesman confirmed today that, in his view, the dome is an important part of the regeneration of the Greenwich peninsula. *[Interruption.]* If Opposition Members will listen for a moment, they may learn something about the regenerative effect of the dome. The Government are the first to acknowledge that the dome has not been the success for which everyone hoped, although it has had more than 5 million visitors. We should not overlook what has been achieved. The dome is a vital contributor to the development of the Greenwich peninsula, and has already brought considerable regenerative benefits to Greenwich and the wider Thames gateway.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) asked earlier whether local authorities had been consulted. Greenwich council predicts that 30,000 permanent jobs will be created in the borough of Greenwich within seven years as a result of the investment in the peninsula. Perhaps Opposition Members would rather those jobs had not been created. I am sure that the electors of Greenwich will be listening carefully to them today.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): For once, I shall give the Minister some all-party support. There is no doubt that the original motivation for the dome was the regeneration of that part of the Thames, and I hope that she will continue it. I am glad that Nomura has backed out of its bid, so there are no more beer-swilling concepts of leisure developments there. Will the hon. Lady please make sure that the Legacy bid is taken seriously? It is an opportunity to build a science park there and to help smaller companies. I hope that the negotiations are progressing as well as she suggested, so that an early conclusion can be reached.

Janet Anderson: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Although I cannot predict the outcome, the Legacy bid is interesting and exciting. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need an early conclusion. I can confirm that we have been having discussions with Legacy plc, the remaining bidder from the final shortlist of two, and the competition team is currently analysing the proposal from Legacy. I cannot predict what the outcome will be, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we want an early solution and we will make an announcement shortly.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my hon. Friend congratulate the national botanic garden of Wales, which is also backed by the Millennium Commission, and has just exceeded all expectations by—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady might try to pick another question, as that does not relate to the one before us.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Will the Minister now treat the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) in the manner that it deserves, and answer it? Does she think that Lord Falconer should resign?

Janet Anderson: Lord Falconer is doing an extremely good job. The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no.

Mr. Ainsworth: We will see whether that opinion still holds on Thursday, when the National Audit Office report is published. On regeneration in east London, will the Minister confirm reports that the chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company has told Ministers that the site could be worth at least £300 million more if the dome were taken down?

The Secretary of State is the chairman of the Millennium Commission. He may be sitting there pretending that it is nothing to do with him, but surely he has a duty to salvage whatever is possible from this disastrous year? With growing doubts about the viability of the deal with Legacy, would it not be better—would it not, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), "maximise the national gain"—to invite bids for the site with or without the dome—or is £300 million a price worth paying for the sake of new Labour's vanity?

Janet Anderson: I can only say that I am not aware of any such advice from the chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company. I repeat to the hon. Member that we, in common with local authorities in the Greenwich area, consider the building very much part of the area's regeneration. That should be taken into account.

Regional Television

7. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): What plans he has to address regional anomalies in television reception where viewers cannot receive appropriate regional variations of free-to-air broadcasts. [135342]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I understand the reason for the question—my hon. Friend has a particular problem in his constituency. It is difficult to know how to resolve it, because the spectrum available for the improvement of terrestrial television services is currently limited. It is difficult to prevent regional anomalies from occurring through analogue and other terrestrial means. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I understand

the problem, which is also experienced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman). If there is any way we can resolve it, we shall try to do so.

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for the interest that she has shown in the matter, and especially for coming to my constituency, where she heard how irritating it is to be interested in the news of Norfolk but to have to watch news that is targeted at Yorkshire.

Under the previous Government, when digital services, which provide new possibilities for dealing with the problems, were introduced, my constituents were ignored. Will my hon. Friend give me a promise that I can take back to them—that they will not be ignored in the White Paper or subsequent legislation, and that every attempt will be made to ensure that seizing the opportunities of the digital era means that we can put the problem behind us?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right. I congratulate him on the tireless campaign that he has conducted in his constituency and in the House on behalf of his constituents. He is right to say that digital television uses the spectrum more efficiently and enables the number and range of services to be increased significantly.

The Government's priority is to deploy the scarce spectrum to enable the BBC and the Independent Television Commission to provide digital television services throughout the United Kingdom and to ensure, as far as possible, reception of the appropriate regional variations. I assure my hon. Friend that we will address the matter in the White Paper when it is published later this year.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the White Paper consider the fact that Yorkshire Television cannot be received everywhere in North Yorkshire?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Lady cites yet another example. I am not sure of the number of such examples, but there are several around the country. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I appreciate that people in particular areas would like to receive their own ITV regional service, especially regional news. We understand the concern that that causes. If we can do something about it, we shall.

Public Buildings

8. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): What steps he is taking to improve the architectural quality of public buildings. [135343]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): We have established the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment—CABE—to promote good architecture and design. We have published a statement of our commitment in a document entitled "Better Public Buildings", copies of which have been placed in the Library. It has been wholeheartedly endorsed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his foreword to the document.

Mr. Hope: In a recent debate that the early years network hosted in the House, the motion that public architecture is failing children was carried overwhelmingly. That is a great worry. In Corby, there is an early years excellence centre which is an example of excellent design for children in my constituency. Through sure start and the early years excellence programme, we are spending approximately £350 million on public buildings for children in the next few years. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the excellence that we have seen in Corby will encourage the rapid growth in, and injection of, capital into public architecture, to benefit children throughout the country?

Mr. Howarth: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am glad that the people of Penn Green in his constituency like the sure start building that has been built there. Large and increasing amounts of capital are spent on public buildings, but for decades, far too many were mediocre—if not downright ugly—in design, depressing for those who visited and worked in them, and unnecessarily expensive to operate and maintain.

The Government take it as axiomatic that we should design our public buildings well as a statement of civic values and our commitment to best value in every sense. My hon. Friend spoke about the importance of good quality in public buildings to which children have access. Peckham library, which won the Stirling prize at the weekend, is an example of the wonderful public design of a building that children use. I have asked CABE to work with the sure start unit to ensure that the new wave of sure start buildings enhances the quality of the environment, and lifts the spirit as well as providing first rate public services.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I recognise that the quality of architectural design is a subjective issue, and I say that with some feeling. Does the Minister agree that the lottery funding of many buildings has aroused much greater public interest in the need for quality of design? I say this diplomatically: will the hon. Gentleman put his money where his mouth is and require that when Government Departments become clients they insist on good-quality buildings—even if that means more expensive buildings? Even if they are more expensive, good-quality buildings are a much better financial, as well as environmental, investment.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman has certainly carried the flag for high-quality public architecture for many years, as I well know, and I pay tribute to him for that. From the beginning, the lottery distributors—this has been a commitment shared by Governments of both parties—have been insistent that the buildings funded from that remarkable source of capital funding should be of high quality. The Arts Council and the heritage lottery fund have done excellently in that regard.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has appointed Ministers in a range of Departments to be champions of high quality and high standards of architecture and design in and for the public sector buildings for which their Departments have responsibility. We are determined to push forward that crusade.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): May I inform the Minister that I have a rather commodious office in Portcullis House, which regrettably rather resembles a Novotel? However, the architecture of the atrium of

Portcullis House is stunning and wonderful. What will my hon. Friend do to encourage greater public access to that atrium, so that people can enjoy the architecture for which their tax has paid?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend also has long been committed to high-quality architecture. Of course, he is always a lucky fellow. I am glad that he has a commodious office. Responsibility for the construction project—that is, Portcullis House—has been a matter for the House and not for the Government. All parties have been involved in the oversight of the project. I am sure that the House authorities will wish members of the public to have the best opportunity to see the remarkable piece of architecture by Michael Hopkins and Partners, which is also a remarkable piece of structural engineering. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend, who is always the most assiduous and conscientious of parliamentarians, will be receiving many delegations who will come to wait upon him in his office.

Millennium Dome

9. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the future of the millennium dome after 31 December. [135344]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The Government are currently in discussion with Legacy plc, in relation to Legacy's proposal for a high-technology business campus at the Greenwich site. The Legacy proposal is currently being analysed by the competition team in advance of any decision on preferred bidder status. We hope to make an announcement in due course, but I can assure the House that the Government are determined to get the best possible deal to continue the regeneration of east London.

Dr. Lewis: One thing that the dome and its contents will not be doing next year is fulfilling the Prime Minister's boast that they would form the first paragraph of his general election manifesto. Is the Minister aware that last week the national health service pulled the plug on four community hospitals, including a long-awaited £22 million community hospital serving New Forest? How many more future consequences will there be for the people of this country as a result of the squandering of three quarters of a billion pounds on the millennium dome and its contents?

Janet Anderson: I do not know how the hon. Gentleman has the brass neck to ask that question. What the Government have done through the new opportunities fund has been popular. I refer him to a comment made by an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), who said that health and education are things on which lottery money should not be spent? Perhaps the Conservative party would like to tell us what it would cut, in addition to £16 billion-worth of cuts in public spending. Would the Conservatives cut sport in schools? Would they cut the green spaces initiative? Would they axe the additional equipment for cancer patients, the after-school clubs and the healthy living centres? People outside the House will want those questions answered.

Primary Schools (Sport and Art Grants)

10. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): When he expects the first grants will be made to primary schools under the space for sport and arts scheme. [135345]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): There is a two-stage application process for the space for sport and arts scheme. In the first, which is already under way, local education authorities have received the prospectus and will return outline proposal forms by the end of the year. In the second, which will run from the end of January onwards, LEAs will be invited to work up projects which have been given in-principle approval and to submit detailed applications. We hope that the first grants will be made during the summer of next year.

Dr. Palmer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that schools will not have to match the funding? We should focus on the most needy schools, but they are precisely the schools with the most claims on their resources. If we want the programme to be effective, it needs to carried out without the requirement for match funding.

Mr. Smith: I can confirm that. The principal element of funding for the space for sport and arts for schools scheme comes directly from the Exchequer as part of the capital modernisation fund. Lottery money is being provided in addition. The running costs, once the projects are up and running, will be met by the Department for Education and Employment through the normal funding arrangements.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Given that sports facilities in schools are increasingly coming under pressure, and that the time for sport in the school curriculums is already under pressure, will the Secretary of State take into account the fact that it is very important for local sporting clubs to augment the sporting facilities that are available to schoolchildren? In that context, will he consider visiting the Bowdon hockey, cricket and squash club in my constituency? By working closely with local schools, it allows schoolchildren to benefit from professional coaching and to take advantage of other opportunities that they should have but which will be affected by the proposal of the Labour-controlled local authority of Trafford to allow house building on one of its most heavily used playing fields. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could take the opportunity of a visit to say whether he shares my view, which I hope he does, that that would be an act of vandalism which should be stopped by the Government.

Mr. Smith: The activities of individual sports clubs are a matter primarily for the clubs themselves and for sports governing bodies. We will shortly announce additional funding for the national governing bodies for sport to assist them with their work. However, in relation to school sport, we have taken measures drastically to reduce the number of school playing fields that are being sold off. We have also taken measures through the new opportunities fund, and through the green spaces initiative, to create playing fields and recreation space. There is also a proposal to spend £750 million on school

sports facilities—also through the new opportunities fund. That combination of measures will help to put right the damage done by the Tories when they were in government. Once again, we have not had a clear answer from the Tories. Will they cut the new opportunities fund projects or not? Those are the projects that will put sports facilities back into schools, to the benefit of our children.

Millennium Dome

11. **Mr. David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): How much *(a)* national lottery and *(b)* Treasury money has been spent on the millennium dome. [135346]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The New Millennium Experience Company has been awarded total grant of £628 million from the Millennium Commission for the millennium experience at Greenwich and its associated national programme of events and activities. No Exchequer funds have been spent on the dome.

Mr. Tredinnick: Is the right hon. Gentleman not ashamed that so much public sector money has been used to shore up that project? Is that not in stark contrast to private sector projects such as Alton Towers, Flamingo Land and CenterParcs, which have managed to make a profit and entertain people for far less money? Is it not astonishing that, after all this time, there is still no proper funfair at the dome to entertain children? Can the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that, if the dome is knocked down at the end of the year, the ball and chain will be on the front page of the next Labour party general election manifesto?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman ignores the fact that so far 5.2 million people have visited the Dome, of whom 4.15 million have been revenue-paying visitors. In the whole of last year 2.65 million people visited Alton Towers, the other most-visited "paying" attraction. The dome has already had nearly twice as many visitors as Alton Towers. Moreover, the latest surveys show that satisfaction rates among visitors to the dome are rising: enjoyment and satisfaction levels are now at 88 per cent.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my right hon. Friend knows, attractions in other parts of the country are also funded by the Millennium Commission, and have proved extremely successful. The national botanic garden of Wales, for instance, has exceeded all expectations by attracting as many visitors in its first six months as it expected to attract in the first year. Will my right hon. Friend kindly offer his congratulations?

Mr. Smith: I am happy to congratulate all those involved with the national botanic garden of Wales, which, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, I visited shortly before it opened. It is a splendid building—a very fine dome, created by Lord Foster—and it has indeed attracted far more visitors than the number originally envisaged in the business plan. The same applies to a number of other projects funded by the Millennium Commission, from the Eden project in Cornwall to Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh. Those projects are proving remarkably successful and, indeed, profitable for the organisations concerned.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Can the Secretary of State confirm what was said earlier by the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting—that he has not been told by David James, chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company, that if the dome were demolished, the Government would receive an extra £300 million? If he can give such confirmation, will he take urgent advice, and if he finds that that is true, will he consider allowing the dome to be demolished—or must it remain as a testament to new Labour's failure?

Mr. Smith: As my hon. Friend the Minister said, we have received no such advice.

Tourism

12. **Mr. David Atkinson** (Bournemouth, East): If he will make a statement on recent trends in the tourism figures for Great Britain. [135347]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The numbers of North American and other long-haul visitors to the United Kingdom have increased by 1 per cent. and 4 per cent. respectively in the first eight months of this year compared to the corresponding period of 1999, although visits from Europe are—rather disappointingly—down by 5 per cent., and overall visits by 3 per cent.

Overall spend by overseas visitors is, however, up by 1 per cent. to £8.5 billion in the first eight months of this year compared to the equivalent period of 1999, and remains on course to be one of the highest levels on record.

Mr. Atkinson: Will the Minister confirm that last year the number of foreign visitors fell for the first time for nine years? Is she aware that the British Tourist Authority predicts a further decline this year? Does she agree that the British tourist industry needs all the help it can get, in the light of ever-increasing global competition? If so, what representations has she made to her right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the fact that the cost of petrol at the pumps in Britain is now the highest in the European Union, whereas three and a half years ago, under the last Conservative Government, it was the lowest?

Janet Anderson: That, dare I say it, is a bit rich, coming from a member of the party that cut funding for the English tourist board from about £25 million to under £10 million—its level when we came to office.

We are doing our best to reverse the declining trend in overseas visitor numbers, but we must remember that this is now a global market, and we are competing with other countries throughout the world. What will encourage people to come here is a value-for-money, good-quality product. That is why, in conjunction with the industry, we produced the first-ever Government strategy for tourism, and established the first-ever ministerial summit.

I congratulate the tourist information centre in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, which deservedly won an England For Excellence award last week.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Is the Minister not being a little complacent in failing to recognise that in the last complete year there was a deficit in tourism of £8.3 billion and that the number of British visitors who went abroad was substantially higher than the number of foreign visitors coming to this country? Is it not time that the Minister recognised that among the factors contributing to that, apart from the high level of the pound, is the extremely high level of road fuel costs compared with that in other countries? Will the Minister draw to the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer the anecdotal evidence, which is supported by statistical evidence, that prices at the pumps of over 90p per litre, which are common in the highlands of Scotland, are deterring visitors, whose number has been cut by at least a third this year?

Janet Anderson: I am afraid that I cannot agree with the right hon. Gentleman. His point about Scotland does not fall within my remit, but he may like to refer to the figures that were published some months ago, when people in Scotland expressed concern. One of the reasons identified for that was the failure of the industry in Scotland to get to grips with the opportunities presented by information technology. I hope that it will now do that.

We have provided the British Tourist Authority with an extra £5 million in grant in aid for the three years from 1999-2000 to promote Britain overseas. With the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we have set up a Britain abroad taskforce to see what we can do to improve Britain's image abroad, and we shall continue with that. All that is in stark contrast to the record of the Opposition, who consistently fail to take tourism seriously, although it contributes £64 billion a year to our economy.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Mobile Phone Masts

30. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If the Commissioners will make recommendations to parochial church councils regarding the financing of mobile phone masts on Church property. [135365]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): Welcome to your first Church Commissioners' Question Time, Mr. Speaker. It is a non-partisan Question Time, we are protected from on high, and you will enjoy it as much as we do.

The commissioners who, as the honourable Gentleman knows, are substantial property owners in their own right, are liaising on this matter with the Archbishops Council which, I am happy to say, is taking a lead on the matter. The council is working on producing national-level guidance and advice on best practice which they believe will be of benefit to the parochial church councils.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the sight of mobile phone masts in rural areas, let alone in towns, is pretty abhorrent to most people? Is he also aware that a mobile phone antenna can be inserted into the top of a steeple internally so that it is not seen from the outside and can generate over £5,000 for the church concerned? When will the hon. Gentleman make recommendations to churches that their steeples be used for mobile phone masts, to hide them from the general public and generate money for the Church, thus scoring a double whammy?

Mr. Bell: The Church will be grateful for that double whammy, which will allow it to render a public service to mobile phone operators, which need to cover 80 per cent. of the country, and perhaps also to gain revenue from that. The hon. Gentleman made the point even better than I can. The Church has taken a lead on the matter through the Archbishops Council and we are hopeful of positive results for parish churches throughout the land.

Mr. Speaker: I call Dr. Tonge.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: "Speaker!"] I am sorry, Mr. Speaker.

Will the hon. Gentleman tell us if he has any information on when the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will publish the guidelines on mobile phone masts which were promised for the end of July this year?

Mr. Bell: I am always grateful to have questions to the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions pushed on to me, and am happy to answer the hon. Lady. Eighty-seven per cent. of our country should be covered by mobile phone operators by October next year. The Church will play its part in assisting those schemes and I hope that it will do so in the interests of our people, our parishes and our churches.

Church Repairs (VAT)

31. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations the commissioners have received on the reduction of VAT on church repairs. [135366]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church continues to make representations on that issue to the Government at the highest level. A survey will shortly be published giving up-to-date figures for the total VAT burden borne by the Church, particularly in relation to the on-going repair bills payable for the maintenance of churches

Miss McIntosh: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the figure that has been put on the cost is £40 million per annum, which is £40 million more than the churches receive in grants from the Government? Is he aware that, today, *The Daily Telegraph* gave what could be the contents of the Budget statement? Is there any truth in the

story that churches will receive a reduced rate of VAT? Will the hon. Gentleman continue to support my campaign to have a lower VAT rate?

Mr. Bell: I had thought it was my campaign, but I am happy to have the hon. Lady as a joint campaigner on this issue. I have read today's newspapers and what might or might not be in the pre-Budget report of the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Wednesday. I will hold my breath on that—it is somewhat bated—as will the House. I take the opportunity to thank the hon. Lady and all right hon. and hon. Members who have supported the campaign over many years.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My hon. Friend is very persuasive and I am sure that he will have another go at the Chancellor, as we are getting to the point where small communities are expected to carry very large debts in relation to their churches. I hope that he will be able to get a response from the Government. They must be sympathetic, particularly to rural areas, which are faced with frightening debts.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. As I said, I have read the newspaper reports. The campaign has been a long one. The imposition of VAT at 17.5 per cent. on church repairs absorbs a large amount of locally raised resources—and for no local benefit. A great injustice will be righted if the Chancellor makes the statement on Wednesday that we hope he will.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some of us have been campaigning for a reduction for nearly 30 years, and Minister after Minister has given us a dusty answer? Will he try to persuade the Chancellor that he would earn well-deserved brownie points if he made the announcement that has been forecast this morning? It is a monstrous scandal that churches are paying back in VAT more than they receive in grant, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) said.

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman has been campaigning on this issue since 1972. He and I have attended Ministers of the Crown as part of delegations. I am grateful for his support. I have said that Church Commissioners questions is a non-partisan occasion, I would add that, if the Chancellor listens to us, and I think he will, he will be the first Chancellor to have done so in 30 years.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not important that the Treasury recognise that such a move would win widespread support; that churches throughout the country perform not only a religious role, but, increasingly, a community role; and that, in many parts of the country, they are an important part of the tourist industry? It is important that we get the concession—I hope, this week.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continuing support for the campaign. He makes several valid points. One is that the churches play an important role in communities in rural areas. Church repairs are to uphold and to maintain our traditions and heritage in local churches, which are a tourist attraction. I hope that those arguments alone will be sufficiently persuasive for the Chancellor on Wednesday.

Clergy Pensions

32. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of clergy pensions. [135367]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The formula for determining the full basic rate of clergy pension is two thirds of the previous year's national minimum stipend for incumbents. In addition, a lump sum of three times the pension is payable on retirement. As housing is provided while clergy are working, the formula recognises that clergy in retirement need to meet the cost of housing.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that considered reply. Given that since 1998 pensions on service have been funded by parishes themselves and that large numbers of parishes have been forced against their will to lose the services of sound and able-bodied clergymen for no other or better reason than that they have reached the age of 70, does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it would make financial sense and strike a blow against the evil of ageism if clergymen were able to continue beyond the age of 70—or, indeed, for as long as their parishioners wanted them?

Mr. Bell: I certainly appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point about ageism. All the points that the hon. Gentleman has made will be taken into account by the Archbishops Council—which has started a review of clergy stipends and is consulting widely within the Church as a part of that process. I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's remarks are incorporated in that review.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): In improving the clergy's conditions of service, will my hon. Friend consider allowing them to go to an industrial tribunal if they are unfairly dismissed?

Mr. Bell: Yes. For the past three years, since my hon. Friend was first elected to the House, that point has been raised on the Floor of the House, and many hon. Members have supported that position. The point is being taken into account by various bodies within the Church, and I am hopeful that, over a longer period, we shall have the result that my hon. Friend would like.

Flooding and Flood Defence

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the serious flooding that has occurred in England. I start by expressing the Government's heartfelt sympathy to all those who have been affected. Some houses have been flooded several times in the past few weeks. The whole House can only appreciate the desperation of all the householders who have been affected.

We do not need to be reminded of the extraordinarily heavy rains that have fallen in recent weeks—and that are still falling even as I speak. It is an extreme situation: the land is saturated and water is running straight off into already swollen rivers.

Floods on this scale are rare. River levels in York, for example, are the highest that they have been for 400 years. The 1947 flood was the most recent event on a comparable scale. It was caused by a combination of heavy rain and melting snow and resulted in significant economic damage. Direct comparisons, however, are difficult, as there has been much subsequent development on the flood plain and our defences are much better.

Happily, and most importantly, we have no reports of people losing their lives in the floods. Of the approximately 1.8 million properties at risk of flooding, fewer than 4,000 have flooded. Much of the extensive flooding has been of agricultural land. I believe that most flood defences for urban areas—including York, which is being severely tested—have operated to their design standard or better, demonstrating the justification for significant Government expenditure over the years.

As the House will be aware, further rain is to come and the prospect of more flooding cannot be ruled out. I shall return to the issue of funding flood defences in a moment. I have to emphasise, however, that we cannot stop all flooding, but can only reduce its risk. The recent floods have overwhelmed some defences. It would not have been practicable to have stopped them, as that would have required massive walls which, even if they could have been afforded and constructed, would be unlikely to be acceptable visually or environmentally. A few years ago, Shrewsbury turned down a flood defence scheme on those very grounds.

Having set out what has happened, I want to say what is being done in response. First, however, I pay tribute to the way in which the Environment Agency, emergency services, local authorities, voluntary services and the armed forces have responded to the flooding. They have been working around the clock to ensure that warnings are issued and acted upon, to evacuate people and to shore up defences. I also thank the local media, including local radio, for their contribution in ensuring that information has been made widely and quickly available. At the weekend, we saw on television the massive efforts being made to combat the floods in York. Similar efforts are being made across the country.

The Government's impression is that those partnerships have worked well and that flood warning arrangements have also been effective. As the House knows, when the immediate work has been completed, I shall be asking the Environment Agency, in conjunction with its partners, to produce a full report on the flooding, its effects, how the flood warning and emergency response worked, and what lessons we can learn. Although I shall ask to have that report speedily, I emphasise that I do not want preparation of the report to get in the way of the immediate work that needs to be done. I ask for understanding on that point.

At the weekend, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made an important Government announcement on flooding. He said that the Government were improving the Bellwin scheme to help local authorities which incur unexpected costs in response to floods. Assistance under the Bellwin formula will now be automatic for authorities dealing with the current floods. The rate of Government support will increase from 85 per cent. to 100 per cent. Valid claims will be settled within 15 working days and claims for advance payments can be made.

That announcement addresses important concerns that have been put to the Government. The scheme will also be reviewed more generally when the current flooding is over. The Government are also committed to discuss with the Association of British Insurers how the insurance industry can respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies such as this one and deal with problems of insurability for homes and businesses at risk of flooding. When the current problems are over, the Government, local authorities and other agencies will do all that we can in pursuing the recovery plan to help communities get back to normal as soon as possible.

On the funding of flood and coastal defence, the total amount of spending on flood and coastal defence in England from all sources approaches £400 million this year. The Government are by far the largest contributor to that expenditure. In the current financial year, the Government planned to spend some £337 million in England. That is a combination of Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food funding towards capital projects of some £80 million and £257 million delivered through the revenue support grant administered by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Revenue support grant funding is used, among other things, to pay levies to the Environment Agency which the agency uses to fund the maintenance and operational costs of flood defences and the balance of capital works not met by MAFF grants.

The announcement in the spending review in July this year foresaw that MAFF funding would be increased by £5 million next year, £10 million the year after and £20 million the year after that. In all, MAFF funding was expected to total £267 million in the next three years.

We would also expect revenue support grant funding to increase by about 4 per cent. a year, in line with the spending review settlement. Recognising the severity of the floods, I am sure that the House will welcome my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement of a further £51 million over four years starting this year for additional investment in flood defence works;new whole catchment area assessment studies; and making an earlier start to planned improvements in the flood warning system.

That is new and additional money for England. Further discussions are in hand about the possibility of extra resources for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The further funding is particularly welcome because it will

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allow us to progress more river-based defence schemes. That is an issue that the Ministry needs to discuss with the Environment Agency, but the Government expect to make an announcement on decisions as soon as possible.

I ask the House to join with me in expressing the Government's appreciation to all those who have been involved in responding to the flooding. I also ask the House to acknowledge the already major investment that the Government make in flood and coastal defence and to welcome the further funding that we are making available to help ensure that the risks are reduced for current and future generations.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I thank the Minister for his statement. I extend the Opposition's sympathy and commiseration to all those who have been so seriously affected by the floods in the past few days and weeks. Many of them, as the Minister has rightly said, have suffered on more than one occasion. None of us can put ourselves in the place of somebody who has seen his home or business totally flooded. I join the Minister in paying tribute to all in the rescue services, who have worked above and beyond any call of duty to help those in distress.

The Minister's statement, although welcome, made no reference to the Bye report which followed the last serious flooding in this country: at Easter 1998, when four people died. As the hon. Gentleman said in this House earlier this year, that report clearly said that work had to be done to stop development on flood plains. Planning policy guidance note 25 has been out for consultation for two years. When will the definitive document be issued, especially as it seems that local authorities are still granting planning consent? In the six months to April this year, the Environment Agency advised local authorities to refuse 190 planning applications because of the risk of flooding, yet in 83 of those cases, the authorities ignored that advice and granted planning consent.

There was speculation over the weekend about maps of flood plains becoming available from, I believe, the Environment Agency. When will that happen? What discussions will the Minister or his colleagues hold with the insurance industry not only on the issues to which he referred but on the whole vexed issue of properties on flood plains becoming uninsurable?

Have not the Government already given permission in the past three years for substantial development on flood plains in Hertfordshire, the Nene valley and Ashford? Will they now reconsider those consents?

I welcome the improvements to the Bellwin system that the Minister has announced. It is obviously valuable to local authorities to get the full 100 per cent. and prompt payment. Will that apply only to expenditure incurred by the authorities themselves, or will they be able to pass on resources to others who may have to take remedial actions to deal with the crisis? That is clearly relevant to what the Minister said about the significant impact on agricultural land.

On flood defences, will the Minister confirm that the £51 million will be allocated over four years, so that the funding, although representing welcome extra resources, amounts to only £13 million a year? Is that additional to the £15 million announced in the comprehensive spending review earlier this year? Does he accept that the figure of £400 million is slightly misleading? Is not it the case that this year the Environment Agency is spending only £290 million, and that MAFF is allocated £80 million—we are not sure whether that is on top, or as grant aid for the self-same capital projects. In short, how much will be spent in total, forgetting by whom, and how much of it will be new money?

Does the Minister agree with the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, published two years ago, that said that there was significant confusion among the different bodies responsible for flood prevention and control—the internal drainage boards, local authorities, the Environment Agency and his Ministry? If so, what action will he take to create a much clearer line of responsibility, so that the House can better understand not only who is responsible but where the money is going and who is to spend it on flood defences?

Mr. Morley: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments concerning those who have been affected and the response of the emergency services.

The hon. Gentleman may remember that the previous statement that I made to the House was on the Bye report and what we were doing in response. We have made great progress in acting on the report by uprating the national flood defence scheme, introducing flood risk awareness programmes and setting high-level targets for annual exercises between local authorities and agencies for dealing with floods.

All that investment and time over the past two years have paid off in the response that we have seen to the current situation, with smooth, professional action by the emergency services, much improved early warning, and everyone living on a flood plain getting a leaflet through the door from the Environment Agency explaining what action to take in response to flood warnings.

PPG25 is expected in December, and we would expect all planning authorities to take into account the advice from the Environment Agency on development on flood plains. In fact, 90 per cent. of applications that are objected to by the agency are turned down.

The publication of flood risk maps was another Bye report recommendation, and the Government have set that as a high-level target for the Environment Agency. All local authorities have flood risk maps for their areas and I understand that the Environment Agency is to make them more widely available.

There will be discussions with the insurance companies about risk with regard to those people who might find it difficult to insure their properties in the future.

The variety of funding sources that go towards flood and coastal defences is being reviewed and a report on that will be out in September 2001. I can confirm that the £51 million announced for the listed schemes is new and additional funding. In terms of the funding proposed, I announced in the statement that the Government are planning to spend £337 million in England—a combination of MAFF funding for capital projects and the funding that is delivered through the standard spending assessment to local authorities for flood defence. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about

funding but, given the Conservative's party proposal for a £16 billion cut in public expenditure, how would it improve matters?

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, particularly the improvements to the Bellwin formula and the additional £51 million of funding announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Although we all recognise that the national focus has, understandably, been on the villages, towns and cities that have been inundated, does my hon. Friend accept that if one house is flooded, the misery is the same whether the flooding is localised or widespread? In that connection, and bearing in mind the repeat flooding in areas of my constituency, which, although localised, has nevertheless damaged dozens of houses in Mirehouse, Cleator Moor and Egremont, will my hon. Friend ensure that the changes that he has announced today will be equally and fairly applied to all areas and all families who have suffered, regardless of the extent of the flooding?

Mr. Morley: I assure my right hon. Friend that that is the case. He is right that although there has been much focus on areas in which many houses are at risk, there have been small, localised floods all around the country in which people have been seriously affected. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is ensuring that the Government talk to local authorities about how to make a unified response to ensure sure that people get the support that they need in all parts of the country.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I thank the Minister for the statement and join him in offering sympathy to those affected and thanks to our excellent emergency services. We also welcome the significant improvements to the Bellwin arrangements.

What plans does the Minister have to provide support to farmers in respect of uninsurable losses that they have suffered during the floods? Is he prepared to discuss with the Inland Revenue arrangements whereby businesses that have been affected by the floods will be allowed to submit their VAT and tax returns later than the official due date?

Finally, I welcome the fact that the Minister is planning to review the quagmire of our flood defence arrangements, but is it possible to bring forward the date on which that report is expected? Does he agree that given so many different bodies are able to act but there is no clarity about which has the duty to act, would it not be better to have a single body with the responsibility, power and funds to get on with the job?

Mr. Morley: First, I thank the Liberal Democrats for co-operating with the Government in providing time for the statement on their Opposition day.

The National Farmers Union has already made representations to MAFF about the problems that farmers are facing, and we will look at some of its suggestions. I also understand the hon. Gentleman's point about businesses whose records will have been destroyed in the floods. I give an undertaking that we will contact the Inland Revenue and ask for understanding on VAT and tax returns, given the circumstances, for the businesses affected.

As for the review on funding sources and arrangements, I give an undertaking to look at the time scale again, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman about it.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I represent a constituency that has been adversely affected by much of the flooding on the River Aire in Yorkshire, so I thank my hon. Friend and other Ministers for the serious and thorough way in which they have dealt with the problem as it has developed. Will my hon. Friend give more details about the changes to the Bellwin formula which will increase the speed at which help can be given? Will the Government consider developing plans to help people with the reinsurance of properties if they have difficulties insuring them in future?

Mr. Morley: I know that my hon. Friend represents an area that has been affected. I have visited those areas and the emergency centres in Yorkshire, along with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. I can assure my hon. Friend about the changes to the Bellwin scheme. Applications had to be made because payment under the old system was not automatic, which could lead to delays. That point was put to me when I travelled the country, talking to local authorities and visiting the affected areas. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has acted—payment under the Bellwin scheme is now automatic, the funding is 100 per cent. and there is a prospect of advance payments and a 15-day turnaround for claims.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister appreciate that some businesses and households have been told that insurers will cover this disaster, but that their insurance will now cease? Is he aware that, for example, the Yorkshire Dales Icecream Company and the households and other businesses in and around Cononley are in precisely that position even though the flooding there was partly caused by the malfunctioning of a flood reservoir that was built under a previous flood relief scheme? Will he ensure that, while the Environment Agency undertakes its work, which is bound to be spread over a long time, those businesses are protected in the event of further problems between now and those works being accomplished? After all, we are not yet into winter.

Mr. Morley: I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point. Of course, that is one of the matters that we would expect the Environment Agency to look at when it has time to review the situation and the areas that might need attention. He is right about insurance, which is why my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has been anxious to take the issue forward in discussions with the insurances companies and to ensure that consideration is given to those homes and businesses that may face insurance difficulties in future. It is fair to say that, at present, there are few people who cannot get insurance in flood risk areas.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Minister for visiting the Stockbridge area of Keighley last Friday and talking to many of my constituents and taking on board many of their anxieties. On Friday, we discussed topping up area social funds. He assured me that he would take that on board because many of my constituents will need to resort to social funds to

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help them out of immediate difficulty. The uninsurability of dwellings has been mentioned. That will be a problem for many of my constituents because many insurers—most of whom have been helpful recently—may not want to take on those households again. Yorkshire Electricity's vans were very much in evidence on Friday, but we did not know that the company was charging households a £65 reconnection fee. I was going to mention that to my hon. Friend privately, but I thought that I would get it in now.

Mr. Morley: I was very moved by the experience of the people I met in my hon. Friend's constituency. Again, the local authority was working hard with all the agencies to provide support. I was impressed that Benefits Agency representatives were present at the rest centre to advise people on the spot. I understand that the Department of Social Security has a central contingency fund. I know that applications are being made from flood hit areas to ensure that there is adequate funding for those people who may qualify for the social fund. I shall take such matters as those raised by my hon. Friend into consideration. I must confess that I was not aware that the utilities were charging people a reconnection charge. I should have thought that the utilities would have taken into account the stress that those people were under at the time.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): As the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) said, areas where flooding is predictable already receive much attention from the Environment Agency. Other areas, however, which had not had problems with flooding for many years, including Duffield in my constituency, have suffered from severe and sudden problems during the past few days. How will the Minister encourage the Environment Agency to prioritise work in those areas, and what steps will the agency take to protect areas that had not previously had problems with flooding?

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency will, because of the current situation, prioritise work on river systems. In the evaluation of the floods, the needs of areas that were affected on this occasion but which had not been affected by previous floods will be taken into account. However, some areas were flooded because of blockages in or the backing up of drains, which are also the responsibility of local authorities. All those points will be taken into consideration.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Will my hon. Friend, who visited the Selby area on Saturday, ensure that the relevant authorities seriously consider a detailed plan from the parish council at Barlby, where 200 homes were flooded over the weekend, to strengthen and repair the flood bank there? He will also receive a report from the Selby area about the failure of the electricity supply during the weekend to more than 10,000 homes. That might have implications for the siting of supply stations and their protection from flooding. As the flood crisis spreads throughout rural Yorkshire, will he ensure that the relevant authorities liaise closely with parish councils, which are often the best sources of local information, community support and volunteers?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend will recall that we discussed many of those issues when we met in Selby on Saturday, when we also talked to local authorities. He is right about the situation in Barlby, although it is worth pointing out that many of the houses involved were built in 1995 in a flood risk area. Such considerations need to be taken into account with regard to such developments.

The same point also applies to electricity substations. I understand that the problem in Selby was that the substation was flooded. We need to consider the siting of such stations in flood risk areas and whether they need to be defended. The hard work of the Environment Agency prevented an important substation in Leeds city centre from flooding. If it had flooded—it was very close to being inundated—that would have caused absolute havoc in the city. We will have to take such matters into account when we plan for what might be more frequent extreme weather conditions and the need to protect vital infrastructure, such as substations.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I point out to the Minister that it was not just the Ouse but most rivers in Yorkshire that were flooding. The River Nidd overflowed in Knaresborough, and caused extensive flooding from the riverside through to two caravan car parks. Most of the area had to be evacuated. Thanks to the emergency services, the borough council and, in particular, King James school in Knaresborough, evacuees could be accommodated. Does the Minister share my concern about the fact that many people, especially those on Abbey road in Knaresborough, did not receive a flood warning until the flood was 4 ft high in their dwellings? There was no awareness exercise in that area, partly because—the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) made this point—it was not an area of traditional flooding. Will the Minister give me an assurance that the way in which the Environment Agency issues awareness warnings will be reviewed? People should receive that information in good time to save at least some of their property and belongings.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have emphasised that no Government can guarantee that floods will not happen. We must reduce the risks and ensure that people have adequate warning. In response to the Northampton disaster and the lessons that we learned from the Bye report, we have put many extra resources into a national flood warning system which, by and large, has worked better. However, that is not to say that there have been no gaps in the system—the hon. Gentleman referred to one. I give him an assurance that in the evaluation that will take place following the floods, we shall examine the area that he mentioned. When we identify failures, we shall take steps to ensure that the situation is improved.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): My hon. Friend will be aware that parts of the midlands—especially in Worcestershire and Shropshire—have been badly affected during the past week. Although, by comparison, my own area in Birmingham has not been particularly affected this time, people in parts of my constituency have suffered four times during the past two years an event that they had been told would occur only once every 50 years. The latest occasion was in July.

As a result, various local taskforces were set up and some lessons were learned that my hon. Friend might like to take on board. First, there is a desperate need to

improve flood defences. Although I welcome the changes to the Bellwin formula, we need to take a fresh look at the operation of cost-benefit analyses, because they often discriminate against areas of localised flooding in favour of big projects.

The second point is on insurance companies. Our experience in Birmingham is that, as a result of those four events, some properties are uninsurable or the premiums are unsustainable. Urgent approaches must be made to the insurance companies in order to stop them cherry picking.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point about frequency. Generally, flood defences are engineered to certain standards—for example, one flood in 150 years, or 100 years or 200 years. Although there is much that we do not know about global warming, there is certainly no dispute that the planet is warming nor that we are seeing changes in weather patterns. We may have to re-evaluate current standards of defences that are set at one flood in 150 years, perhaps reducing that time because of changing weather patterns. Of course, there are cost implications in that for the Government. We accept those implications; that is one reason why we are significantly increasing the available budget.

We have to apply a cost-benefit analysis, although I am aware that it causes problems in some local schemes. We shall certainly consider those in future.

The Government will hold discussions with insurance companies on all the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for visiting Tewkesbury last Friday to look at the flood damage. His visit was greatly appreciated. He will recall that I stressed the additional problem experienced in the small village of Sandhurst in my constituency where there was an explosion at a chemical factory—a couple of days before the floods, thankfully. If it had occurred during the flooding, the emergency services would not have been able to reach the area.

Will the Minister carry out a full investigation into that explosion, including the reason why a chemical factory was allowed to be sited on an obvious flood plain? As my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) pointed out, to build houses on or near flood plains causes many problems. One reason why councils do so is the pressure to accommodate the number of houses that they are asked to provide.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right about the risk of pollution during floods. Any company dealing with hazardous products, such as chemicals, must follow certain standards. I understand that the Health and Safety Executive is currently investigating the case to which the hon. Gentleman refers and I am sure that it will be dealt with.

On flood plain development, new guidance will be issued in December and we shall expect planning authorities to act on it.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The Minister will agree that there has been much debate about who is responsible for approving new developments on flood plains. However, there is a further question: about approval for the development of new estates, where the increased run-off created by extra hard surfaces inundates adjacent areas. That is a recurrent problem—year on year—in my constituency. Who is responsible for approving such plans? Is it the planning authority, the Environment Agency or the drainage authority? At present, they are all passing the buck.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right. Increased run-off must be taken into account in flood plain development. I understand that PPG25 will address the issue of run-off as part of the guidance to local authorities. That new guidance will not be merely a code of practice as it was in the past; it will have much stronger force to ensure that planning authorities take note of it.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the giving of permission; that is a matter for the planning authorities.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I too thank the Deputy Prime Minister for visiting Malton on Friday. The Minister went to Malton last year; this year, the floods are worse. The beleaguered community wants to know whether his announcement and his change of policy today mean that flood defence systems, currently at the design stage, will be built more speedily. Is it likely that they will be progressed and constructed as quickly as possible?

Will the Minister ask his recovery plan teams to pay attention to the problems of alternative accommodation? Currently, the homes of about 1,500 families in North Yorkshire are flooded and are likely to remain so for several days. Those families will be out of their homes for nine months or longer. We need desperately to find them accommodation for that period—especially during the run-up to Christmas.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right. I visited Malton and Norton in 1998 and, given the severity of the flood then, I did not expect it to happen again for a very long time. However, as he said, the floods are even worse two years later.

The additional £51 million, which is new money, means that we can progress more schemes. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a scheme for Malton is at the design stage, but I understand that some technical issues need to be addressed. The scheme will be introduced as quickly as possible, and I assure him that the frequency of flooding that Malton has experienced will have an effect on the way that we score the schemes and on the priority that we give to them.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the problems of alternative accommodation is a serious issue. It will be tackled by local recovery teams and we want to ensure that people will continue to receive help from such teams even when the cameras and the newspapers are no longer present.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): When the Deputy Prime Minister kindly visited my constituency over the weekend, he gave so many assurances that they prompted my constituents to ask when Upton upon Severn will receive its share of the £51 million or when we will be told that it will do so. More generally, when we will we hear any details of the £51 million and, more particularly, what will its impact be on reducing the risks of flooding?

Mr. Morley: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, schemes for flood defence have to go through the

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processes of design, evaluation and receiving planning permission. They cannot be introduced immediately. Nevertheless, I repeat that the £51 million of new money means that we will be able to introduce a range of additional schemes that we could not have introduced otherwise.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is the Minister aware that the focus of attention in my area was the prevention of flooding in the down-town part of York itself? The perverse consequence was that the Vale of York was left totally exposed and, in Rawcliffe, the flood defences were breached. No sandbags were provided even though they had been requested from City of York council at 11 o'clock on Friday evening. I visited the area the next day and saw the consequences of the flooding. Sandbags were still not available and pumping was not started until 4 o'clock that afternoon. In fact, social services were nowhere to be seen until today and no soup kitchens had been provided. When I was in the area, I learned that one couple had not been rehoused and had nowhere to go. It is a serious problem, and the people in that area feel neglected and exposed.

The Minister also mentioned the revenue support grant. Will he respond to the request from the Local Government Association, which wants additional safeguards so that within year changes, as there will be this year, in local authority spending on flood defence schemes are recognised in the SSA for future years?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Lady has an Adjournment debate on the subject tomorrow and that will enable us to debate some of the issues in more detail than I can now. Much of her constituency is a flood plain and its flooding has taken a great deal of pressure off urban areas. The flood plains in Leeds, which flooded to take some pressure off other areas, have reduced the water level in Leeds by 1.5 m. Water catchment areas form part of the cycle of defence.

Sandbags have been issued in York, but some of the city's flood defences were operating beyond their designed capacity. Sandbags were needed in the city to stop the water getting under the flood defences and destroying them. Therefore, their distribution was an issue of priority. However, I understand that sandbags have been distributed as widely as they possibly can be.

On the SSA, money at above the rate of inflation is being made available for flood defence in all parts of the country. I am sure that we shall have the opportunity to discuss that in more detail tomorrow.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Stamford Bridge in my constituency has been affected twice in the past two years. I never thought that I would welcome the Deputy Prime Minister tramping around my constituency, but we were grateful that he came. I apologise for not being able to be with him, as I was attending a meeting of the Economic and Development Committee of the Council of Europe.

I am sure that the Minister will recognise that, having being affected twice in two years, with the prospect of floods again in another two years, the people of Stamford Bridge are saying that something must be done. I accept that the problem is enormous and not easy to solve, but when he is considering new flood defence work once the floods have gone down, will he make it clear to the Environment Agency and English Nature that top priority must be given to the safety and property of householders and businesses, rather than to birds and wildlife?

There will be a problem with insurance. In Stamford Bridge, small businesses have been particularly affected. Will the Minister consult the Deputy Prime Minister on whether businesses and houses which people cannot insure or for which excessive insurance rates must be paid should receive council tax relief?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman will know that when I visited Malton two years ago, I also went to Stamford Bridge, where, again, I did not expect such flooding in another two years. We will have to take into account changes in weather and more frequent flooding—and we are doing so by providing increased expenditure. His idea about council tax relief for affected businesses is interesting. We are discussing the matter of insurance companies, and we shall be looking at a range of options. The option that he is advocating would of course involve increasing public expenditure—of which he has not always been in favour.

Miss McIntosh: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Although it is always a pleasure to see the Deputy Prime Minister and other Ministers in one's constituency, may I seek your guidance? I have written to you on the matter. I was informed that the Deputy Prime Minister was coming to my constituency, and then that he was not. In the end, he came to my constituency accompanied by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), and a number of national film and local radio station crews, but I was not informed. May I be assured that parliamentary conventions will be respected in future?

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I met you, you twit.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is an established parliamentary courtesy that a Member visiting another Member's constituency on official business should give prior notification. That applies to Ministers as it does to other Members. However, the matter should be sorted out between the Members concerned. I suggest that the hon. Lady write to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Under-Secretary.

Miss McIntosh: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it parliamentary language to call a fellow parliamentarian a twit?

Mr. Prescott: On this occasion, yes.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is not nice.

Opposition Day

[19TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Pensions and Pensioners

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) to move the motion, I should announce that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.13 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I beg to move,

That this House believes that pensioners have been betrayed by both Conservative and Labour Governments over the last twenty years; notes that the Conservatives devalued the basic state pension, slashed future SERPS entitlements and oversaw the scandalous mis-selling of personal pensions; notes that the Labour Manifesto promised that pensioners would 'share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation', but that the Government now spends a smaller share of national income on pensioners than when Labour came to power; notes that pensioner poverty rose by 400,000 in the first two years of the present Government and that there were nearly 50,000 excess winter deaths in 1998–99 alone, mainly among pensioners; further notes that this year's 75p pension rise was an insult to pensioners and that despite a multi-million pound take-up campaign half a million pensioners still do not receive the means-tested assistance to which they are entitled; believes that the failure to adopt the recommendations of the Royal Commission on long-term care will still leave tens of thousands of pensioners having to sell their homes to pay for care; is concerned that hundreds of thousands of pensioners have faced delays in receiving their pension because of the Government's failure to deal with the problems of the NIRS2 computer system; and therefore calls upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer to announce a substantial increase in the rate of the basic state pension, with additional increases for the oldest pensioners, and to apologise for failing to deliver a decent pension to all pensioners.

Today's debate is about pensions, but it is about much more besides. It is about the attitude of successive Governments to older people. The 75p pension rise has been much talked about and is a symptom of that attitude, but it is but one of many examples. The Government's failure to implement the recommendations of their own royal commission on long-term care is another example, to which I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) will be able to draw attention later in the debate. The Government's failure to legislate against age discrimination in the workplace—they went only for a feeble code of conduct—and to stamp out ageism in the national health service are but a few more examples. In failing to treat Britain's older people with true dignity, the Government are following the tradition set by their predecessors. For that reason, our motion refers not only to the current Government but to those in office over "the last twenty years", wherein pensioners have been second-class citizens.

The Government's attitude to older people was summarised by the Prime Minister telling the Labour party conference that he wanted Britain to be "a young country"—that all the things associated with youth were positive and that, by definition, an older and ageing country, which ours is, was a negative thing about which we should be concerned. That is symptomatic of the current Government's attitude. Later, I shall refer to key documents that the Government are concealing, which would reveal their failure to act in support of pensioners and their willingness to keep the pressure off in terms of pensions increases. The Government are sitting on two important documents that should be before the House, but are not. That is a matter of concern.

Our motion begins with the Conservatives' record. As the House will expect, I am a regular reader of *Saga Magazine*, and I am sure that the Minister of State is too. The magazine recently conducted a survey asking its readers their views on Conservative proposals on pensions—which I have heard described as robbing Peter to pay Peter, by taking pensioners' awards away with one hand and giving them back, plus a few pence, with the other. Although it might have been presumed that the readers would want more money on the pension, rather than in other forms, they voted substantially against the Conservative proposals. The reason was simple: as many said, "We don't trust the Tories on pensions."

Pensioners have long memories. They remember the Conservatives' record on pensions and they are not willing to trust the party again. That record is one of not believing in the state pension, of eroding the basic state pension during their 18 years in office, of attacking SERPS—the state earnings-related pension scheme—and of slashing entitlements. In addition, as the House knows, women whose husbands were concerned about making provision for them when they became widows are now reaping the harvest of changes that were sown by the Conservatives in the mid-1980s. Pensioners, rightly, do not trust the Conservatives on pensions.

What do the Conservatives offer pensioners for the future? They face a dilemma: they have to go into the next election pledged to cut taxes, but they still need something to say to pensioners. The entirety of the policy that they have announced is twofold. First, they pledge to take money that pensioners already receive and then to give it back to them; added to that will be some money taken from lone parents who are trying to find work and some taken from the poorest of the poor through the social fund, to a grand total of 42p. At the next election, the electorate will be faced with a choice between a party that gave them 75p and one that promises them 42p—what a choice.

In my customary fashion, I am being generous to the Conservatives by citing a figure of 42p. The Conservatives said that their pension increase next April would be £5.50—£2 for inflation and £3.08 for the gimmicks, leaving 42p. However, we now know that £2.25 will be needed to cover inflation. Although the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) might provide one in her speech, we have not yet heard a revised figure for the increase. If it is still to be £5.50, with inflation taking £2.25 rather than £2, that leaves only 17p. Perhaps I have been too generous.

Secondly, those calculations are based on an equation that does not include tax, which leads me to one of the features of the Conservative proposals to which the readers of *Saga Magazine* objected most. The £150 winter fuel payment is tax free, as is the reduced television licence, worth more than £100. Once those pensioner benefits are subject to tax, many pensioners will be worse off overall. That is the best the Conservatives offer for the state pension in year 1; in years 2, 3, 4 and 5, they offer nothing. They would return to the old ways of nothing more than price indexation—nothing more than 75p and its equivalent.

[Mr. Steve Webb]

As for the Conservatives' long-term plan, they have always wanted to privatise everything that moves—and, in the case of the railways, plenty of things that do not move—and pensions are no exception. They tried to go for the full Monty—to phase out the basic state pension. Before the previous general election, they cobbled together a policy that was roundly rejected, so now they are going to try to do it very slowly.

The Conservative party intends to start with the young, by telling them that they can opt out of national insurance and save for a private pension in future. However, there is a slight cash flow problem. If people in their 20s start paying less national insurance in return for the state saving some national insurance in 40 years, there will be a bit of a gap between the loss of revenue now and the saved expenditure in 40 years. Where will the money come from? That is another black hole in the Conservative spending plans.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to dwell too long on the Conservative record. The House is familiar with it; more important, pensioners are familiar with it. I have one thing to say about Conservative proposals for the future. I have seen examples from around the country of Conservative literature relating to the party's proposals for pensioners, and the figure of £5.50 features prominently. I am reminded of the situation that arises when one writes an article for a newspaper, and the sub-editors remove the final paragraph because there is insufficient space. In this instance, it is the paragraph which discloses where the £5.50 will come from. Mysteriously, those who read the first line will see that £5.50 is to go on the pension, but they may never read the line that states that £5.08 is to come off. I believe that that is dishonest, and I hope that the hon. Member for Beckenham will dissociate herself from any local Conservative association that is putting out such literature.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He observed a few moments ago that the Conservative party is not trusted by pensioners on the subject of pensions. How, therefore, does he explain the fact that even at the 1997 general election, 44 per cent. of pensioners voted Conservative, only 34 per cent. voted Labour, and we cannot quite remember how poorly the Liberals did?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman underestimates pensioners by assuming that all they do is make a simple calculation of what their pensions will be. Pensioners look at a range of policies, not just pensions. Does the hon. Gentleman want to dispute the verdict of *Saga Magazine* readers on the Conservative pensions policy, which they rejected by an overwhelming majority when specifically asked about it a month or so ago?

The Conservative record is well known. We might have expected better from Labour. Many pensioners voted Labour in the hope of something better. In their manifesto, the Government set themselves the goal that pensioners would share fairly in the rising prosperity of the nation. How is that to be measured? Clearly, by the share of national income going from the Government to pensioners. One would not measure it narrowly, by looking just at pensions. One would look at the range of things given by Government to pensioners. I did that, in the form of a written question.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The hon. Gentleman referred to an election manifesto. The Liberal Democrat election manifesto at the last election stated:

> The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices.

That means that this year the Liberal Democrats would have increased the basic retirement pension by 75p. That is what the hon. Gentleman admitted to me in the debate on 8 June. It is sheer hypocrisy to describe as an insult what the Liberal Democrats themselves would have done.

Mr. Webb: I am well aware that the right hon. Gentleman is rattled by the local success of the Liberal Democrats and is nervous about the subject of the debate. Earlier this year, I moved a motion in the House condemning the 75p pension rise as inadequate. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman was elsewhere. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I supported the motion. The right hon. Gentleman and his party voted that the pension rise was adequate, and the Conservative party abstained. That is what happened this year.

The Labour promise was that pensioners would share fairly in the rise in national prosperity, so the least one would expect is that pensioners' share of national income from the Government would rise. For goodness' sake, doing better than the Tories is not much to ask, but they have not done so. Under this Government, the share of national income going to pensioners is lower than in the final year of the Conservative Government. No Labour-supporting pensioner who voted for this Government can have expected that to be the outcome.

There is plenty more evidence of the disappointment caused by the Government on pensions. The Government's own figures show that the number of pensioners living in poverty rose by 400,000 in the first two years of the Labour Government. The Government will say, "Since then, we have done A, B and C." Is it acceptable for two years to go by, with hundreds of thousands more pensioners living in poverty, before the Government get around to doing something as an election approaches?

Last December, we highlighted the figure for excess winter deaths—the number of deaths that exceed the expected figure. Those numbers are not large in much colder climates, but they reach extraordinary levels in this country. We have been trying to get the figures for last winter, but we are not being told them. My noble Friend Lord Russell asked for that information almost six weeks ago after one of our researchers phoned the Office for National Statistics and was told that the figures were ready but that we had to ask a parliamentary question to get them.

I tabled a question to the Treasury a couple of weeks ago and was given a named-day answer. I was told that we would get the figures soon. We phoned today and were told that they were still being "worked on". The Government want to get the figures off the political agenda. They want to announce a big pension increase before they receive the flak. They are sitting on the information, which should be before the House now.

As the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) knows, that is not the only information on which the Government are sitting. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman

will try to make that point during the debate. The Government Actuary's Department has been asked to produce a report on the funds available to the Government, the cost of higher pensions and the state of the national insurance fund. The Government Actuary wrote to the Southwark pensioners action group and said that his report was more or less ready at the end of September and would be finalised in the next few days and sent to the Government. I am grateful to the group for letting me know his comments. I have it on good authority that the report was sent to the Government. However, in a written answer today, the Minister said that it was being finalised. We bet it is being finalised!

One imagines that the figure for the national insurance fund balance was so huge that the Government had to get some different figures. That is the problem. There is key evidence for the Government's overflowing finances and the Government's record on pensions, but the Government are sitting on it—so much for freedom of information.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Does the hon. Gentleman seriously suggest that the Government would try to manipulate the report of the Government Actuary's Department?

Mr. Webb: Yes. *[Interruption.]* I make no bones about it; yes is the answer to the question. I believe that the Government were sent a report, which did not provide the answers that they wanted. I hope that the Minister will explain the delay in making known the contents, given that he has had the report for approximately a month. What extra questions has he asked the Government Actuary? What was the bottom line? Perhaps the Minister will tell us now; he has seen the report. The Government Actuary knew the figures at the end of September; I hope that the Minister will give us the figures.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): A little more than an hour ago, a journalist told me that the Department received the report on 6 October—the date it was expected—and that it would be published next Thursday. That is significant. That was the reason for a long point of order that you allowed me to make last week, Mr. Speaker. It is worrying that information crucial to deciding whether restoring the link is affordable has been kept from the House for a month.

Mr. Webb: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his dogged pursuit of the matter. I have written to the Minister about it, and, so far as I know, I have not received a reply.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does my hon. Friend know that he is describing common Government practice? My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and others have made the point that Governments publish independent reports only with their spin on them, rather than letting the public read and judge the reports, and responding to them alone. The freedom of information measure has not yet been amended at the other end of the building to deal with that because the Government continue to refuse to allow facts that are given to them to be free from Government constraint, and to insist that they should not be generally available.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Freedom of information is sometimes viewed as an esoteric issue that is only for the cognoscenti, yet it clearly has practical consequences in the case of BSE, rail and pensions.

A couple of administrative issues that relate to the way in which the Government have run pensions remain a shambles and are symptomatic of the lack of priority that is given to the needs of pensioners. The first is the infamous NIRS2 computer system. In the fourth year of the Parliament, the Government are still incapable of paying pensioners the right pension on the day that they are entitled to it. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has pursued the issue in the House.

I tabled a question to the Treasury—I know that that is usually a triumph of hope over experience. I asked what progress there had been on the NIRS2 system. The Paymaster General replied:

> Following the well-documented problems . . . considerable progress has . . . been made and the Inland Revenue now regards the system as stable.—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 409W.]

There was an answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), a Conservative spokesman, on 2 November. He asked

> how many pensioners are not receiving

their pensions on time. The reply was as follows:

> As at 15 September 2000, Benefit Agency offices had 97,000 pension awards waiting to be reviewed.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 573W.]

If that is stable, is it being suggested that that is the way we can expect things to be indefinitely?

I raised the issue of delays in state pension payments in an Adjournment debate in July 1999. I was assured that the problem would be sorted out by Christmas. Which Christmas? When will the problem be sorted out? How long will pensioners have to wait?

It is not only the computer system that the Government seem unable to run. I mentioned earlier the position of widows' state earnings-related pension schemes.

Mr. Butterfill: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the computer system, is he aware that each of the seven different types of benefit that are payable by the Benefits Agency has its own separate computer system, none of which is capable of interfacing with the other systems? Even if the Government get NIRS2 right, they cannot get the benefit right.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right. There are fundamental issues that have gone unaddressed by consecutive Governments. I shall give some evidence of the scale of the problem. The *Financial Times* reports that

> there are 7m cases on the computer system with data missing today, compared with 2.5m in 1998.

The situation is getting worse, not better, and the Government have failed to address it.

I understand that Age Concern is taking the Government to the European courts on the issue of widows' SERPS. The Government have said that men—it is typically men—who inquired about SERPS rules in the early 1990s and were given duff information can claim protected pension rights, on condition that they can show that they

> would or might have acted differently if they had received the correct information.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 166W.]

[Mr. Webb]

I have discussed the matter with some of the folk who have been through the personal pension mis-selling follow-up. Each case is painstakingly examined and the process is taking a long time to complete. However, the work is being done thoroughly. How can anyone prove that seven or eight years ago he saw a duff leaflet—*[Interruption.]* I think that the Minister said from a sedentary position, "He does not have to prove." The individual will have to say that he received a duff leaflet and show that he

would have or might have acted differently.

That person would have to produce the scheme of which he was a member at the time, the alternative schemes that were available and the situation and provision of the spouse. How will that be done? I believe that the Government are giving a misleading impression to the many men in this position—there are some women—who have been told that they will be protected. They will find out in a few years' time, when we know how the scheme will work, that they will not be protected. What they will have to prove will be impossible to prove. I hope that the Minister will clarify what exactly these men will have to provide.

I shall set out the Liberal Democrat approach to the issue. First, I shall reflect briefly on the Government's strategy for pensioners. Almost certainly, "strategy" is completely the wrong word. It is a dog's breakfast. The Government have been making it up as they have gone along, and there is still a lack of coherence. A few months after the general election, there was a massive increase in the level of the means test, and a renaming, which is essential. It is the minimum income guarantee.

We know that about 500,000 pensioners—

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No, I would like to make some progress. I will give way later.

About 500,000 pensioners are not claiming the money to which they are entitled. When the Government said that they are prioritising the poorest pensioners, they have it wrong. The poorest pensioners are not those who claim their entitlement. There are about 500,000 with an entitlement who are living below the poverty line but do not claim.

To be fair, the Government have ridden into battle. Thora Hird was brought forward to tackle the issue. The most recent figure that we have been given in a written answer—perhaps the Minister can update us—is that 30,000 of the 500,000 have now claimed their benefit. After the millions of pounds spent on publicity and on sending nearly 2 million letters to pensioners—at least three quarters of them did not have an entitlement—they have managed to increase by 30,000 the numbers of those who claim. Therefore, 470,000 pensioners are still going without. Aiming for a target of 500,000 and hitting 30,000 is a pretty poor performance. Is the Minister satisfied with that?

Reliance on the means test—which, of course, the Chancellor will increase massively on Wednesday—means missing the poorest pensioners in the land. The basic state pension reaches those pensioners like nothing else. That is why we believe in it.

Mr. Rammell: The same Liberal Democrat manifesto as my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) mentioned commits the Liberal Democrats not only to increasing the pension in line with prices, but to introducing a top-up of the basic state pension to meet the needs of the poorest pensioners. How is that different from the minimum income guarantee?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right. I am well aware of what the manifesto said. We committed ourselves to ensuring that the incomes of those pensioners would rise at least in line with earnings. That is the basis on which we will work, but we need to go beyond that.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Webb: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will tell him what we want to do in addition.

The minimum income guarantee sounded like a good idea. The Government thought that if they changed the name, came up with a new scheme and got Thora Hird involved, all would be well, but there was a problem. They realised that by creating a chasm between the basic pension and the means test, they were also creating a savings trap. They were discouraging pensioners from saving for the future and saying to today's pensioners who had already saved, "What was the point of saving? You've got your small pension, but all it's doing is disqualifying you from the minimum income guarantee."

What do the Government do? Instead of closing the gap between the pension and the means test, they increase it. If the Chancellor does what is widely expected of him on Wednesday and puts a fiver on the pension and takes the MIG up to £90, he will increase the gap between the basic state pension and the means test, which will push more pensioners on to means testing. I recently asked how many extra pensioners will be means-tested as a result of the increase under the new package, and was told that nearly 100,000 extra pensioners are to be means-tested.

The Government decided to do something else to deal with the hole that they had dug themselves into by creating a huge gap between the basic pension and the minimum income guarantee. Instead of putting the pension up, they decided to have another scheme called pensioner credit, but because it is so complicated, they have said that it will be years before they can introduce it.

In the meantime, however, they needed something else, which I think the Chancellor called transitional measures. What transitional measures could the Government possibly take between now and 2003? Well, let us think: what is happening between now and 2003? Oh, an election, so the Government decide to introduce transitional measures which will put money on the basic state pension, the very thing that they have spent several years telling us is a bad idea.

The Government have said that they could not possibly put money into the basic state pension because it is poorly targeted, but they have now decided to pay £150 to every pensioner regardless of means. It is a complete mess.

There is no coherence to the Government's approach. There are pension increases when an election is on the way, but only a 75p increase when it is not. That summarises the Government's approach. More schemes, more claim forms. Why does it have to be so complicated?

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): If the hon. Gentleman wants all funding for pensioners to be given through the basic state pension, what would be an adequate amount to replace what he is describing as gimmicks and what we describe as targeting resources where they are most needed? How would he pay for that?

Mr. Webb: The £150 winter fuel payment, to which I presume the hon. Gentleman's remarks also refer—he is not indicating whether that is so—goes to every pensioner household in the land, regardless of means. It is impossible to imagine anything more untargeted. It is so untargeted that his right hon. Friend the Minister of State will get it this winter.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): He is not a pensioner.

Mr. Bercow: He is only 59.

Mr. Webb: I would not begrudge him £150—I am sure he needs it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. There are far too many interventions from a sedentary position on both sides of the House, but particularly from Labour Members. The hon. Gentleman must be allowed to carry on with his remarks.

Mr. Webb: There is a rag bag of schemes—take-up campaigns, publicity campaigns and new schemes to deal with the problems of the old schemes. Even the free television licence scheme is a shambles. Many other hon. Members may have had my experience of receiving a letter asking whether I am over 75 and want to claim. Plenty of pensioners have received cheques to refund the money that they spent on the licence. Many pensioners do not have bank accounts, so they are being asked to send the cheques back so that they can have some money to take to the post office. This lot could not organise—well, it is a complete shambles.

What, then, is our priority? The hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) asked what should be done—

Mr. Kaufman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No, I will not.

The hon. Member for High Peak asked what level of pension we proposed, and I am keen to give him a specific figure. At our party conference a few weeks ago, I moved a motion on our new pensions policy, which our party has overwhelmingly endorsed. I can put on record precisely the policy on which we shall go into the next general election.

We propose that those who benefited from the Lawson tax cuts of 1988 and are always on the top incomes, having done two, three, four or five times as well as those on average earnings—that is, those on more than £100,000 a year—should be asked to pay more tax on their slice of income above £100,000. They, after all, are most able to do so. That would raise enough to allow us to put money on to the basic pension.

We propose that, over and above the figure that the Chancellor announces for next April, there should be rises of a minimum of £5 a week for all newly retired pensioners, of £10 a week for those aged between 75 and 79, and of £15 a week for those aged 80 or more. Those figures are in addition to inflation, in addition to what the Chancellor announces, and in addition to the other payments that the pensioners currently receive.

The payments will not be means-tested, but they will be intelligently targeted. That is the beauty of our proposals.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Webb: I think I had better ensure that I set out the entire policy.

I mentioned an increase of £15 a week for those over 80. Why should the amount be tapered according to age? Because there is a strong link between the oldest pensioners and the poorest. I have received letters from pensioners up and down the land, and those in most need are often the oldest. Almost all are women, who are given a particularly raw deal in regard to both state and private pensions. We can give extra help to those in most need without forcing them through additional means-testing. That is the clear distinction between what the Liberal Democrats advocate and what the other parties advocate.

Mr. Levitt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No; I am about to finish my speech.

The Conservatives propose to give people back their own money, plus 42p top whack. Labour proposes a pre-election giveaway. On Wednesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will stand up and do a Chris Tarrant routine: "£2.25 for inflation—but we don't want to give you that! £3.40 for the earnings link—but we don't want to give you that!" It will be £5; it will be £8. Who wants to be a millionaire?

Labour will be throwing the money at pensioners because there is an election around the corner. Pensioners, however, will remember what the Government did when there was not an election around the corner. They will remember which was the only major party in the House that voted against the 75p—the Conservatives abstained. At the next election, when Conservative candidates show themselves to have undergone a damascene conversion to the basic state pension, they will need to be reminded that, given the chance to decide whether 75p was enough, they said "We do not really know." I note that the Conservative party declined to table an amendment to today's motion. Clearly, only one party is expressing serious opposition to the Government on pensions: the Liberal Democrats.

We believe that a substantial increase is needed in the basic pension. The Chancellor has created a huge gulf between the pension and the means test, and on Wednesday, whatever he says, he will increase that gap. We believe that there should be fewer pensioners on means-tested benefits, not more. We believe in a decent basic state pension, and we believe that we will be the only party to go into the next election committed to that.

4.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"endorses the Government's approach to pensions and other policies for pensioners; notes that the Government has already committed £6½ billion more to pensioner benefits during this Parliament than was planned by the Conservatives, while ensuring that this additional expenditure is funded prudently and consistently with the Government's fiscal rules; strongly agrees with the Government that the basic state pension should be retained as the foundation of pension provision, and that most should be done for those pensioners who need most help through the Minimum Income Guarantee; supports the additional help for pensioner households, including winter fuel payments, which now gives them the equivalent of a further £3 a week and free TV licences for the over 75s, which were introduced from 1st November 2000; also supports the wide range of other measures taken by the Government for pensioners, the record investment in the National Health Service, free eye tests, help with home insulation and concessionary public transport fares and reductions in income taxation; and further agrees with the Government that the next priority should be to help pensioners with moderate savings and small occupational pensions to ensure that their thrift is rewarded and that they are able to share in the rising prosperity of the nation."

I do not wish to be misunderstood, but I am one of the few Members of Parliament who can say with some certainty that I have a limited amount of time in which to listen to this drivel. The reality is that the speech of the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) was thirty minutes of drivel. I shall do my best to answer some of his points, some of his highly misleading statements and, indeed, the contemptible scare stories that were deliberately designed to frighten people outside the House.

The hon. Gentleman started off with a point about age discrimination. I wholly agree with part of his speech, as age discrimination is rampant throughout society in this country and goes across the board, whether in jobs or the health service. It is not the easiest thing in the world to deal with that but, as the House knows, we have attempted to tackle it in employment on a voluntary basis. We also made it abundantly clear with the publication of the report "Winning the Generation Game" that we are considering going beyond a voluntary approach. The hon. Gentleman therefore made a valid point.

The hon. Gentleman made some assertions on the share of the gross national product going to pensioners, but did not provide figures or *Hansard* references. He was on the verge of giving a quote or reference, but did not do so. I suspect that he got a quote from a parliamentary answer that appeared some months ago. I have read the motion and done Liberal Democrat Members the justice of taking it seriously, even if I cannot take the hon. Gentleman's speech seriously. I went back and looked for that parliamentary answer because I recall it—although parliamentary answers in March are not good up-to-date information in November.

One should look at expenditure on pensioners, including retirement pensions, winter fuel payments, means-tested benefits and other benefits paid to pensioners, as well as concessionary TV licences, which came in last week, and compare the last year of the previous Government, 1996–97, with the planning year 2001–02, which begins next April. Even before the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday about what will happen next April, the percentage of the gross national product spent on pensions is higher than it was in the last year of the Tory Government.

Mr. Webb: What about the first four years?

Mr. Rooker: It is no good the hon. Gentleman saying that, as he said that we have spent less. I am telling him that we have spent more, even before the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday.

Mr. Webb: And now?

Mr. Rooker: It is no good, the hon. Gentleman cannot go back and rewrite his speech.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I shall not, as I am going to make my speech in my own way and answer some of the drivel that we heard before it becomes folklore that is repeated by Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners up and down the country.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: In a moment, but first I want to put the matter on the record so that no one can go round using the hon. Gentleman's statement, as they will have the knowledge that I rebutted it with figures, which are 5.32 per cent. and 5.33 per cent. That is a small difference, but it is bigger than the hon. Gentleman said it was, even before this Wednesday's announcement.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: In a moment. I may be able to save my hon. Friend time, although I shall gladly give way if he is not happy with what I say.

The hon. Member for Northavon raised the matter of the Government Actuary's report and, in response to a question asked by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), said that the Government were seeking to manipulate it. I do not think that the Government Actuary would admit to that, and it is useful for me to put on the record the fact that we have answered parliamentary questions on the matter in the last couple of weeks. I do not resile in any way from what I said when the Government accepted Baroness Castle's amendment at the final stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill last year. It is true to say that the Government Actuary is finalising his report on the effect on the national insurance fund of an earnings uprating of basic state retirement pension, and it will be published when it is completed. That is the phrase that we have used in parliamentary answers and in answers to letters from right hon. and hon. Members, but it is important to point out that, on Friday, Baroness Castle received a letter from the Government Actuary in which he answered some specific questions. He said:

I can confirm that I submitted a report to the Secretary of State during the week ended 6 October, as indicated by Mr. Young in his letter to the Secretary of the Southwark Pensioners Action Group.

which is what the hon. Member for Northavon quoted. The Government Actuary went on:

> In my letter to the Secretary of State covering the report I made it clear that the report did not cover the Government's proposals for uprating in April 2001. In pursuance of my responsibilities with respect to the uprating orders I would either have to amend this report or lay a supplementary report detailing these effects.
>
> The Secretary of State wants Parliament to have all the relevant information before it debates the uprating orders.

That is the commitment that the Secretary of State for Social Security made clear. Before Parliament is asked to approve the uprating orders, the House will have all the relevant information, including all the reports available. That commitment has been given and will be met. It is outrageous for hon. Members to imply that the Government are deceiving the House or that Ministers are lying.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: I have not finished the letter yet. It goes on:

> Accordingly he—

that is, the Secretary of State—

> asked, and I—

that is, the Government Actuary—

> have agreed, to complete the report by adding a further section to take account of the Government's proposals for uprating in April 2001. The Secretary of State has asked me to complete that section in time for him to lay the report when he sets out his proposals to Parliament next week.

As everyone knows, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make the pre-Budget report statement on Wednesday and the Secretary of State for Social Security will come to the House and make a statement on Thursday, so there is nothing secret. Nothing is being hidden. It is only once our plans for next April's uprating have been announced—they will not be announced in the main until Wednesday and in more detail on Thursday—that the report can be published.

Therefore, it is not possible to publish the Government Actuary's report in a way that allows right hon. and hon. Members to have a meaningful debate, but when the House is asked to vote and to approve those orders—some time in the near future, subject to the business managers—the report will be available. It will be published on Thursday.

What is the problem with that? The report could not conceivably be published beforehand. Any report that was half completed and put in the hands of hon. Members for today's debate would not take account of what will be proposed for next April. Surely, it is relevant for Members to have the full picture before we get involved in a debate and in decision making.

Mr. Beith: May I suggest that, in any publicity the Government give to the figures to be announced on Wednesday and Thursday, any press release or briefing given by the Department contains the relevant passage from the Actuary's report, particularly if that briefing takes place before an announcement to the House?

Mr. Rooker: Drivel plus. The report will be published in full. We are not in the position of manipulating the Government Actuary's report.

Mr. Simon Hughes: You are delaying it.

Mr. Rooker: We are not delaying it—it is not finished. It cannot be finished until the Government Actuary is given the figures that the Chancellor will announce on Wednesday.

Mr. Beith: Has the Government Actuary been given the figures?

Mr. Rooker: The right hon. Gentleman cannot expect me to answer that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Again, we cannot have conversations from sedentary positions with the Minister at the Dispatch Box. If Members want to intervene, they should stand up in the normal way and the Minister may or may not give way.

Mr. Rooker: As Liberal Democrat Members well know—and as they knew when they chose the subject of today's debate—they cannot have any information whatever on Wednesday's uprating statement. I can answer no questions today on Wednesday's statement.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No.

Mr. Flynn: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: Yes; I promised my hon. Friend that I would.

Mr. Flynn: Does my right hon. Friend recall telling the House, on 24 July, that the earliest opportunity to publish the Government Actuary's report would be in January 2001? Does he also recall that the Deputy Government Actuary—in his letter to the Southwark Pensioners Action Group, of which I am a member—said:

> The report on the financial impact of price and earnings indexation of the basic pension—

which is what he was talking about—

> is now at a very advanced state and I am hoping to be able to submit it . . . next week.

The Deputy Government Actuary's letter was written on 28 September, since when I have tabled five parliamentary questions—including one during the recess—on the subject. However, I can generously describe the answers given to me by my right hon. Friend the Minister as evasive. Would it not be better if he had replied to those questions with the type of answers that he has just given the House?

Mr. Rooker: Indeed; that is precisely what I have done. As I said,

> The Government Actuary is currently finalising his report on the effect of the National Insurance Fund of an earnings uprating—

of pensions—

> and it will be published when it completed.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 575W.]

[Mr. Rooker]

The report will not be completed until the Government Actuary has the figures that the Chancellor will use on Wednesday. That is precisely what I said in parliamentary answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) and to other hon. Members.

I should address some of the other issues raised in the debate, including those on administration. I do not deny that NIRS2 is a problem that has not been solved. However, I am not going to review the history of NIRS2 or the preceding years in which competitive tendering was used. I should add that the word "stable", when used in relation to information technology systems, does not mean that those systems are 100 per cent. perfect.

Each month, about 50,000 plus people become pensioners. Currently, the system is not dealing correctly with payments to about 2,300 of those people, which is not satisfactory. Also, there is still a backlog of information from NIRS2 to the Benefits Agency. We are, however, working very quickly to correct the situation.

I do not think that it is a secret that the Department of Social Security is not proud of our IT systems, which are rubbish. Over the years, underinvestment in IT and purchase of the cheapest systems have brought us to the current sorry state. Although I shall not blame all that on the legacy that we inherited, everything cannot be put right in three years. We are purchasing and designing new systems. Had hon. Members examined some of the finer points of detail of the spending review 2000, they would have seen that more money is being made available to obtain those systems.

In his remarks on inherited SERPS, the hon. Member for Northavon showed himself to be a disgrace to his party and to the House. By refusing to accept that the Government have accepted, from the ombudsman and from the Public Accounts Committee, that the burden of proof is on the Government and not on the individual, he sought deliberately to create a disturbance among the public. Our difficulty in designing a scheme is that the burden of proof is on the Government, not on the individual. It is for the individual only to make a claim, subject to procedures that we will be introducing for debate.

The hon. Gentleman knows that it is untrue that individuals will have to satisfy the burden of proof, and it is dishonourable and disgraceful for him to repeat that statement on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Webb: The Minister is getting extremely carried away. It is a serious issue about which many pensioners have contacted me, because they are concerned about the Minister's utterances on it. I think that everyone agrees that those pensioners saw duff literature. Will he clarify whether the Government will seek to disprove their claims that they might have taken different action, or will their assertion that they might have taken different action be sufficient?

Mr. Rooker: The House can debate that when it debates the regulations—*[Interruption.]* No; the burden of proof is on the Government, not on claimants. I cannot express the position any clearer than that.

The hon. Member for Northavon is trying to twist my words. Claimants do not have to prove anything. They do not have to have documents; they only have to make a claim. They have to fill in a form and answer some questions. The onus of proof is on the Government, not on claimants. I have said that since March, and it is entirely false and disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman to try to assert otherwise.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Northavon talked about it taking years to introduce the pension credit. A few sentences later, he slipped in the date of 2003. We hope to get the pension credit up and running in two years, and we shall publish detailed information on that. As we have not yet published that information, and there is not much on the subject in the public domain—other than the speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security—the hon. Gentleman cannot say that that information is complicated. A consultation document on the subject will be published very shortly.

I am not sure what the hon. Member for Northavon said about his party's policy on the minimum income guarantee, because I was adding up the figures. He can make assumptions, based on press speculation—I cannot—about Wednesday's announcement. However, it did not seem that pensioners aged between 65 and 75 would end up with a pension that reached even the present MIG level of £78, let alone our £90 proposal. I say to pensioners who are now on £78.45p that it is not a princely sum—it is a safety net, and one cannot have a comfortable life on it. However, before April, the figure was £75; there has been an increase of £3.45. By next April, the figure will be £90—an increase of almost £12 a week. I do not hear many cheers from the Liberal Democrats about that increase for the poorest pensioners. I assume that they will vote against it, as they did with regard to the help for pensioners earlier this year.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I will not. Let me finish this point.

The hon. Member for Northavon seemed to imply that the winter fuel help would disappear. From his calculations, I thought that it had disappeared. We know that it would disappear under the Tories' plans, and they have the brass neck to complain about us not getting money to men aged between 60 and 64 who have been working when they plan to take that money off them anyway.

This month, the over-75s start to get their free television licences. This week, the cheques start to go out for the winter fuel allowances. Those are not celebrated by Opposition parties. All they do is come here to whinge and moan. There will be good news later this week and we will be able to rebut in detail many of the assertions made by the hon. Member for Northavon.

The hon. Member for Northavon has not outlined to the House a cohesive strategy for pensioners. He let it slip that the Liberal Democrats' policy would be paid for by taxing those on £100,000. Earlier this year, they said that they would pay for the policy by abolishing SERPS—the additional pension. We have not heard that rebutted, so our assumption must be that the Liberal Democrats would still have to abolish SERPS to make their policy work. Those who have been on average earnings for the past 20-odd years will get SERPS payments of £70 a week. The Liberal Democrats are offering to take that away. That is more drivel.

5.2 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I am glad to follow the Minister, but I hope that I do not get so excited. As all will be revealed on Wednesday, the Minister must feel—I have a great deal of sympathy with him—a bit like the emperor without any clothes.

I agree with the Minister's analysis of the speech by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), which was a classic Liberal Democrat speech—holier-than-thou, sanctimonious to the nth degree and of breathtaking cheek, particularly in the attempt to exempt his party from any electioneering. His speech was guaranteed to be attractive to a certain part of the electorate, without taking any responsibility. Suggestions have come today from the hon. Member for Northavon and, last week, from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) in Westminster Hall, on how much the Liberal Democrats intend to give pensioners. I cannot think of a better, or more expensive, way of appealing to one particular, but very large, group of the electorate.

It might be worth while to go through some of the information that we elicited from the Liberal Democrats in the debate in Westminster Hall on the exact cost of their proposals.

The hon. Member for Northavon set out what he thought was the cost of the £5, £10 and £15 hike, and he maintains that it can be covered by the 10 per cent. hike in the higher rate of tax for people earning more than £100,000. My calculations show that that hike would raise only £2.6 billion, and that the cost would be £4.5 billion.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): No, £3.1 billion.

Mrs. Lait: Well, I did not want to burden the House with figures, but I am willing to enlighten the Liberals as, judging by the puzzled face of the hon. Member for Northavon, they have not done their sums.

My calculations show that £5 a week for all pensioners would cost £2.8 billion; that the cost of the extra £5 for pensioners aged between 75 and 79 would be £500 million; and that the further £5 for the over-80s would be £1.2 billion: a total of £4.5 billion. The Liberals are £1.9 billion adrift on the total that they plan to spend.

Last week in Westminster Hall, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam declared that the Liberal Democrats' target was to offer single pensioners £90 a week and couples £135 a week. That was all hedged around with phrases about growth in the economy and not reaching that stage in one go. In fact, growth in the economy is usually linked to earnings. Despite the hon. Gentleman trying to obfuscate the situation, we know that the Liberal Democrat conference chucked out that proposal, possibly because the delegates did not want to frighten their supporters with the consequences, which, as worked out by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research—not a body known to favour Conservative philosophy—would be to put 5p on the basic rate of income tax.

The Liberal Democrats have adjusted their figure, as we heard last Tuesday. I was surprised that the hon. Member for Northavon did not use the figure, because it represented such a clear commitment and, given how much they are pandering to the pensioner vote, I should have thought that they would want to re-emphasise it. However, the total cost of increasing the basic state pension to £90 for single pensioners and £135 for couples is £8.5 billion. I am prepared to subtract from that the £2.6 billion that we have already agreed would be raised by the tax hike, so that we get a difference of £5.9 billion, which is the equivalent of an increase of 2.3p in the basic rate of tax. Or are the Liberals planning to increase the higher rate of tax on those earning more than £100,000 to the 73p in the pound that I have calculated it would cost? Those of us of a certain age remember what that did to public finances in the 1970s.

We have heard a speech of such breathtaking electioneering cheek that the House can treat the suggestions in it with the contempt that they deserve and get back to the real world of trying to help pensioners.

I am concerned about a broader matter mentioned in the motion: long-term care policy. Most of us would agree that paying for nursing care in England and Wales is a recipe for bureaucracy. Anyone who has had anything to do with defining what is nursing care and what is not will know the difficulties.

In recent days, we have seen emerging the very difficulty that we warned about all along when we were debating the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The Scots are being promised that all their care costs will be covered. They are in charge of their own budget and can make their own decisions; the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people have to pay for it. We can clearly see a battle royal taking place between the Scottish and English Executives—between No. 10 and the Scottish Parliament. Scots are able to vote on English and Welsh issues but not the other way around. We will also have the dubious pleasure of watching those with a dual mandate having to vote against their Scottish parliamentary colleagues and for the London Government, or for the Scottish Parliament and against the London Government. It will be most interesting to see what happens when people who sit in both Parliaments have to vote.

Mr. Burstow: Is it now the Conservative party's official position in this House that personal care should be free on the basis of assessment of need, as the royal commission recommends?

Mrs. Lait: The point that I was making, which the hon. Gentleman obviously missed, was about the constitutional position known to many as the West Lothian question, which is the key to the illogicality of devolution. What happens on long-term care, as the hon. Gentleman should know, is the responsibility of the Department of Health, and some elements of social security may well be included. If he is not careful, he will get the same lecture on annuities as he got last Tuesday. He gave me the opportunity to give it then, and I am happy to give it again now, but I know that a number of Back Benchers wish to contribute to this debate on pensioners' income.

Many of us have seen the statistics arising from the Government's annual poverty report, which show that, since 1997, the number of pensioners in poverty has increased from 28 per cent. to 30 per cent.—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, it is not mentioned by the Government. Their attempts to change it—although who knows what will happen on Wednesday—appear to be falling on stony ground. We still see pensioners losing out, as has been discussed, from the minimum income guarantee.

[Mrs. Lait]

We have all seen the Thora Hird advertisements on television. On my way here today, listening to BBC Radio Kent, I heard someone from the Benefits Agency explaining the minimum income guarantee and now it will work. I know that many letters have gone out to pensioners who could claim. From surgery experience, I am aware that some have still not received their letter or, if they have, that they thought that it was junk mail and chucked it in the bin. However, this past week has seen the figures so far emerging and they have not been a pretty sight.

In last Tuesday's debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), told us that 500,000 people have inquired about the campaign. However, it has taken parliamentary questions to extract the answers as to how many have been successful. On 31 October, we were told that 24,746 claimants had been successful so far and that 22,988 had been unsuccessful. Therefore, barely 10 per cent. of eligible people have replied; only half are getting anything, and the rumours are that they are finding the sums pretty small. I would be most interested to know the largest and smallest sums awarded so far, and the average payment.

Mr. Rooker: Because of the lack of time, I did not deal earlier with the take-up. The last time that I looked at the average figure of those successfully claiming, it was just over £20 a week. Furthermore, not all the 2.3 million letters have gone out; they are still being sent out at the rate of 30,000 a day.

Mrs. Lait: I am very pleased to have the average figure. We knew that the letters were still going out. However, more significantly, only 10 per cent. of people are replying at present. As anyone in marketing knows, 10 per cent. is a jolly good return. I congratulate the Government on attracting replies from 10 per cent. of people; a marketing company would consider 1 per cent. a very good return. However, 10 per cent. is still scandalously low, and I hope that more people will be able to claim that to which they are entitled.

People are losing out in other ways as well. We heard that a million people are still waiting for winter fuel payments. The Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), said:

all payments should be issued by the end of September.—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2000; Vol. 354, c. 274W.]

Perhaps we could be updated on that as well, because we understand that a million people are still waiting.

It is worth stating that the length of time taken to deal with the problem has increased. However, the then Pensions Minister, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms), predicted that, by the end of the year,

everybody would have received all of the benefits, plus any compensation . . .—[*Official Report*, 26 July 1999; Vol. 336, c. 97.]

The Minister of State said that 2,300 new cases a month were emerging. I should be most grateful to him if he would confirm that figure because those cases are in addition to the 100,000 people who are still waiting.

Mr. Rooker: There was an argument about whether the system is stable. I shall not refer to my folder, but I said that being stable does not mean working at 100 per cent. accuracy. The system is not 100 per cent. accurate at present. About 650,000 people become pensioners each year—50,000 plus a month—but 2,300 are not dealt with accurately. I saw that figure this morning. However, that does not mean that they do not get their pensions. Some pensions are calculated on the basis of what the figure may be and involve an overpayment or an underpayment.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I accept that the word "stable" does not mean 100 per cent. accuracy, but I take that to mean that, of the new pensioners who can claim SERPS payments, approximately 2,300 a month are new cases. It is useful to have that information on the record. Taking into account all such matters—NIRS2, MIG and the winter fuel payment—it is interesting that 2.5 million people are awaiting the pleasure of the older person's champion, otherwise known as the Secretary of State. To add insult to injury, it now appears, from coverage in *Pensions Week*, that the reorganisation at the Department of Social Security has led to a shortage of pensions advisers, so much so that the Department has asked the National Association of Pension Funds to do its work for it.

We, and all other hon. Members, await with interest the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday, although I assume that information on the pensioners credit will be given on Thursday. We hope that the consultation document will be published on Wednesday, so that we have time to study it before Thursday's statement and can provide a relatively reasoned response, which we may otherwise not be able to give. I congratulate the Government on the fact that, unusually for them, they have so far failed to leak what is in that document or, indeed, to spin it.

Precise details about the pensioners credit are scarce, but I cannot understand how a pensioners credit and the transitional arrangements could be introduced without some sort of means test. Thousands of pensioners may have to fill in tax forms, as opposed to income support forms, but that still constitutes a means test.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does the hon. Lady regard herself as being subject to a means test when she completes her tax return?

Mrs. Lait: The pensioners credit has a great similarity to the working families tax credit and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the tax credit is merely income support provided by another Department, and the pensioners credit will, in effect, be the same—hence a means test will be involved.

We shall make our own judgment of the Government's proposals when they are produced on Wednesday and Thursday, and so will the pensioners of the United Kingdom. To date, they and we are unimpressed by the Government's treatment of them.

5.19 pm

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): Our debate so far has been combative. As the chairman of the all-party group on ageing and older people, I shall refrain from making party-political points. Clearly, other hon. Members in the Chamber will make enough of them.

I pay tribute to the great deal that the Government have already done for pensioners. I recognise that the £6.5 billion allocated to pensioners in benefits and in kind

during this Parliament is considerably more than the cost of uprating pensions in line with earnings. In view of my constituency's demography, the majority of pensioners there will benefit from the Government's policy of targeting the poorest pensioners.

I am pleased by the increase in the threshold for payments of the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit for pensioners with second pensions and modest savings. Those measures go some way towards addressing my concerns, which I have expressed on several occasions in the Chamber, about those pensioners who are just above the income support and minimum income guarantee thresholds, of whom there are many in my constituency. They are typical blue-collar workers with a small occupational pension from, for example, Plessey or British Insulated Calendar Cables.

On the other hand, I want to discuss several areas in which the Government have not yet quite got their approach right and to urge them to do so in future. My right hon. Friend the Minister commented on the state earnings-related pension scheme, and I do not envy the Government their problem with SERPS. It was not of their devising, although they have the unenviable task of having to sort it out. I hope that my right hon. Friend was right to say that the onus of proof will lie with the Government. I have previously expressed to him my concerns about the fact that any system of remedying the mess that is based on justification is designed to be inequitable and perhaps to disfavour those in most need. We shall see.

The 75p uprating of pensions in line with inflation last year will be discussed extensively in this debate. It was entirely logical to those in the Treasury who crunch numbers in the abstract, but it was psychologically crazy to anyone who knows and cares about real pensioners. On previous occasions, I referred to the prism—it might be a distorting mirror—through which pensioners will continue to view the Government's pensions policy. That is sad, in view of the fact that their policy contains many generous provisions.

The argument about whether pensions should be uprated in line with earnings is complex. The Government maintain that that would be unsustainable in the medium to long term, and that the concept is outmoded because, for many pensioners, the state pension is not the main element of their retirement income. I understand the Government's concern that an increase across the board would put pension payments into the pockets of those who least need them. They are better targeted at those who need them most, but it is surely not beyond the wit of the Treasury to find a means to claw back some money from those who do not need it.

I disagree with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) that clawing back through the tax system or the allowances system involves means-testing. It does not involve means-testing, as I understand it. Everyone who pays tax has to have an assessment, but those who pay large amounts in tax commonly have different reasons for being sensitive to means-testing than do those many pensioners who simply find it demeaning.

Mrs. Lait: The pensioners' credit is for people who have a small occupational pension and who do not already pay tax. Many of them will have to fill in some type of form—whether a tax or an income support form.

Mr. O'Hara: I do not agree with the hon. Lady that that equates to means-testing. I was referring to those people whom the Government rightly do not want to receive pension benefits that are better targeted elsewhere. Such people do not fill in their tax return; they have an accountant to do it for them.

Pensioners regard the pension to which they have contributed not as a benefit or a handout but as an entitlement for which they have paid through their contributions. We are advised that there is a surplus in the national insurance fund that could provide an increase in line with earnings—at least in the medium term. However, in the absence of the Government Actuary's report, it is difficult to make a judgment on that matter, although I note the Minister's reasons for the delay in publishing the report.

Surely there is room for some policy improvement—on increasing pensions in line with earnings rather than with prices. The minimum income guarantee is the Government's own estimate of the minimum decent income for a pensioner. In the medium term, could we not at least move towards that as the acceptable amount for the basic pension? At the least, could we not have a discretionary increase in excess of inflation? I look forward to hearing good news on that in the autumn statement, although I realise that the Minister cannot be drawn on that at present.

Mr. Simon Hughes: As this is the last relevant parliamentary debate to be held before the Chancellor makes his announcement on Wednesday and before the subsequent debates on its social security aspects, is the view of the all-party group on ageing and older people that it would be preferable for fewer people to be in receipt of means-tested pensions or pension top-ups and for more people to receive a higher non-means-tested basic allowance? That is certainly the view that pensioners of all parties have put to me. Everyone understands that they may have to fill in a tax return and pay tax, but surely it would be a bad result if this week's announcements meant that more people were means-tested.

Mr. O'Hara: I hesitate to speak for other members of the group, but my view is that there should be a more generous basic pension, across the board, even if it cannot at present be increased in line with earnings.

To help pensioners to share in the prosperity of our country—a laudable aim in the Government's manifesto for the previous general election—is not an act of charity. When pensioners were earning, they contributed to that prosperity. They worked and, in many cases, fought to lay the foundations for the prosperity that we enjoy. What better argument could there be for the Government to show a little more generosity towards older pensioners—those aged between 75 and 80—in the settlement to be announced in the autumn statement?

5.28 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): None of the parties can look back on their record on pensions with any great credit. The Liberal Democrats made an attack on the Conservatives' record when we were in office. Under Baroness Thatcher, it is certainly true that we broke formally the link with earnings, although during our period in office the increase was slightly higher than inflation—about 10 per cent. higher. Furthermore, we introduced the winter fuel allowance—*[Interruption.]*—

[Mr. John Butterfill]

Yes, we did. I point out to the Minister of State, Department of Social Security that the real link with earnings was first broken when his party was in office—under a Lib-Lab coalition—although the Minister himself, to his great honour, was extremely critical of his Government when he was a young Back Bencher; the figures were fiddled and he said that the earnings link had been broken.

The problem is that all parties in the House, knowing that it would never be possible to give pensioners a full pension that would sustain them throughout their retired lives, have somehow connived, particularly at election time, to hint that that might some day be possible. No one has done that more than the Liberal Democrats with their series of wholly unsustainable and inadequately costed proposals that they know that they will never have the opportunity to implement. They know that all they are doing is putting out fodder for their *Focus* magazines.

Mr. Webb: We have tabled interminable questions on these issues. The revenue from a 50p rate in a full year is £3.1 billion. The cost of our proposals—I can show the hon. Gentleman the written answers—net of savings on tax on means-tested benefits is £3.1 billion. What more can we do than that?

Mr. Butterfill: I prefer the figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) gave. Even if the hon. Gentleman were correct, he is saying that his proposal is affordable. Even if were affordable in the short term, it would not be affordable, as he well knows, in the long term. Indeed, the present system is not sustainable in the long term. Anyone who has studied the issue sensibly and for a length of time—many Members on both sides of the House have done so—knows that the present system is not sustainable in the long term because of a demographic time bomb. People are living longer and not a state in the western world is capable of sustaining a system that is wholly unfunded in the way that ours is. It is a pay-as-you-go scheme that will never be affordable in the long term.

Mr. Flynn *rose—*

Mr. Butterfill: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he knows much about these matters.

Mr. Flynn: I refer to a booklet entitled "The Age of Entitlement" that was published by the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). He refers to the myth of the demographic time bomb, which was used by the Conservative party when it was in government to wreck the national insurance system. In addition, the evidence given to the Select Committee on Social Security made it clear that the funds in the national insurance system now are enough to restore the link for the next five years and will be enough for the period after that if national insurance funding increases by just the rate of inflation.

Mr. Butterfill: The hon. Gentleman studies these matters carefully and he will know that there are many conflicting views. The majority view, which is expressed by all sorts of experts on the subject—I have read as many publications as the hon. Gentleman—is that the present system is not sustainable. Even if it were, it would be sustainable at a level of pension that would never be adequate for people to live on without additional savings of their own or the provision of means-tested benefits by the state. That is the point that I want to make. We must try to get away from the politicking and down to the reality of what can and should be done by all of us on an all-party basis to provide a sustainable decent standard of living for pensioners in future.

There are three groups in society. The young have inherited a wonderful economic climate and will have the opportunity during their lifetimes to make themselves rich beyond the aspirations of any of us here. Most of us probably represent the middle group and then there are the significantly elderly—particularly those aged over 75—who fought in the last war and grew up in a period of austerity. They did not have the opportunities that we, and certainly the young, have had to save for their retirements. If we are going to make a change, we should single out the elderly and accept that we have an inter-generational responsibility to pay them, as of right, a decent pension.

For the intermediate group—that includes most of us; certainly anybody between the ages of 40 and 65, and perhaps those between the ages of 40 and 70—we should say that the present system will continue. We should tell them, "You should have been able to save something for your retirement. It is reasonable to assume that you might do so and, therefore, you will not be entitled to more than the present system provides." For those who fall through the net, there should be the prospect of some means-tested safety net.

Most people under the age of 40 view with horror the idea of having to live on a state retirement pension—and quite rightly so. They know that they must save for their old age and are quite prepared to do so. We should make that far more possible for them. At the moment, a series of incentives—many of them introduced by my party—is proving inadequate to persuade people to save.

The Government stakeholder pension scheme benefits nobody. The poorest group of people, whom the Government are keen to encourage, will find it better to be on the minimum guaranteed income and, frankly, it would be pension mis-selling to sell them a stakeholder policy. The richer group have better savings vehicles that are not encumbered by the ludicrous rules that currently apply to pension saving. Therefore, only a small group of people in the middle could benefit from stakeholder pensions, but they are not those whom the Minister of State and his party wanted to target.

Eventually, the answer must be to look at what has happened in other states, such as Australia, Argentina and Singapore. We need a compulsory retirement scheme into which everyone will have to pay. The young should be told that there will not be anything else and that they must save for their retirement. Then, we should concentrate on looking after the group of people to whom we all have an obligation—those who were not able to save during their working lives—and pay them a decent pension.

5.37 pm

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Given that about a third of my electorate are retired, my concern is that we need to do better—even than we have already. I know, however, having gone around the constituency

just recently, that many of my constituents already recognise just how much better things are than they were three years ago.

I do not think that people will forget that, in 18 years, the previous Government badly short-changed pensioners. Many will recall the hardship that pensioners suffered without relief. Even when the economy was going well during the many years of rising prosperity, there was nothing for pensioners beyond a basic increase in line with prices. That makes it clear where the Conservatives have been coming from. That record will not be forgotten; pensioners were not born yesterday.

When I faced the electorate in 1997, not one of my political opponents proposed anything more than an uprating of pensions in line with prices. That was true of the Liberal Democrat candidate, as it was of everyone else. However, because things have gone well, the Government have done better than could possibly have been envisaged. Benefits such as the minimum income guarantee, the uprating in line with wages, fuel payments and free television licences for older pensioners could not have been expected in 1997. Those things are appreciated, but I acknowledge, as I am sure many hon. Members would, that pensioners need and want more.

I have spoken to a number of pensioners over past weeks and found that, on analysis of their incomes, very few regard themselves as worse off under the Labour party. In fact, I have found quite the reverse. Pensioners get excited at public meetings, but when I had the opportunity to offer to write a cheque for the difference to anyone who was worse off, no one came forward. That is not to suggest that the pensioner's lot is sufficient, but they are better off under Labour than they were three years ago, and certainly better off than they would have been under the policies of the other two major parties.

My concern centres on the way in which things could get worse—indeed, they could only get worse if the Conservatives were to have the opportunity they seek—for the one third of my pensioner constituents who are on or near the level of the minimum income guarantee. They would lose from the minimum income guarantee no longer being upgraded according to wages, as well as on the winter fuel payment and free television licences. Happily, most of my constituents have seen though the Conservatives' hall of mirrors and are unlikely to fall for it. It is by one's deeds that one is judged and the Tories have a long way to go, especially among our experienced constituents, who remember them for what they did, not for what they say.

For all their good will, the Liberals never promised more than Labour has provided—how could they, when they reject the means by which the Labour Government have delivered an economy that is able to create options to pay more? If the Liberals early spending commitments had been implemented and their refusal to back the new deal had been accepted, we would be looking, not at a budget surplus this year, but at a deficit that would make it impossible to help those to whom we want to give priority.

It is important that we abandon the dangerous idea, often mentioned by hon. Members, of linking pensions with national insurance contributions. I had the Library calculate current pensions based on 40 years' national insurance contributions at the basic rate. The result would be a pension of £40 a week—of course, that pension would be upgraded according to inflation, but it is significantly less than is already paid. When the Tories talk about privatisation, with private pensions replacing the state system, we must remember that pensioners have made a wider contribution to our society, for which they should be rewarded; that contribution is more than merely the national insurance contributions they made, which would pay far less than even the current meagre pension.

Mr. Flynn: Does my hon. Friend recall that there was a substantial sum known as the Treasury supplement which was paid into the national insurance fund from 1911 to the mid-1980s, to which all those who are pensioners today have contributed? Therefore, one cannot measure the pension only using national insurance contributions; one has to take into account the sums paid through the Treasury supplement, which was interrupted in the late 1980s by the Conservatives.

Mr. Foster: I accept my hon. Friend's point that pensioners have made a contribution greater than their national insurance contributions alone. My point is that, often, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives imply that national insurance contributions alone could pay for a pension greater than that which pensioners now receive. That is far from the truth. If the sums involved in national insurance contributions were paid into a private scheme, as the Conservatives would have us do, the resulting pension would be far smaller than the one that is currently paid. Their calculations are invalid. Whether or not they have been able to contribute through taxation, people's broader contribution to society should be taken into account.

I strongly support the Government's desire to improve the lot of all pensioners while simultaneously targeting the greatest benefits on those in greatest need. However, I believe that there is a weakness in the way we attract claims from those who are deserving of extra help. The problem is that we have mixed up supplementary pensions with the income support system: there is a significant difference between those who require temporary assistance while awaiting employment opportunities, for example, and those who have completed their years of toil and now look forward to security in retirement.

The supplementary pension that is sometimes necessary to produce a minimum guaranteed income should not be referred to as "income support". It is a supplementary pension for which people have worked and which they deserve. The perceived degradation of older people claiming an income support payment could easily be alleviated by changing the name of the payment—perhaps by using the term "supplementary pension" to refer to that special payment applied only to older people who require extra help.

I do not accept, as is sometimes suggested by the Government in answer to questions, that legislation is required to change the terminology on a form. That could be done without a great deal of effort. When the next version of the form is printed, perhaps the heading could be something other than "Income Support".

I commend the Government for their work in targeting groups that may be eligible, but while the term "income support" persists, there will be those who refuse to claim it. Many pensioners, rightly or wrongly, associate income support with folk sitting outside McDonald's with their dogs and their begging bowls. That is not an image that pensioners are prepared to accept.

[Mr. Foster]

I plead with the Government to look again at the administrative apparatus for delivering the minimum income pension. That should refer to a minimum retirement income, and the difference between other incomes and that level should be made up by a retirement supplement.

Terminology is important. To some extent pensioners have been aided by the introduction of telephone claims, but they will not fill in forms that warn of the dire consequences of fraud. More work needs to be done on that. However well-meaning Department of Social Security staff are, specially trained staff are needed to work with the claims of elderly people. Pensioner applicants are not skivers and must not be made to feel uncomfortable when they make their claims.

Much has been done, but much remains to be done for our pensioners. A change in the name of that additional benefit would make an enormous difference to many people in my constituency and elsewhere.

5.46 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) referred to the Liberal Democrats' commitment to additional investment in public services early in the life of the present Parliament. Hon. Members on both sides will recall that on a number of occasions we highlighted what we believed to be weaknesses in public services that needed early investment. It is only recently that the Prime Minister has acknowledged those weaknesses and the fact that the Government failed to invest in the early days of their Administration to address them. For that reason, we continue to have NHS winter crisis after winter crisis.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: Briefly, as I must make progress.

Mr. Corbyn: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about investment in the public services. In a spare moment, will he ask Islington Liberal Democrats why they are closing day centres for the elderly, other day centres and luncheon clubs?

Mr. Burstow: One of the reasons, I suspect, is that the Government have decided that the data changes that would lead to an increase in standard spending assessments for London this year will not come through. Consequently, London will lose substantial resources. I imagine that that causes concern to the hon. Gentleman as well. I shall bear in mind what he said and find out whether that is, indeed, the case.

I return to the subject on which I intended to speak—long-term care. At the last Labour party conference before the 1997 general election, the then Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, gave this pledge:

> I don't want to live in a country where the only way pensioners can get long term care is by selling their homes.

That was clear and unambiguous, and it was deservedly welcomed by many across the country. It was a promise to act to end the grotesque spectacle of the debt collector pursuing the dementia sufferer for care home fees.

Three years on and one royal commission later, what is left of the Prime Minister's promise? Nothing but bitter disappointment and a sense of betrayal among many people outside. What do the Government propose to put in place of the Prime Minister's pledge to the Labour party conference in 1997? The sop offered by Government is that nursing care will be free in future. Legislation will be needed to bring that about, and it will not start until 2003 at the earliest.

Everyone in the country, and many of my constituents to whom I have spoken directly about the matter, thought that nursing care was free anyway. They are puzzled about why the Government intend to give them the great gift of free nursing care.

The message about the Government's views on long-term care is plain. Care is free for those who have a medical condition from which they can recover. That applies to every aspect of the care: hotel accommodation, food, personal care and nursing care costs. Everything is free, and so it should be. That is part of our commitment to a universal, free health-care system. However, care for those who suffer from a chronic medical condition such as Parkinson's disease or dementia comes with a bill attached. Liberal Democrats are clear and unequivocal about our commitment to making personal care free on the basis of an assessment of need.

Mr. Rammell: If the commitment is clear and unequivocal, why does the Liberal Democrat alternative Budget for 2000 include only a costed commitment to pay immediately for nursing care?

Mr. Burstow: If the hon. Gentleman had read on, he would have realised that we are also committed to funding all personal care. It is clearly stated in the same document. During our previous debate on the subject, the hon. Gentleman did not have a copy of the alternative Budget. I am glad that he now has it. He can read that it goes on to refer to a first step towards implementing the royal commission's proposals for free personal care.

Mr. Rammell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: I shall not give way because I have answered the hon. Gentleman's point. The royal commission's recommendations are also clear. It was right to recommend that personal care should be free.

With chronic health conditions, it is difficult to predict or anticipate the way in which the risk will fall on an individual, and whether someone will need long-term care. Consequently, the costs fall disproportionately on a few people. We believe that the costs of long-term care should be spread across the whole community and ultimately met through taxation. The royal commission also took that view after undertaking the inquiry that the Government requested to ascertain the way in which we can construct a fair, effective and sustainable system for financing long-term care. Unfortunately, the Government chose to miss the opportunity of accepting the royal commission's proposals. Instead, they plumped for short-term fix. We have had what could be described as an adjournment of the debate on long-term care. The Government will return to it because they must do that.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does not my hon. Friend agree that the Government discriminate against

people who are mentally ill through their policies on long-term care, which affect sufferers of Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, which becomes a mental illness? That is grossly unfair.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend is right about such discrimination. Their policies are also another form of age discrimination. It means that many people, who rightly expect that their nursing and personal care costs would be covered if they suffered from a chronic condition such as dementia, know that nothing will change as a result of the NHS plan. The Government's announcement will leave in place the postcode lottery of care that existed under the Conservatives for years. It will create new anomalies when the new definition of nursing care is interpreted.

The NHS plan leaves in place the perverse incentives that encourage local authorities to utilise residential care rather than help older people who remain in their homes. It leaves unanswered a fundamental question: where does the balance lie between an individual's personal responsibility and that of the state for meeting care costs? The Government have not provided a clear answer to that. They have put the matter into a siding, but they will have to return to it, and answer that question clearly and definitively.

As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) said, reports in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend, and in the *Daily Mail* today, describe the way in which the Scottish Executive will view long-term care. If those reports are correct, the Government will be put under a spotlight to explain why they have followed one road while the Scottish Executive have gone down another. The Scottish Executive appear set to go further than the Government. The new First Minister, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), is reported as saying that not only nursing care, but personal care should be free.

In *The Sunday Times*, the First Minister is quoted as saying:

> If you are rooted in public concern then you will know that if every organisation you talk to, every medical group, every local authority, the Sutherland people themselves, the PLP, the Liberal group—

I believe that he means the Liberal Democrats—

> the opposition are all agreed, then sometimes you just have to say to yourselves: "Well, look. There is a firm body of opinion. Is what we have as a policy the right thing to do?"

Clearly, the First Minister believed that the Government of Scotland had not adopted the right policy by embracing the Westminster Government's policy of covering nursing care only. I welcome that decision, which is a step in the right direction. I hope that we, along with all the organisations in England and Wales that want the same policy as Scotland, can persuade the Government to provide it.

There has been no action on the matter during the whole Parliament. Plenty of debate has taken place, and the Government have often refused to set out their clear policy intent. They set up a royal commission within six months of the general election and we had to wait a year for it to report. That is unusually quick for a royal commission, and we welcomed that. Another 18 months passed before the Secretary of State told us at the Dispatch Box that he had to consider the report for another six months. In June or July, smuggled out under cover of the NHS plan, we received the extremely bad news that nothing would be done in this Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) spelled out, pensioners feel betrayed not only in the case of long-term care. There is genuine anger about the pension. I have met many of my older constituents, who feel insulted by the 75p increase in the basic state pension this year. Labour has presided over an increase in pensioner poverty—400,000 more pensioners live in poverty today than when the Government took office. The Government spend less of the national income on pensions now than when they took office—they have spent less in the first four years of the Parliament. The Minister may have wriggled at the Dispatch Box, but relying on future figures is not helpful and does not bear close scrutiny. When we consider the true figures for Government spending in their first four years in office, we realise that the prosperity of the nation is not being shared.

If Labour has made matters worse, the Conservatives are not the solution. Let us consider how much their pensions policy will cost. The hon. Member for Beckenham did an exercise to try to cost our policy. She needed only to read *Hansard*, which makes it clear that our policy will cost considerably less than the figures that she chose to peddle to the House. The Conservatives would scrap the winter allowance and the free television licence for the over-75s, and they would end the Christmas bonus.

What extra money would pensioners receive through Conservative pensions policy? My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon was generous; he said that they would receive 42p extra. However, the inflation increase of £2.25 would mean that pensioners would receive only 17p extra.

Mrs. Lait: Will the hon. Gentleman deny that, last Tuesday, he said that he wanted the basic state pension to be £90 for a single person and £135 for a couple? Will he also deny that the net cost of that could be 2.3p on the basic rate of income tax?

Mr. Burstow: I have the relevant copy of *Hansard*, and I urge the hon. Lady to read my speech, her speech and the interventions before she pursues that line of argument. The construction that she placed on my words—although I am happy to accept it—does not entirely reflect what I said. I was referring to the family budget unit's work on low cost, affordable pensions. The unit suggested two figures: £90 for a single person and £135 for couples. I said that we wanted to establish a commission to review the way in which pensions are increased year on year, and that the family budget unit's methodology should be considered as part of the commission's work.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: No, I have dealt with the hon. Lady's question clearly for the third or fourth time. She asked me similar questions during last Tuesday's debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon rightly said, the Conservatives' proposal is the first case on record of robbing Peter to pay Peter. They would be taking money from pensioners and giving it back to them. We shall hear a great deal about pensions this week because of the pre-Budget statement, and those who consider the debate and the issues should carefully

[Mr. Burstow]

examine Conservative proposals and not take them at face value. They should look carefully at the contents of their pockets before accepting any pension proposals from the Conservatives. I think that they will find that they would be well and truly short changed.

That is hardly surprising when we consider the record of the Conservatives over the 18 years they were in office. It is undoubtedly true that the richest of our pensioners, who are a small minority of pensioners, enjoyed significant increases in their pensions. The poorest pensioners saw their incomes rise by only £10 a week. After 18 years of Tory rule, pensioners had only £10 to show for it. That was the consequence of a Conservative policy which was all about targeting extra help on the rich rather than doing something to help the poorest pensioners.

We are clear that the most effective way of getting extra help to pensioners is through the basic state pension. It is the most administratively cost-effective way of targeting extra help.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Burstow: On the effective targeting of extra help?

Mr. Bercow: Yes. Given that the Liberal Democrats June 2000 policy document proposed a restoration of the earnings link, that their party conference took a different view and that the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends were veritably at sixes and sevens on the subject, with no coherent overall position, will he now remove the fog of confusion that is descending?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman intervened on a specific point and then moved on to another. He should draw out the document from the Library and read it. It does not state anything to do with the earnings link. An amendment to that effect was moved from the floor of the conference.

Mr. Bercow: I studied reports of the debates and the votes.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman obviously blanked out during that part of the conference. He should check his facts. Central office briefing was completely wrong.

The most effective way of getting extra help to pensioners is through the basic pension. Administrative costs are about 6 per cent. of expenditure if there is targeting through a means test. They are about 0.9 per cent. if we proceed through the basic state pension. The Minister has accepted that it is far more costly to use a means test to get extra help to the poorest. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon rightly said, the poorest pensioners do not get the help because they are the ones who do not claim the minimum income guarantee.

As there is such a strong and clear link between poverty and old age, targeting extra help to pensioners aged 75 and 80 is the right way forward. We all know that at the age of 80 pensioners receive an extra 25p. That is not enough to buy a first-class stamp to send it back. When the increase was introduced in 1971, it was worth something.

Liberal Democrats want to increase the extra payment to £15 for a single pensioner and to £28 for a pensioner couple. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) says that our proposals cannot be afforded and cannot be implemented. We say that they can be afforded and delivered. There is clear evidence of a willingness outside the House to ensure that the basic state pension is increased. Even the evidence from the Department of Social Security bears that out. It is clear from social security research report 83 that the Department found from its research work that even people in work were prepared to pay enough to enable an extra £10, £20 or £30 a week to be paid through the basic state pension.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon has been chastised for not sticking to some of the commitments set out in the Liberal Democrat manifesto in 1997. I find it odd to be chastised for doing not less but wanting to be more ambitious and wanting to do more for our pensioners. It is rather novel to be challenged and chastised by the Government for taking such an approach.

The Prime Minister says that he has got the message about the 75p increase. On Wednesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer should say clearly and effectively whether he understood the message. We believe, along with people outside the House, that a decent pension increase is long overdue. Too many years have passed during which we have seen the basic state pension wither away. It is time that we reversed that long-term decline and invested for a decent basic pension.

6.4 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): During the 10 years of miserable opposition that I suffered, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends, we dreamed about the day when we would reform the pension system on the lines that we preached throughout those 10 years. Indeed, they have been preached during the party's entire history. We said that we would rebuild the pension on the basis of the national insurance principle. I shall say many things in opposition to the Government's policy, but I shall do so with the support of my party's history, my party's present policy as decided at the most recent conference and the approval of two marvellous reports by no fewer than three Select Committees since June, and knowing that we are talking about a policy that has worked brilliantly.

We can go to our constituencies and say that there is a Labour good-news story on pensions. We have provided a good £6 billion more than the Conservatives would have made available if they had been re-elected. I do not understand how the perception of our policies is so badly wrong. Many pensioners believe that we have been mean with pensions. The fault is ours. It cannot be said that what has happened was not predicted. It was predicted in early-day motion 1 this year. Over the previous four years, pleas have been made, with the backing now of 106 Members, to restore the earnings link and start to ensure that the basic pension has a strengthened foundation, not a crumbling one.

To his great credit, the Welsh Liberal, David Lloyd George, introduced the national insurance scheme in 1911. There were moves before that to introduce such a scheme. However, it determined how we would organise our welfare benefit throughout almost the entirety of the 20th century. The 19th century was marked by the

poor law. It was thought that the way to distribute welfare was to give it to the poor, tapping them on their grey heads and saying, "There is a little handout for you."

It is extraordinary that we appear to be reverting to the principle of the poor law in Government policy. It has been said that there is a young person's view of these matters, and that may lie behind what is happening. When we were in opposition, and especially during the final years, we said that 1 million of the poorest pensioners would be our first priority. They were getting basic pensions and not what we call the minimum income guarantee.

There is nothing new about MIG. It was around 60 years ago, and it existed throughout the life of income support, supplementary benefit and national assistance. It has always been possible for those whose pensions were not at a level that was deemed reasonable to obtain extra money. It was the handout, the charity or the gift from Government. The number of our poorest pensioners has been reduced to 876,000, and we are now talking about 500,000. They are living below a level that the Government have described as the minimum income guarantee.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), talked about the take-up of the scheme, which arrived two years late—the Government had been begged to introduce it a long time before. Take-up is disappointing. At the most, it is about 5 per cent., but it is probably about 3 per cent., which is tiny. Why is that the position? I suggest to my right hon. Friend the Minister that he should talk to pensioners. Many pensioners worked throughout their working life, paid all their dues and never claimed any dole or any benefit. That is a matter of great pride for them. When they reach the age of retirement, they are told that if they are to get the amount of money that the Government regard as the minimum that they should receive, they will have to complete a very long and complex form and ask for a handout. That is the difference between what the Government Front-Bench spokesmen are saying and what 85 Labour Members have said and have not resiled from in early-day motion 1. They want the extra amount put on the basic pension, so that it is an entitlement that pensioners can accept with dignity and pride. They do not want it to be a demeaning amount that pensioners have to claim through the income support scheme. The difference is crucial. It is difficult to see why that is not understood by the Government. Investigations have been made throughout this long period into why people entitled to the minimum income guarantee are not receiving it. The evidence shows that pensioners find the scheme demeaning, although it has not been published in great detail.

The majority of pensioners, including those who will come to Parliament tomorrow, want a promise that no party is making to them, which is that in their retirement they will have an increase in their pensions equivalent to the real rate of inflation. That is not a great deal to ask. Is it affordable? I agree with the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) about compulsory pension schemes.

It is not just today's pensioners who face these problems. People in their 40s and 50s who were mis-sold personal pensions will get a terrible shock when they reach retirement age and go into the world of annuities. Annuity rates dropped in value by 30 per cent. from the 1990–94 projections. That is a huge drop. Some of my constituents believed that their total fund was the annual amount that they would receive in their personal pensions, and they had organised their lives accordingly. People understand well their occupational pensions, but few understand the personal pensions that they were wickedly mis-sold.

Millions of young people will be in even greater trouble if we allow the basic pension to wither on the vine. Those not in work will be in terrible trouble, but so will those not paying into any occupational scheme. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West spoke against the policy of his own party. The most dangerous thing about the Government's policy is that it attacks the principle of the basic pension. If on some dark day in the future there were a change of Government, they would have an open invitation to destroy the basic pension. The Opposition already have a policy of allowing young people to pull out of it.

We all know the attitude of staff to pensions. They have almost to be nailed to the desk to get them to contribute to pension schemes that are freely given, which require a contribution of 10 per cent. of their salaries. It is difficult to persuade them that they are not immortal and that one day they will grow old and need that pension. They do not want to contribute during the early, furniture-buying, child-rearing days of marriage. In their 40s and 50s, they will have to pay 15 or 20 per cent. of their income on a pension. If the state pension goes, they will receive a derisory pension. That is an important point.

I want to consider the intellectual poverty of the Government's position on pensions. Since June, there have been reports from three Select Committees, which are not manned or womanned by people who present a challenging view for the Government. I have just discussed that with my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). We have been told in clear terms that we will never be allowed to serve on a Select Committee, certainly not the Select Committee on Social Security. The Government trust members of Select Committees to be loyal to them. I would love to read the Government's response to the splendid report of the Social Security Committee on "The Contributory Principle", which says that the Government's preference for means-testing

> involves a rejection of the wider functions which the contributory system offers, of allowing individuals, whatever their means, to redistribute income over their lifetime.

The whole point of national insurance is to provide help in certain periods of our lives: when we are very young, in the early days of marriage and when we are old. If we have paid into an insurance fund during that period when we can afford to do so, we can have money out at other times. Every party accepts that principle for child benefit, which enjoys almost 100 per cent. take-up. Why? Because there is no stigma attached to it, everyone can receive it and it is entirely untargeted. It is a very popular benefit.

The report from the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs on "Poverty in Scotland" said:

> fundamentally we believe that the basis for support in old age should be the universal state pension, payable at the age of retirement. The state pension should be linked to the increase in average earnings.

The Social Security Committee report on "Pensioner Poverty" referred to the aims set out in the 1998 pensions Green Paper. It said that

> people who work all their lives should not have to rely on means-tested benefits when they retire.

[Mr. Paul Flynn]

It went on to say that

> the Government's long-term aim of enabling working people to retire on incomes which will not require them to depend on a means-test, will be realised.

All those reports are detailed and thorough. They were the result of months of work by the various Committee. Not one of them supports the stubborn, doctrinaire line taken by the Government, which is contrary to the opinion of the Labour party and is difficult to sell to pensioners.

We know that the Government intend to allocate a large amount of money to pensioners. However, after the Budget, the £150 allowance and the policy behind it met a growing feeling of rejection. I went to a meeting of a pensioners' group, and the morning papers were saying that the Chancellor would be popular with pensioners. He was not. Feelings about that larger lump sum were similar to those that people had in the early years of trade unions when rogue employers cheated their workers every week by paying them low wages and then tried to buy back their favour by giving them a turkey for Christmas. The effect of being given a turkey was much greater than being cheated out of £5 a week in their wages. It was a gimmick. When the 75p increase was announced, those pensioners were very angry about it.

Liberal Democrat and Labour Members have expended much energy trying to find out the amount of the national insurance fund. That information is crucial to debates on pensions. Last November, there was a surplus of £8.43 billion. That money belongs principally to pensioners. This and previous Governments have raided the national insurance fund to reduce contributions to employees. Employees have a claim on some of that money, but large sums have been used for that purpose.

The stable employment situation, with the lowest unemployment rate for 20 years, and the Government's other great achievements have ensured that the national insurance fund contains an even bigger sum. That £8.43 billion was not the balance of the fund: it was the unneeded surplus. There was already enough money in the fund for contingencies, as the law states that there should be. Increases in unemployment could have been dealt with using the contingency fund, and there would still have been £8.4 billion available. An increase in the basic pension of £1 a week would cost about £500 million. No one is asking for an unreasonable increase for pensioners to bring pensions up to what they would have been had those pensioners not been cheated by the Tory Government every year between 1980 and 1997. We know that that is not possible: it would be very difficult to achieve.

We argue, however, that increases are affordable. They are just, and they are the best way to reward pensioners for the contributions that they have made. The Treasury supplement was paid for years. Real money went into the scheme. Pensioners who have worked all their lives and have contributed through their insurance contributions and through the Treasury supplement now have to beg for charity and take handouts to get a pension. Increasing the MIG to £90 may provide extra money, but instead of the current one in five persons on means-tested benefits there will be more of them—if the present trend continues that number will increase to one in four by 2050. We cannot say to a whole generation that they must rely on means-tested benefits.

I appeal to the Government to re-examine their policies. Those policies are deeply unfair, although the Government's heart is in the right place. Their spending is generous, but they are corrupting what has been one of the Labour party's great achievements over the past 100 years: supporting the principle of national insurance. Not only is a large increase fair, affordable and overdue; it should be possible to make that increase now, and it should be announced on Wednesday. There is no excuse for any other action.

6.20 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who speaks about these matters with great passion and knowledge. I thought I would be able to agree with him to an extent that would embarrass us both, but I am happy to say that in a moment I shall be able to resume normal hostilities.

The hon. Gentleman was right to talk about the restoration of the pensions link, a theme that has run through the debate. Certainly, out in the country there is a feeling that—if I may use the phrase employed by the hon. Gentleman a few moments ago—the Conservative Government cheated in 1980 by withdrawing the link with earnings, and that although the present Government would like to restore it now, they cannot for some reason. The Government seem to be trying to have it both ways: they are blaming us for taking away the earnings link, and are trying to achieve vicarious credit by saying that they would of course restore it, but cannot quite get around to doing so.

The history is instructive. Under the National Insurance Act 1974, Labour linked the retirement pension to the rise in earnings. I think that it was honouring an election pledge, and many people greeted the move with joy. The difficulty is that it is one thing to introduce legislation, and another to implement it. In 1976, pensions were raised by less than income or earnings. In that year, the Labour Government did not implement their own legislation. Then came the uprating for November 1977, when the link did not apply, because earnings had risen faster than prices, and earnings had risen faster in any event.

The real crunch for the Labour party came in the uprating statement of November 1978. Labour raised pensions by 11.4 per cent., but earnings had risen by 13.3 per cent. Labour then proposed an uprating that it was not in a position to implement, because it lost the election. That is nevertheless relevant to the point that I am about to make.

In March 1979, it was proposed that pensions should rise by 12.8 per cent. At the time, earnings were rising by something in excess of 15 per cent. That caused outrage among pensioners, many of whom had doubtless voted Labour and seen legislation passed, and now saw their own fluffy Labour Government and their own Secretary of State avoiding their own legislation.

Trying to square the circle and work out how such an extraordinary thing had happened—extraordinary, that is, to those who had not followed the track record of previous Labour Governments—Lord Ennals, then Secretary of State for Social Services, wrote in *Pensioners Voice* something that, even in a cynical profession, comes across as cringe-making. He wrote:

> There is a statutory obligation to take these figures (i.e., earnings) into account, which was done, but no statutory obligation to get it right—

a Government who introduce legislation then cynically refuse to implement it.

The Conservative Government did not, in some cloak-and-dagger or hole-in-the-corner way, repeal the link; they said in their 1979 election campaign that they would remove the link, because at the time it was unsustainable. Lord Jenkin of Roding, as he then was not—he was then Secretary of State for Social Services—explained why it was unsustainable, given the state of the economy at the time. I shall say more about that shortly. He went on to say that the rise in pensions would be linked to the rise in prices instead, because that was

> a more realistic, a more honest and, above all, a more sustainable, prospectus.—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1979; Vol. 976, c. 903.]

What has happened with the earnings link has passed into mythology. A Labour Government campaigned to introduce it, refused to implement their own legislation, and cynically sneered that all they were obliged to do was take the figures into account—they did not have to get it right. A Conservative Opposition and, in due course, a Conservative Government campaigned on the basis that those figures were simply unsustainable, and that it was better in the long run to promise something to pensioners that was sustainable.

Mr. Rooker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I would adore to give way to the Minister, so that I can share his embarrassment.

Mr. Rooker: There is no embarrassment. The hon. Gentleman has gone over the history of what happened during those four years and I do not dissent from any of what he has said, but he has neglected to draw attention to something that was fundamentally wrong. I refer to the attempts to forecast earnings and prices six months in advance. Ministers were coming to the Dispatch Box in March announcing what they thought earnings and prices would be in November, and stating what the pension would be. The forecasts were wrong, and it was necessary to return to an historical system.

There were inbuilt errors in the design of the system. I complained at the time, as did others. There was no precision in the attempts to forecast what would happen in six months' time, which is why we have an historical system today.

Mr. Nicholls: There is something glorious about the Minister. I always enjoy my exchanges with him.

As the Minister well knows, under the Labour Government in those days it was impossible to forecast rises in prices or earnings in terms of more than a few weeks, because the economy was completely out of control. At that time—the last time that the Minister was involved in an alliance, a Lib-Lab pact—it was impossible to forecast what would happen from week to week. At that time, the country was so bankrupt that when Lord Healey was going overseas he had to turn his car around on the way to Heathrow, because the International Monetary Fund had said that it would withdraw the country's credit and make it bankrupt.

In 1979 our economy was a thoroughgoing basket case, and it was certainly true at the time that the earnings link was unsustainable. We are now in a vastly different world. We now have an excellent economy, bequeathed by a Conservative Government who had learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. Although the economy will slow down as stealth taxes begin to bite, the present Government have not yet wrecked the economy that they were bequeathed. As it is a strong economy, I think it fair to consider whether the earnings link could be restored in some shape or form.

I say that without for a moment making light of the figures that would be involved. I understand that if the earnings link were restored for this year, it would cost £1 billion, and that by 2010 it would amount to £8 billion. Those are substantial sums, even if we allow for the amount that the Government have stored up to give back to those from whom they took it forcibly in the first place to persuade them to vote Labour next May, and even judged by the sums that are in reserve.

But—it is an important but—this is a vastly different world from that of 1979. Although all three parties have, in a sense, followed the historic and traditional view that the earnings link is unsustainable, I think it fair to ask whether there is something in it that we should try to revive or retrieve.

I think it comes down to this. I think that Members on both sides of the House always see such action as a sticking plaster. One thing that unites the hon. Member for Newport, West and me is our wish to see something done for pensioners that is better than what has been done for them by either of the last two Administrations. That much is clear; but we must also ask what is the underlying, and overriding, consideration.

When we talk of the earnings link, we are not just trying to outbid each other. We are saying that we want the elderly, who have played their part in producing the economy we have today, to be able to benefit in the future. That is the core of what we are trying to achieve, and I should have thought it was possible. I do not know whether it will be necessary to define it in relation to gross domestic product, but it should be possible to state the aspiration in regard to an earnings link, while ensuring the existence of mechanisms to deal with any substantial downturn in the economy without the need to refuse to implement legislation that we have ourselves passed.

I think that a debate on that should take place in my party, and I think it would be healthy for it to take place in all three principal parties. I should like it to be acknowledged that, although such action was indeed unsustainable in the world of 1979, we should now ask—given the present state of the economy—how pensioners can have a stake in rising prosperity, while not ultimately saddling taxpayers with burdens that they cannot afford.

The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) made an offer, but I do not know whether he is prepared to come down to my constituency on his holiday and keep his promise. He offered to give a cheque to anyone who, in a public meeting, could honestly say that, as a pensioner, he or she was worse off under the present Government. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has his cheque book ready, as the first person to whom he must send a cheque is Mr. Allen Bridges of Shaldon in Devon. Mr. Bridges wrote to the Prime Minister about the interesting matter of the financial burdens of partially sighted people and concluded his letter by saying:

> But no matter, I have my 75p increase plus my 75p "over 80" gift and to cap it all, £100 fuel allowance. Minus £97 tax credit loss, this then equals £3 for fuel plus increase plus age allowance. It makes the mafia appear as Fairy Godmothers.

[Mr. Nicholls]

I am sure that a cheque should be made out to Mr. Bridges, which is spelt with one "d".

I have dozens of such letters, which are completely unsolicited. If time allowed I would read them all, but I shall read out just one from Mr. Howell, again from Shaldon, who, I am sure, would also appreciate a cheque from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye. Mr. Howell writes:

> Dear Mr. Nicholls,
>
> My wife is 77 years of age and is registered disabled; I submit her tax return to the Inland Revenue each year.
>
> I am enclosing photostat copies of statements for the tax years ending April 1999 and April 2000 which reveal a substantial drop in income due to the changes made by the Chancellor . . . in respect of the taxation of dividends.
>
> Throughout her working life my wife endeavoured to save, out of taxed income, in order that she would not become a burden on the State. The Government boast that they have kept their promise not to increase basic rates of tax but are careful not to mention the many significant increases in indirect taxes.
>
> There are, most probably, large numbers of pensioners who have been affected similarly and I hope that protest continues to be voiced in . . . Parliament and the media.

Mr. Howell then sets out figures that have been accepted by the Inland Revenue, so there is no doubt about them. Mr. Howell says that for the year 1996–97 his gross income was £5,220 and his tax refund was £601—I shall leave out the pence for the sake of brevity. In 1997–98, his gross income was £6,853 and his tax refund was £619. In 1998–99, his gross income was £5,345 and his tax refund was £588. In 1999–2000, his gross income was £5,062 and his tax refund was £10.66. Mr. Howell concludes in irony, I assume, rather than sorrow:

> I had thought that the Government were encouraging people to save for their later years!!

We must be straight about the matter.

Mr. Rooker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I shall give way to the Minister who is marvellous and reminds me of the late Brian London. Boxing fans will know that that was not meant to be a compliment.

Mr. Rooker: I would like more information, as the hon. Gentleman has just quoted the figures for a tax refund for a gross income of £5,000. The basic pension for a couple is £107 a week and the minimum income guarantee is £121 so, because of the tax allowances, other income must be involved. In that situation, there would not be a tax liability. The hon. Gentleman should not kid the House that the couple's gross income is their only income. He cannot be giving the House the full information.

Mr. Nicholls: I am giving the House the full information, and it says something about the right hon. Gentleman, whom I respect, that he is embarrassed by what he has heard. I will send the right hon. Gentleman the information, which is news to no one on this side of the House. I accept that the matter is not entirely within his brief, as it is more of a Treasury brief. However, if he understood the effect of advance corporation tax on pensioner income, he would not be in the least surprised by the outcome. I shall send him the papers without any difficulty at all.

Mr. Bercow: As my hon. Friend is helpfully providing the House with a list, perhaps he would be so kind and generous as to add to it one of my own constituents, Mrs. Jones-Williams of Seven Gables, Buckingham Road, Winslow, whose husband is registered blind and who is trying to maintain a car. Mrs. Jones-Williams has suffered from the Government's ACT policy and assures me that she has been impoverished by this benighted Administration and wants them out of office yesterday.

Mr. Nicholls: There are dozens of examples of the way in which ACT has worked. The two examples that I mentioned simply made the point that the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye was wrong.

A moment or two ago, I said that, to some extent, given the figures we were discussing, we were almost swapping offers. We need to go much further than that, and a different approach should be considered by all the main political parties.

There is now a third age, and people live immeasurably longer than ever before. In 1909, which, give or take, was the time when Lloyd George introduced the first state retirement pension, average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 49 years for women. In other words, the state pension was paid 15 years after the actuarial calculation of one's death. Give or take a few years for the time that I was born, the figures for 1951 show that men's life expectancy was 66 years and women's life expectancy was 71 years. For a male born today, life expectancy is 75 years and, for a woman, 80 years. I have checked with the Library the proposition that once one takes out of those figures the fact that mortality in the early years is still relatively high, it is true that someone born today has every expectation of living well into his or her nineties. When the state retirement pension was introduced, it came into effect 15 years after one was expected to die. With a bit of luck, one will now live for a good 25 years after first receiving one's pension.

Mr. Butterfill: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Nicholls: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall continue as time is short.

We must draw the conclusion that we have the opportunity of a third age. We need a bigger idea, and Her Majesty's Government—it does not matter of which political party—should accept that we have moved on so much that we need a Ministry of the third age. We need an overriding, all-embracing Ministry that considers pensions policy, employment policy and health policy. It should also think about recreation policy, taxation and health care. Old age need not be undignified.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wants pensioners to be branded because he thinks that being old is uncool. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), who is chairman of the parliamentary Labour party, said that there is no point in trying to appeal to pensioners, as they are either racist or Conservative. The first notion is a slur and the second is not necessarily always true. However, we all aspire to a dignified old age and to have time during the third age

for opportunities that people of our parents' and grandparents' generation would scarcely have believed. If there was a Secretary of State in the Cabinet who was charged with considering the entirety of what it is like in the third age, we really could make progress. Until then, progress must be relatively slight.

6.37 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): In the three minutes available to me, I shall attempt to do justice to the proposition on the Order Paper. I shall make three short points, the first of which concerns the consistency of Liberal Democrat Members. If we go back to their 1997 manifesto, they were in favour of raising pensions only in line with prices. In the vote in the House in April, they committed themselves to restoring the link between pensions and earnings. Liberal Democrats campaigned on that issue in the local elections and, in my constituency of Harlow, put leaflets through the doors that made it clear that their policy was to restore the link between pensions and earnings. In the vote at the Liberal Democrat conference in September, the link between pensions and earnings was explicitly rejected.

That is a bewildering set of somersaults on policy, the end result of which, certainly in my constituency, is that Liberal Democrats refuse to admit that originally they were in favour of restoring the link between pensions and earnings. People expect from politicians a degree of consistency on the issue which, sadly, the Liberal Democrats lack.

I shall pick up on two other points made by Liberal Democrat Members this afternoon, the first of which concerns long-term care. I shall reiterate the fact that the Liberal Democrats' alternative set of proposals for the 2000 Budget did not include a costed commitment to paying for personal long-term care. Their explicit costed commitment was to pay for nursing care, not personal care. Frankly, that is symptomatic of what we often get from Liberal Democrat Members. They spray promises around like confetti and hope that, in the meantime, nobody will look at the detail or the fine print and find out that there is no costed commitment to implement their proposals. I am committed to progressive taxation to fund decent public services, but the case for that is not bolstered by not being straight with people about where the money will come from.

Finally, in the short time available, I shall refer to the specific pension proposals that the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) spoke about this afternoon. If I heard him correctly, he said that he would fund those proposals by raising the top rate of taxation to 50p in the pound. Only six months ago, the Liberal Democrats' alternative Budget for 2000 proposed raising the top rate of taxation to pay for cutting the 10p starting rate to zero. Therefore, in six months, the specific proposal from the Liberal Democrats has been changed for a different purpose. There is no consistency whatever from them on those issues. That is why, in my constituency and elsewhere, no one will believe them.

6.40 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) talks about consistency and about Liberal Democrat policy changing. I suspect that, on Wednesday, we shall see one of the Government's biggest U-turns. They have spent some three years arguing against the principle of above-inflation pension increases. I believe that, because of a campaign by the Liberal Democrats—with the support of many Labour Back Benchers—but, above all, by pensioners, despite having no support from Ministers or from the Conservative party, which did not accept the argument, the case for above-inflation increases, resulting in a substantial pension increase, will prove to have been won.

That is a measure of the mistake that the Chancellor made at the start of the Parliament in taking pensioners for granted and in forcing them into increased means-testing. It is a measure of the effectiveness of a public revolt that has had nothing like the attention of the fuel tax protests, but will prove to have been more effective.

In constituency after constituency throughout the country, pensioners have taken up the case for a decent income, on which they can survive, as of right. That was the basis of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), probably the most expert person in the House on the issue; he is certainly one of the most expert.

In those terms, I regret the tone of the Minister's response. Many years ago, I served with him on the Committee that dealt with the poll tax. He did an effective job; I think that we did quite an effective opposition job between us. The poll tax certainly did not last long. I have always had great admiration for him, but he misjudged his response and he was wrong in his criticisms.

The figures that the Minister gave were, to say the least, misleading. He did not let me intervene at the time. Had he done so, I could have put him right, so it is sad that he did not. The fact is that the Government will call a general election—we will see whether they get back—and leave office spending less on pensions as a proportion of national wealth than when they came in. They will be doing worse on the state pension than the Conservatives.

The figures that the Minister sought to give related to overall expenditure on pensioners. That is a different issue, but, even there, the Government's record is nothing to be proud of because the simple fact is that, at this moment, they are still spending less than the Conservatives.

We know that the Government have jacked up spending for the general election and that they will just, in the Minister's terms—not by much—reach the level that the Conservatives were at when they left office. In the meantime, however, pensioners will have lost out on money that they will never get back.

The Conservative official spokesperson, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), made up a series of figures. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) resorted to saying that he preferred those to ours. She simply got her figures wrong. Perhaps she should call the House of Commons Library. It is very good and it will sort her out on that. She failed to take account of the fact that the costs of our policy are net, not gross. She also underestimated the gross costs of the policy, but her maths are clearly not too good. Broadly speaking, the net costs are equivalent to the income that we raise from the 50 per cent. rate of tax on earnings over £100,000 a year. Some years will bring in more income than we need and others fractionally less, but the figures are almost identical. There is a tie-up there.

[Mr. Matthew Taylor]

We are clear about why it is necessary to put that tax on: we want to guarantee pensioners our big increases. We could simply hope that the economy delivers continued growth. The evidence is that the Chancellor has more than a big enough pot into which he can dip to make substantial pension increases. I hope that he will take a step towards that on Wednesday, but to guarantee, after a general election, to deliver substantial pension increases, we have to say that that might mean an increase in tax. We believe that it would be right to have a 50 per cent. tax rate on earnings over £100,000 a year, if necessary.

There are several reasons for that. First, we believe that it is important that pensioners should receive the benefit of the pension increases. Secondly, our tax system is regressive. People on high incomes pay less tax overall as a proportion of their income than those on low incomes. We do not believe that that is right. In tackling what was a real problem—taxation of very high incomes under Labour prior to 1979—previous Conservative Chancellors went too far. That is why very wealthy people now pay less, as a proportion of income, than people on very low incomes—the pensioners on whom we are concentrating. We believe that, if we have to make a tax increase, that is where it should be made. It will still leave this country's high-rate tax one of the lowest in Europe and lower than for most of the period that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister.

Mr. Bercow: Obviously, if the top tax rate is cut, those who pay that rate thenceforward will pay a lower proportion of their income to the Exchequer, but does the hon. Gentleman not accept that, as a consequence of the Lawson tax changes, the proportion of the overall tax-take contributed by the highest earners was higher? I hope that even a Liberal Democrat would acknowledge that point.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is trying to argue that, if we tax very high earners a little more, we will get less income. I challenge him to find an academic report that backs him. Even the last Conservative Administration—let alone any academic group—undertook their own report on that and failed to find the evidence.

The hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) made a far more measured speech than the Minister. Not only Liberal Democrat Members, but other Members on both sides of the House would agree with much of what he said. He sought to reflect some of the general concerns, which were echoed by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who has an exceptional record on this issue. He highlighted something that the Minister sought to deny: the Government are holding back key information on their ability to afford increases prior to their announcement.

The Minister says that we will be given the information after the announcement. That will help us to look at what the Government have done, but it does not help anyone to argue, before the announcement, for a better, more generous decision. Once that announcement has been made, there is no chance of any of us—whether the hon. Member for Newport, West or Liberal Democrat Members—winning the argument this year that the Government have the funds to do more. The decision will already have been made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) addressed the issue of long-term care. It was not the centre of attention in the debate, but it is an important matter. I have already touched on the accusation of inconsistency by the hon. Member for Harlow. It will be interesting to see whether he says the same of his Chancellor. In both cases, I hope that he will do more than he has previously argued for.

Let us be clear about long-term care. We made an absolute guarantee to fund nursing care, which the Government would not guarantee. We committed ourselves to work towards funding long-term care, too. That is a difference between Labour and us: it is not that the proposal is not budgeted; it is that Ministers oppose it and we shall work for it. People who are concerned about their elderly relatives selling their houses and having to pay for care should understand where the Liberal Democrats stand and where the Labour party stands.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that there should also be a rurality consideration? Provision for the elderly sometimes costs more in rural areas, such as mid-Wales, and the Government should take that into consideration in their planning.

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend tempts me, as the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, down the route of special offers for rural constituents. There are key issues for rural constituencies, and I hope that Ministers will address them soon in the long-promised but still-not-delivered review of local government expenditure. I have made that argument directly to Ministers.

Today's debate has very clearly set out three options available to pensioners. Conservative Members are so embarrassed by their true position on pensions that they dare not spell it out. The truth, of course, is that they are committed to the continued whittling away of the state pension as the basis for people's long-term support. The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), to be fair to him, countered by calling for restoration of the earnings link, which he believes would cost £8 billion. I notice that that is the very same sum that Conservative Members have committed themselves not to adding, but to cutting.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West spoke rather more in favour of the position advocated by Conservative Front Benchers—although they will not spell out their position. The truth is that, on the pensions issue, Conservative Members want to have their cake and to eat it. They want to talk about tax cuts, but not about the fact that those can be delivered only by cutting expenditure on pensions and forcing more people into private pension schemes. Nevertheless, they pretend to pensioners that they want a real increase in the state pension.

One Conservative leaflet after another promises that pensioners would receive a pension increase of more than £5. One has to read the fine-print—as many pensioners do—to discover that the Conservatives would take away pensioners' Christmas bonus, heating allowance and even the 25p age addition that people start receiving at 80. The promise is an insult.

Mr. Butterfill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Taylor: I cannot give way to the hon. Gentleman; I have to get on. People will be able to read his comments for themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon said, Labour Members are all over the place on the pensions issue. Year after year in this Parliament, Liberal Democrat Members have campaigned for real increases in the state pension. Ministers, however, have said that they cannot agree to those increases, but must target assistance more accurately on those who need it, yet the Government have chosen to provide the heating allowance, which is not only indiscriminate, but not taxed. Pensioners who perhaps could have afforded to do without the allowance are beneficiaries of it. Therefore, Ministers' comments on targeting are absolute nonsense.

The Government do not want to increase the basic state pension, but are willing to allow it to wither away in the long run. Their long-term plan is to ensure ever more means-tested support and to withdraw support from those who they think can afford to be without it. Although that is a distinct policy, which is not dissimilar from that of the Conservatives, they do not want to talk about it.

The Government also believe that the arrival, just before Christmas, of a £150 cheque for the heating allowance is more effective politically than adding a few pounds a week to the basic state pension. The 75p increase, however, proved that they misunderstood the situation and got the spin wrong. It led to a revolt, and proved that pensioners care most about being able to feed themselves and to live in dignity week by week.

Tomorrow, there will be a pensioners' rally at Westminster, attended by pensioners who have supported all of the political parties. They are rising in protest at the way in which the Government have treated them in this Parliament. The Chancellor's attempt on Wednesday to retrieve the situation will be seen for what it is: a response to that campaign as the general election approaches, rather than a genuine commitment to long-term improvement in the basic state pension.

The Liberal Democrat proposals would ensure substantial increases in the state pension, targeted on those who most need it. If we were making Wednesday's announcement, single pensioners would receive an additional £7.25. Older pensioners and pensioner couples would receive even more, so that pensioner couples over 80 would receive an increase of more than £30 a week. However, we go even further than that.

Labour Members have asked about our long-term policy. Because we have underwritten our pensions policy with a tax policy to fund it, we can guarantee that we will be able to deliver those increases in addition to those made in the Chancellor's announcement on Wednesday. The difference is that our policies are underwritten and funded by a tax policy that is more progressive than that which the Government are willing to offer. We can fund a pension increase that will take pensioners out of means-testing, rather than forcing them into it, as the Chancellor will do on Wednesday.

Our policies give pensioners independence and dignity, rather than force them to ask for hand-outs from the state. They also guarantee that pensioners receive the increase, regardless of whether they can find their way through the means-testing jungle that the Government have imposed.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) was complaining that Conservative and Labour Members had been caught electioneering—as if that were a crime—but then went on to do a little electioneering of his own. Much to my surprise, however, he produced figures different from those given earlier by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb).

Undoubtedly, both hon. Members' expenditure will be financed by the same 10p increase in the top tax rate that they announced, and which my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) pointed out has already been committed elsewhere. Liberal Democrat Members really have to learn that they cannot keep spending the same tax increase over and over again. One may not be able to perceive that fact when in opposition, but one perceives it rather quickly when one gets into government.

We have had an interesting debate. All the major parties—I include the Liberal Democrats—fought the previous general election on the same basis: that there would be a link between pensions and prices, and that other action would be taken subsequently. I should quote the Liberal Democrats' 1997 manifesto, on which the hon. Member for Northavon was elected to the House. It stated:

> The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices.

It went on to say a little more about what they might have managed to do had they entered government in 1997. It stated:

> We will create an additional top-up pension for pensioners with incomes below the income support level. This will be indexed to earnings and tapered as outside income increases.

Does not such provision indexed to earnings describe the minimum income guarantee that the Government have introduced? I am not very sophisticated, but is not tapering that provision as outside income rises another way of describing a means test? I might have it wrong, but I think that that is how the Liberal Democrats' manifesto—on which every Liberal Democrat Member stood—would have been interpreted by those who read the manifestos in the previous general election.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady is obviously easily confused. The inflation figure for next April is £2.25 and I pledged £5 on top of inflation, making the £7.25 mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). The taper mentioned in the manifesto would mean a rate of less than the 100 per cent. tax that she applies to pensioners' savings. That would be better than what she has delivered.

Angela Eagle: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not address the point about the manifesto, which is on the record. All the Liberal Democrats promised to do is what we have done in government.

The Conservatives recently produced their pensions policy and, clearly, they also agree only with an increase in terms of prices. However, they would abolish winter fuel payments. They would abolish the Christmas bonus and the free television licences for the over-75s—even though those are arriving as we speak. They would abolish the age addition for the over-80s and, interestingly, the winter fuel payments to men over 60.

In her speech—which I enjoyed—the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) asked me why 1 million men aged between 60 and 65 were still waiting for their winter

[Angela Eagle]

fuel payments. What a cheek to ask me that, when the Conservatives have announced that they would abolish the payment.

Mrs. Lait: Does the Minister agree that the philosophical point is that people want to have their money in their own pockets to spend as they wish, rather than the gimmicks that the Government deliver? They want the dignity and self-respect of spending their own money.

Angela Eagle: The practical point is that, according to the Saga poll, 75 per cent. of pensioners do not want their winter fuel payments abolished.

The Tories' "Common Sense for Pensioners" policy would effectively give 42p extra to some people in certain circumstances. That is enough to buy a tin of Campbell's soup—very generous. The Tory document contains some questions and answers. For example:

What about a man aged 60 to 64 losing his winter fuel payment?

The answer is:

We faced a tough choice here . . . We decided it was more important to increase the state pension. The savings on benefits for this group help to finance better pensions which will, of course, benefit these men within a few years.

The reality is that men aged between 60 and 65 will not get winter fuel payments when they retire under the Tories.

Spending as a percentage of gross domestic product has increased and will be greater by April 2001 than when we came to power, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of State made clear. We must remember also that that is a higher percentage of a growing GDP because we have had a successful economy under the Labour Government. The cake is getting bigger and the percentage given to pensioners is also getting bigger. That is before whatever might happen on Wednesday, so part of the Liberal Democrat motion is inaccurate.

I have had some fun listening to the debate today. The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who is a doughty fighter—a shock trooper for Thatcherism in his time—gave us a history of the link. He said that it would be a good time to consider restoring the earnings link and that, because the Tories' economic legacy was so good, we could now afford it. What a cheek from the party that abolished the link in the first place. That was opportunism from the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention the £8 billion cost of restoring the earnings link and said nothing about how his sums would add up—particularly when the shadow Chancellor has already announced £8 billion in tax cuts. We know that the Tories plan £16 billion worth of cuts from our spending plans, yet the hon. Gentleman proposes to spend another £8 billion. I am not sure how much will end up in the national insurance fund when the Tories are through with it. However, there seems to be a lot of billions floating around for people to spend as they think fit.

This debate has come far too early this week for it to be meaningful. The Government have spent £6.5 billion more on pensioners over this Parliament than would have been spent under Tory spending plans. The key point is that half of that has gone to the poorer pensioners who were in poverty as a result of the Tory legacy. In those 18 years, pensioners' income distribution was stretched. Many pensioners did far better in that period because of occupational pensions and the original SERPS. There was a 64 per cent. increase in real terms in pensioners' incomes but, when we look at the details, we see that the income distribution stretched and that there was a huge increase in pensioner inequality. Given the structure of pensioner incomes that we inherited as a result of the Tories' ideology, we had to address pensioner poverty and the bottom end of income distribution first. This is what we have done with the minimum income guarantee.

There are those who may quibble with the minimum income guarantee, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn). But I say to them, "Please help pensioners who are eligible for the guarantee to claim it. You can have your own opinion of it but, on average, those who claim successfully are £20 a week better off. Your constituents who are eligible but not claiming will thank you for helping them to make a claim, rather than for rubbishing the system."

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Angela Eagle: No, I do not have long enough. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is helping his pensioners to claim the guarantee.

The key thing this week is the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday. To those who have been making pleas and looking at the structure of expenditure and the Government's record, all I will say is, "Wait for Wednesday to see how we will fulfil our promises to Britain's pensioners."

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 38, Noes 280.

Division No. 317] **[7.7 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John

Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 81.

Division No. 318] **[7.22 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary

Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John
(Aberavon)
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew
(Oxford E)
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
(Swansea W)
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
(NE Fife)
Chapman, Sir Sydney
(Chipping Barnet)
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
(Rushcliffe)
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Fabricant, Michael
Foster, Don *(Bath)*

Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Paice, James
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House endorses the Government's approach to pensions and other policies for pensioners; notes that the Government has already committed £6½ billion more to pensioner benefits during this Parliament than was planned by the Conservatives, while ensuring that this additional expenditure is funded prudently and consistently with the Government's fiscal rules; strongly agrees with the Government that the basic state pension should be retained as the foundation of pension provision, and that most should be done for those pensioners who need most help through the Minimum Income Guarantee; supports the additional help for pensioner households, including winter fuel payments, which now gives them the equivalent of a further £3 a week and free TV licences for the over 75s, which were introduced from 1st November 2000; also supports the wide range of other measures taken by the Government for pensioners, the record investment in the National Health Service, free eye tests, help with home insulation and concessionary public transport fares and reductions in income taxation; and further agrees with the Government that the next priority should be to help pensioners with moderate savings and small occupational pensions to ensure that their thrift is rewarded and that they are able to share in the rising prosperity of the nation.

Privatisation

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We now come to the motion on privatisation. I should announce to the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.31 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I beg to move,

That this House notes public concern about the effects of railway privatisation and about current plans to privatise National Air Traffic Services and London Underground and opposes the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in public services.

I am not surprised that Mr. Speaker chose to select the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister because—disappointingly, given that the Conservative party was responsible for many of the problems through its dogmatic approach to privatisation—it has not even bothered to table an amendment to defend its record. We tabled the motion because the privatised railways are in chaos at present and we are concerned that, if the Government follow their current proposals, we shall end up with exactly the same chaos in the London Underground and National Air Traffic Services.

When the Conservative party introduced many of its privatisation proposals, the Liberal Democrats warned it that privatisation simply was not the cure for all ills. At that time, the Labour party in opposition entirely agreed with us. The Labour party would accept that both our parties were correct in expressing our concerns. However, it appears that, in office, the Labour party has changed its spots. We are now in danger of seeing a Labour party introducing its own dogmatic approach to privatisation and the real possibility of putting lives at risk with its proposals for the part privatisation of NATS and the underground. It seems that the new Labour party has developed its own form of privatisation dogma.

The Liberal Democrats are certainly prepared to acknowledge that the private sector and the public sector can benefit from each other. We acknowledge that some of the privatisations that have occurred in recent years have had positive outcomes. Even if British Telecom has some way to go, the liberalisation of the telecommunications industry has undoubtedly brought significant benefits. We also acknowledge that the privatisation of gas and electricity has been instrumental in improving the standards of service offered, even though we were unhappy with the way in which and the price at which that was done.

It is interesting that some rather bizarre side effects have resulted from those privatisations. I suspect that the Conservative party did not anticipate that the electricity powering the lights in Parliament would come from an electricity company owned by the French Government. Therefore, rather bizarrely, given the views of the Conservative party, any profligacy on our part in this building will lead to a reduction of taxes in France—not what the Tories wanted.

There has been a growing acceptance that, in certain circumstances, some public services can be delivered by or in partnership with the private sector. A good example is the Government's recent announcement of the concordat between the NHS and the private health care sector. That seems to be a sensible form of partnership between the two sectors.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the hon. Gentleman bring pressure to bear on the French

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

authorities to privatise those moribund state organisations in France to ensure that British companies are allowed reciprocity so that they can buy French companies in France?

Mr. Foster: That is the most bizarre intervention that I have heard for a long time. It is extremely bizarre for the hon. Gentleman, whom I have heard speak passionately against our integration into Europe many times, to express any concern whatever about how industry is organised in France. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who supports a party that was so passionately committed to privatisation, is prepared to acknowledge that privatisation has involved many problems. I hope that he accepts that, where privatisation involving selling off the family silver and putting money into the Treasury coffers, very often the organisation was sold off far too cheaply and the nation sold short.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Would my hon. Friend care to comment on the Government's proposals to sell off the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency? Given that that sell-off has few friends in the Ministry of Defence or the American Department of Defence and, indeed, no friends at all on the Select Committee on Defence, is it not another case in which the only friends of the sell-off appear to be in the Treasury?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is interesting that that case follows the pattern of the way in which the Labour Government are now pursuing privatisation. Having opposed the way in which the railways were privatised, with massive fragmentation, the Government are proposing to split DERA in two and flog off three quarters of the total package to the private sector. That has implications not only for public safety, but for national security.

As we look back on privatisation, I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House accept that many mistakes were made, details were often not properly thought through and long-term consequences were often ignored for short-term gain. Many such examples abound. We have only to consider the way in which employees lost out, especially in early privatisations. For example, when local government services were privatised, it was ludicrous that the employees who worked in the public sector ended up doing exactly the same job as before, but their wages were lower and they had poorer pensions and conditions.

Protection was rightly introduced under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. However, equally bizarrely, transferees are protected, but new employees of the privatised service provider have poorer conditions, so there is a two tier system, which is not likely to raise morale.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is desperate to intervene, so I shall give way to him.

Mr. Bercow: Desperate is scarcely the word. The hon. Gentleman refers to the undervaluation of assets at flotation to the private sector. Would he care to cast his mind back and concede that the significance of the privatisation of the bulk of the state industrial sector was that industries which, in public ownership, were costing the Exchequer £50 million a week under the previous Labour Government now contribute tens of millions of pounds a week to the Exchequer?

Mr. Foster: I certainly do not accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. How did the Conservative Government manage to sell off the railway system? Their first act was to pay off £1.6 billion in debt. They ensured that the company's assets were widely spread, and they took various steps to make the company more attractive. If the hon. Gentleman examined the figures for many privatisations—the railways are a good example—he would appreciate that more state money is being put in to subsidise the various services than previously.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The hon. Gentleman appears to criticise the privatisation of the railways. I wonder whether he is aware that the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) asked:

> is not the answer to give BR access to the private markets to increase investment and to give private services access to the rail network to increase competition?—[*Official Report*, 15 October 1991; Vol. 196, c. 148.]

Does the hon. Gentleman agree with his right hon. Friend?

Mr. Foster: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that his point is a bit of a damp squib. I had been warned in advance by several Conservative Members that an exocet missile would be coming at me—I was told that a former leader of my party totally disagreed with the way in which the Liberal Democrats, and our predecessor parties, voted on the privatisation of the railways. Fortunately, I took the opportunity to check the record, which showed that my right hon. Friend voted in the same Lobby as the rest of my colleagues.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: So the right hon. Gentleman said one thing and supported another?

Mr. Foster: No. If the hon. Gentleman studied my right hon. Friend's comments, he would appreciate that my right hon. Friend suggested the possibility of a state-run sector becoming involved within the market. We have no problem with that—we have discussed it on several occasions. It is sad that the hon. Gentleman precisely illustrates my concern about the dogmatic approach that the Conservatives adopt in this context.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No. I want to make progress.

Many examples show that the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of public services has not been very smooth. For example, during the early days, Group 4 ran our prisons, and, more recently, there were failures in the administration of housing benefit.

Mr. Bercow: Group 4 was seven years ago.

Mr. Foster: I gave a more recent example. Even more recently, the private sector attempted unsuccessfully to

turn around failing schools. The allegedly incomparable business skills and entrepreneurial flair of the private sector have not, frankly, been a huge benefit. I suspect that few of us support the continued use of the skills and flair of, for example, Connex South Central. The tragedy of the Hatfield rail crash threw the dangers of inappropriate privatisation into stark relief.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: Not for the moment.

The public must wonder why, during the past fortnight, whole swathes of our rail network had to be closed at short notice, and whether benefits would result from an approach that fragmented the service into hundreds of parts, which competed against rather than co-operated with each other. They must also wonder how, in recent years, there has been a significant reduction in the number of people employed to check the safety of tracks, a reduction described by Railtrack as an efficiency gain. The public must wonder how Railtrack could put out to contract the safety checking and maintenance of the track and the supervision of that work. It appears that Railtrack wants to distance itself from any responsibility. The public will begin to wonder why the many different contractors, who are all busy trying to out-do each other, do not talk to each other about the crucial issue of rail safety.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does my hon. Friend find it bizarre that Railtrack's first action was to invest heavily in tarting up Britain's stations rather than in improving outmoded track and signalling systems? In other words, safety was compromised in order to create nice stations at Paddington, York or Leeds.

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, although I should go further. The Government recently introduced a safe stations award. We want stations not only to look pretty but also to be safe and to provide adequate protection to the people who use them. However, after two years, only 63 of 2,500 stations have reached the relevant standards.

Hon. Members may be particularly surprised by the fact that privatisation of the railways means that Railtrack is fined if it closes track to carry out safety work and fined if it keeps the track open and does not carry out safety work. One might say, "Heads, you lose and tails, you lose."

The public would be most surprised of all by a report in *The Daily Telegraph* on Friday, which stated that a busy commuter train had been deliberately driven over a broken track. Railtrack said that it was "standard practice" to pass a train over a suspected break at low speed to assess the defect's seriousness. I find that horrific. Surely Railtrack has more sophisticated testing equipment and does not need to roll a train with 200 passengers on board over damaged rail to assess whether it would be derailed. That is an appalling indictment.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend's speech. Does he agree that the situation is partly due to the incompetence of the contractors chosen by Railtrack to do that work, which has often allowed the track to get into that condition? Does he also agree that we need a major investigation into the way in which the railway system was privatised and into the involvement of people who are connected with the Conservative party and with companies that benefited from that privatisation?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. He may not be aware of the full details about the current contractual arrangements between Railtrack and its contractors. If hon. Members studied them, they might be very surprised. Some contractors are given the task of ensuring the safety of the track, and of determining how much work should be done on the track, but they are provided with the same amount of money regardless of how much work is done on the track. Clearly, there is at least a temptation for contractors to minimise the amount of work that is done.

The public's concerns about rail privatisation make them worried about the Government's proposals for public-private partnerships for the tube.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I sense that the hon. Gentleman is about to discuss air traffic. The central thrust of his remarks so far has been to suggest, in a slightly snide way, that somehow or other privatisation has led to a decrease in safety on the railways. If so, how does he account for the fact that the number of signals passed at danger are half what they were before privatisation and that the number of fatal accidents has been cut massively? Of course, we all have the recent tragedy in our minds. None the less, there has been a great improvement in rail safety since privatisation. How does he account for that?

Mr. Foster: I explain it by asking the hon. Gentleman to look again at some of the statistics. The number of broken rails is greater and the overall state of the track is worse than at privatisation. Those are the official figures and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept them.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, because we shall end up by batting statistics—

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Foster: Very well, I will give way.

Mr. Gray: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again, as it is most important to correct the point that he made. He must have listened carefully to the evidence given by Mr. Gerald Corbett to the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, last Wednesday. Mr. Corbett pointed out that Railtrack was checking 1,800 individual sites and that not one was in anything like the same condition as the broken rail at Hatfield. He said that the state of the railways was vastly better than it was before privatisation. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is wrong to say that the railways are worse.

Mr. Foster: This could become a rather silly argument between the hon. Gentleman and me. I hope that he will

[Mr. Foster]

agree that merely to judge the matter on whether bits of track are in an identical condition to that found at Hatfield is not a fair way to assess the overall quality of the track. It is generally accepted that, overall, the track is in worse condition than at privatisation.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to get technical, it is more difficult to understand why gauge-corner cracking appears in the new high-stress, steel rails that did not exist at the time of privatisation—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] The installation of those new rails may be leading to greater difficulties than occurred with the old rails. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) looks surprised, but he should be aware that, in the current programme of work, Railtrack is replacing the more modern rails with the softer type that was used previously. I hope that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) will not pursue the matter.

Because of the public's concern about safety as a result of the way in which the railway was privatised, they are understandably anxious about the Government's proposals for the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services and of the London underground. All hon. Members agree that the underground desperately needs urgent attention. Hon. Members may have heard an item on the "Today" programme this morning, which referred to a District line driver who, yesterday, told passengers in his train that

> if you have a camera handy, there's a chance to record a rare sighting of a Circle Line train in its natural habitat.

It is certainly true that there is overcrowding, delay, unreliability, dirt and discomfort. Decades of neglect have built up a huge backlog of faults and structural failings. We are all aware that at least £1.5 billion is needed to return the tube to a worthwhile condition.

Mrs. Laing *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I want to make some progress.

How can we deal with the problems? The Liberal Democrat proposal was clear and was well publicised during the London mayoral elections: to allow Transport for London to raise money through a bond issue. We envisaged Transport for London having access to the market at a far cheaper rate—at less expense—than the Government's proposed private sector borrowing arrangement. Under our proposals, the money could be raised more cheaply, with the additional benefit that it would remain under democratic control.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions agrees that the majority of candidates who stood at that election supported our proposals—including the present Mayor of London. Indeed, the only candidate who supported the Government's public-private partnership obtained only 13 per cent. of the votes—such was the popularity of the Government's proposal.

Yet again, the Government are making a proposal that would lead to the fragmentation of a service—in this case, the tube—allowing different people to buy the various fragments. It is somewhat worrying that the Health and Safety Executive notes that some of the potential purchasers are bodies and organisations which were implicated in some of the safety problems with the national rail network. We are deeply concerned about the Government's approach for London underground and equally worried about their proposals for NATS.

I hope that we all agree that the only purpose of NATS is safety. The Deputy Prime Minister said:

> Air traffic control is all about safety, which must be paramount.—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 535.]

In London and the south-east, at any time of day, thousands of aircraft are circling overhead, waiting to land. The demands on air traffic controllers increase monthly. There is little room for manoeuvre.

Despite all those pressures, NATS has an excellent safety record under its current arrangements. There can be no justification for anything that puts that record at risk. The PPP would provide an unnecessary and dangerous distraction and would put safety in conflict with profit—the same conflict that was so disastrous for our railways.

The Government claim that they have to adopt that arrangement, but they do not have to do so; it is not even necessary. We agree with the Government that it will be necessary to raise about £1 billion for investment in NATS over the next 10 years. Their proposal is to sell off 51 per cent. of NATS, possibly selling off more at a later date. The new partner will be expected to raise the money for that investment.

Our argument on raising money for the tube also applies to NATS. It would be cheaper for the Treasury to raise the money than if it were raised by a private sector borrower. Such a borrower would want a return of between 10 and 20 per cent. compared with the 8 per cent. needed by the Treasury. Something will have to go. Our concern is that the something will be safety.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Many of the hon. Gentleman's comments will strike the general public as scaremongering. Is he aware that air traffic control in the majority of Britain's airports is already in private or independent ownership? Is he really saying that those airports are less safe as a result?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman makes the same mistake as those who suggest that we should no longer be concerned about airline safety after the privatisation of British Airways. The reality is that there is a difference between safety under a monopoly supplier and under a regime of tough competition. The provision of air traffic control is subject to competition at individual airports, just as there is competition between airlines. However, NATS is not subject to competition.

It is no wonder that so many people oppose the Government's proposals—pilots, air traffic controllers, the chair of the Transport Sub-Committee, and a large number of Labour Members and peers. It is not surprising that the Sub-Committee described the proposal as the worst of all possible options. However, the Government seem to refuse to listen. They are unable to listen to those who know what is at stake; unable to learn from the mistakes of rail privatisation and unable even to remember what they said four years ago.

Everyone in the House remembers the pledge given at the 1996 Labour conference by the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He was cheered to the echo for saying:

> Our air is not for sale.

Liberal Democrats agreed with him then, and we continue to agree with that sentiment. We have seen no evidence to justify changing our mind.

The wording of the Government's amendment to our motion is interesting. Labour Members should note that it states that the House should welcome

> the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground.

Hon. Members should note the word "pragmatic".

Liberal Democrats certainly prefer a pragmatic to a dogmatic approach. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "pragmatic" as

> dealing with things sensibly and realistically.

We certainly do not accept that the two PPP proposals are sensible or realistic. However—given the Government's apparent refusal to listen to anyone—they perhaps used in the amendment the 16th century definition of the word "pragmatic". That definition is, "busy, interfering, conceited." It is my contention that pressing ahead in the face of significant opposition based on the failures of similar moves elsewhere is conceited. It is not pragmatic; it is dogmatic.

We hope that Members on both sides of the House will join together to support our motion and to oppose the dogmatic approach to privatisation being adopted by a Labour Government.

8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> "deplores the previous Government's incompetent privatisation of the railways which left the network fragmented, cost taxpayers billions of pounds and brought rail travellers hours of delays; welcomes the Government's creation of the Strategic Rail Authority to give direction to the industry from an industry-wide perspective rather than from the narrow interests of individual companies; recognises that the Government's 10-year plan is delivering the largest investment programme for the railways for generations to tackle the problems caused by years of under-investment in the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground, enabling much needed investment and private sector financial and management skills to be introduced to the public services while safeguarding safety and the public interest; and regrets the official Opposition's dogmatic pursuit of privatisation for the London Underground and the National Air Traffic Services."

I have frequently proclaimed my affection and respect for the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), but I fear that he has slipped from his normal high standards on this occasion. I found his speech both disappointing and disingenuous. I could think of another word with the prefix "dis" to describe it, but our parliamentary conventions preclude my use of such a word. However, we all know what is going on here—it is the technique of the big slur.

The hon. Gentleman begins by citing the widespread, and perfectly understandable, public dissatisfaction with the privatisation of the railways by the previous Administration—a dissatisfaction that has certainly been heightened by recent tragic events and the continued shortcomings of the railway network—but then seeks to tar the Government's wholly different proposals for the public-private partnerships in London Underground and National Air Traffic Services with the same brush. It is an attempt at condemnation by innuendo, or guilt by association. It is typical Liberal Democrat opportunism and, as usual, it will not work.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I do not remember whether the Minister held responsibility for transport issues in the previous Parliament, but does he recall that the Liberal Democrats urged Labour Members to set their faces firmly against the privatisation of Railtrack by making it clear that, if it were to be privatised by the Conservatives, it would be bought back by an incoming Labour Government, with Liberal Democrat support if that was the way that the country had voted? We could have then stopped privatisation in its tracks. I judge from his comments that he still believes that the privatisation of Railtrack was a mistake. Why did the Labour party at that stage not take up our proposal?

Mr. Hill: I am always rather amused by the Liberal Democrats' rewriting of history. I notice that it is always the Liberals who lead on the issues and the rest of the House seems to follow tamely. However, the Labour party came to a clear judgment before the election and we stated in our manifesto that the reacquisition of the privatised railway system was a cost that was simply not worth bearing when set against other demands on the Exchequer from the nation's priorities of health, education and law and order. That is why we are working to improve the privatised railway system that we inherited in ways that I hope, with the indulgence of the House, I shall be able to describe soon.

The motion before the House is unacceptable and ought to be rejected. It ought to be rejected not because, as is usually the case, an opposition motion is an expression of opinion that does not reflect the opinion of the majority of the House, but because this motion is—in its premises—quite simply factually wrong.

The motion describes the Government's proposals for London Underground and NATS as "privatisation". That is just plain wrong. If we were planning to sell off the public's stake in these concerns lock, stock and barrel and pass over ownership and control in their entirety and in perpetuity to the private sector, that would be privatisation. That is what privatisation meant for water, for gas, for electricity, for telecommunications, for coal, for buses and for the railways under the Tories.

Mr. Don Foster: Given that the Minister's definition of privatisation involves selling off the entirety of a service, will he tell us that, having sold off 51 per cent. of NATS, the Government have no intention whatsoever of selling off any of the remaining 49 per cent? Were he to say that, he would be saying something that totally contradicts what he said in Committee during our consideration of the Transport Bill.

Mr. Hill: If the hon. Gentleman gives me a chance, I shall come to that issue in due course. What I said with crystal clarity in Committee—as he knows, that is my style—was that any such decision would have to come back to the House for its democratic decision.

By contrast with the privatisation carried out by the Conservatives, in the case of National Air Traffic Services, the taxpayer will not only retain a major

[Mr. Hill]

shareholding in the public-private partnership. In addition, the Government will appoint "partnership directors" to protect the taxpayers' interest as an investor. Board unanimity will be required on dividends and reinvestment, and a special share will be entrenched in the new company's articles of association to protect the taxpayers' rights in key matters, such as the issue of new shares and dividend policy. Frankly, it is ludicrous to describe those arrangements as a privatisation.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Minister elucidate a little? Is he saying that selling 51 per cent. does not constitute privatisation and, therefore, that the previous Government's initial sale of 50 per cent. of British Telecom was not an act of privatisation?

Mr. Hill: I am certainly saying that the Government's proposals for NATS do not constitute privatisation. Indeed, if the right hon. Gentleman had not been so keen to make his point, he might have listened to the reasons that I adduced a little more carefully. If he had, he would have found out that the safeguards entrenched in the arrangements for NATS are totally distinct from, and contradict, any arrangements made for BT or any other privatisation under the previous Administration.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I shall wait for a moment before I receive the exocet that has been prepared for me by Conservative central office.

To return to my thread, it is equally ludicrous to describe as privatisation our proposals for London Underground. They will leave the new public sector London Underground with responsibility for operations and safety, and they mean that a modernised London Underground will return to public ownership at the end of the PPP period.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I take pity on the hon. Gentleman, so I shall let him have his moment of glory.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for letting me have my moment of glory. Does he agree with the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs? It says:

> The current proposal for a public-private partnership for NATS is, in our view, the worst of all the possible options.

Given that their lordships—with the assistance of Liberal Democrat peers and some Labour peers—defeated the Government on an important amendment to the Transport Bill last week, will he clearly state whether he intends to try to overturn that amendment in this House and to bring about a public-private partnership for NATS?

Mr. Hill: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, we do not agree with the judgments expressed in the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. We found them ill considered and ill thought out. On the question of support for the amendment carried in another place, our position is entirely clear. We do not intend to jeopardise the new investment that will flow from the PPP and the improved project management. That is why we shall seek to reverse the amendment in this House.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I do not wish to detain the House for as long as the hon. Member for Bath did. After this intervention, I shall seek to make some progress.

Mr. Syms: A second amendment carried by the Lords was designed to protect the pensions of NATS employees and to include provision for doing that in the Bill. Do the Government intend to overturn that amendment, too?

Mr. Hill: We want to look at that amendment very carefully, and we will return to that in due course.

The public-private partnerships that we are putting in place for London Underground and NATS are neither privatisations nor, as the motion would have it, remotely inspired by dogma. After all, by what stretch of even the Liberal Democrats' lurid imagination could the Labour party and this Government be charged with a dogmatic commitment to privatisation? On the contrary, those PPPs represent carefully devised, appropriate and pragmatic solutions that deliver the best possible outcomes for the underground and NATS. They are the solutions that the Government's amendment commends to the House.

It is indisputable that the British Rail privatisation was flawed. The Labour party spelled out its alternative approach in its general election manifesto—and we have delivered in government. We have set up the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to provide leadership and direction. The Transport Bill will establish the SRA proper and provide for stronger accountability and enforcement. Our 10-year plan provides the resources for massive investment in the railway: £49 billion over 10 years, including £7 billion of public money for a rail modernisation fund.

In the past few weeks, the Rail Regulator has published the results of his review of Railtrack's access charges for maintenance and renewal, including necessary expenditure on safety improvements. By the end of this year, Railtrack's industrywide safety responsibilities will be separated from its commercial operations. Next year, Lord Cullen will publish his report on the Ladbroke Grove accident and on the culture and management of railway safety. Those initiatives herald more investment, more public accountability and a better deal for passengers—including a safer railway.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I will give way, but after doing so I must make progress.

Mr. Öpik: On a non-confrontational point, the Minister is describing how he will try to make rail privatisation work. One very common and specific problem arises when companies such as Northern Spirit and Virgin Trains abandon passengers at stations other than their final destination. Customers often have to haggle with

station staff for a taxi or some other means of completing their journeys. Will the Minister give me a commitment that one thing for which the money and his legislative powers will be used will be ensuring that those companies make it easy for customers to get to where they need to go even if they are abandoned at a station on the way?

Mr. Hill: In a non-confrontational way, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that a very dissatisfactory situation all too often prevails in our railway system. Frankly, the train operating companies ought to be improving their act right now. We inherited some flawed franchising agreements. We are in the process of refranchising and certainly expect to wrest from those contracts much higher standards of customer care along the lines that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

I think that we can all agree on the scale of the financial problems faced by the underground, and the need for urgent measures to deal with them. The previous Government left a huge investment backlog on the tube, and their public expenditure plans envisaged still further cuts in funding.

We set about dealing with the underfunding immediately. In March 1998, we announced an additional £365 million of funding for London Transport over and above existing plans. In July 1999, we announced that we were allocating £517 million of additional resources to London Transport over two years, to help it deliver real improvements to passengers in the run-up to the PPP. In the Budget this year, we announced that a further £65 million would be allocated to London Underground in 2000–01—plus an additional £40 million to deal with claims on the Jubilee line extension.

The extra funding still does not provide a long-term solution to the underground's funding problems. Even with the increases, London Underground is left with changes every year to its funding arrangements, making it impossible for it to plan its investment efficiently. That is what the PPP is designed to transform. It is quite wrong to suggest that the PPP is in some way like rail privatisation, and that it will somehow undermine safety. In fact, the whole point of the London Underground PPP is to learn from the mistakes of previous privatisations, not to repeat them.

That is why the PPP structure is so different from a privatisation. It is based on fixed-term contracts rather than permanent transfers to the private sector. So assets will return to the public sector in a much improved condition. The PPP structure retains clear public sector accountability from the outset. Statutory safety responsibility for the whole underground remains with public sector London Underground. Indeed, the recent Industrial Society report that was commissioned by the Mayor of London on the PPP said that it

> recognises the special effort made by Government in ensuring that safety is managed centrally and rests ultimately in public sector hands.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Minister will appreciate how successful bond issues for funding public transport have been in the United States. Will he explain why it is such a bad idea here and why the Government will not consider it?

Mr. Hill: That is exactly what I intend to do. I noticed that the Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath, skated over the Liberal Democrat proposals. I intend to give them careful scrutiny and to explain precisely the reasons for rejecting them.

I return to the question of the proposed PPP for London Underground. Unlike on the privatised railways, there will be no separation between train and track infrastructure maintenance. London Underground will retain responsibility for all operational matters—from switching signals to driving trains and staffing stations. So it will be a far more unified system.

The PPP will also be subject to two key validation tests: safety and value for money. On safety, we have consistently made it clear that the PPP will not proceed unless it can be shown that it will make a substantial contribution to improved safety. As I have said, the safety regime for the PPP retains a structure in which statutory responsibility for safety of the whole network remains with public sector London Underground.

The transition to the new arrangements for the PPP requires three sets of changes to London Underground's safety case—to ensure that safety is maintained and improved both in the run-up to the PPP and when it is under way. Two of those revised safety cases have already been approved by the Health and Safety Executive. The transition process also requires a safety audit, which will begin shortly, and the submission and acceptance of the third set of changes to the safety case.

I am not making any new political commitment when I say that the PPP will not proceed unless and until the HSE has taken an independent view and has stated that it is satisfied with the revised safety case. I am simply stating the legal position. Our plans will deliver a network that is publicly run, publicly accountable and properly financed. It will reverse the increase in serious injuries that we have seen on the tube over the past 10 years.

The second key test for the PPP, after safety, is value for money. As the House will be aware, London Transport and its advisers have been devising a public sector comparator against which the bids for the PPP will be judged. Bids will be considered against not only traditional funding methods but a public sector bond option. We have published the methodology for that comparator, which has been independently audited by KPMG.

Most importantly, in August, the National Audit Office—Parliament's public expenditure watchdog—announced that it would bring its scrutiny of the comparator forward so that it could report on it before contracts were signed. That will ensure that the comparator represents a fair and rigorous test of the PPP bids.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I know that the hon. Gentleman has not yet intervened, but I hope that he will forgive me for not giving way because I need to make progress. If I feel that I have made satisfactory progress, I will of course yield to him in due course. After all, he used to represent me on Lambeth council—albeit not, I hasten to add, with the benefit of my vote.

The Liberal Democrats' alternative to the PPP is a bond option. Fair enough—we are not dogmatically opposed to bonds, but we do not believe they are the right solution for the underground. They would do nothing to bring management efficiencies to the system; they would

[Mr. Hill]

introduce a further delay in getting a financing regime in place; and, as the Industrial Society itself concedes, they would not be a realistic prospect without new powers to raise local taxes. We do not believe Londoners want more delay—perhaps of up to two years—in modernising the tube, nor do we think that they want to pay more taxes, or to confer tax-raising powers on the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly.

We are convinced that the PPP is the best option for NATS; let me explain why. NATS provides a world-class service, but air traffic is growing by more than 5 per cent. each year and increasing delays are inevitable unless significant improvements are made to the system. We are already addressing these needs: the £700 million Swanwick centre will open in the winter of 2001–02. However, NATS managers say that they also need more than £1 billion over the next 10 years to invest in safety. In particular, major investment is needed to bring the new Scottish centre at Prestwick on stream when it is needed, probably by 2007-08.

Under the PPP, we will bring in a long-term strategic partner from the private sector that will fund and deliver the next generation air traffic control system. Under the PPP, NATS will be freed from Government financial constraints. With stable and long-term funding provided by the strategic partner, NATS will be able to plan its investment to provide significant benefits to the United Kingdom, airlines and their passengers as soon as possible. Freedom from Government financial constraints will also put NATS in a good position to export its expertise at a time when there is an increasing realisation that international air traffic control systems must be consolidated if they are to be able to cope with continuing increases in air traffic.

We have rejected the privatisation of NATS precisely because we do not believe that it would provide the necessary safeguards that the travelling public deserves. Crucially, under the PPP, we are able to build in specific safeguards that would not be possible under a privatisation. For example, as I have already said, by retaining a significant shareholding, the Government will retain the right to appoint directors to the board of the company. Under the PPP, the main strategic decisions of the NATS board will require a unanimous vote of all directors, including those who will be appointed by the Government. Under that structure, the Government and the taxpayer will also be able to share in the future success of the PPP and to have a say in key decisions affecting the company. None of that would be possible with a 100 per cent. sell-off.

Air traffic control is all about safety. That will continue to be the overriding priority under the PPP. That is why we have amended the Transport Bill in another place to make it clear that maintaining a high level of safety in the provision of air traffic services must have priority over every other consideration when functions are exercised under the legislation.

Of course, setting up the PPP is also crucial in delivering the final and complete separation between safety regulation by the Civil Aviation Authority and the provision of air traffic control services by NATS. The mid to late 1990s saw a 35 per cent. increase in the number of risk-bearing air proxes involving commercial air transport. That is why we are determined to strengthen aviation safety by separating air traffic services from safety regulations, which is something that the industry, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and other aviation interests have sought for some years now.

It goes without saying that our proposals for a NATS PPP have proved contentious, but everyone, including the Select Committee and the unions, accepts that doing nothing is not an option. We have considered various other funding mechanisms, including trusts, bonds, and publicly owned companies, but we are convinced that none of those will deliver all the benefits that a PPP will provide.

The Liberal Democrats want a not-for-profit company to take over NATS. The reasoning behind this is, I assume, to establish that profit is not put before safety. Let me reassure the House that the PPP will not jeopardise safety: rather, it is designed to enhance the safety regime for air traffic control. Safety regulation will remain firmly in the public sector in a reformed CAA and, as I have just said, we have amended the Transport Bill to reiterate our commitment to safety. In short, I do not accept the profit-before-safety argument, and nor should the House.

I should stress that there is nothing in the PPP structure or in the Transport Bill that would prevent a viable not-for-profit company from becoming our strategic partner, but for us to take a view on what offers the best future for NATS, there needs to be a competitive process which allows rational assessment of the bids we receive. Any not-for-profit bid needs to stand up and be assessed alongside the others. Limiting the selection criteria in the way the Liberal Democrats propose would knock out potential candidates who might, at the end of the day, be a better partner.

Other funding mechanisms for NATS have also been mentioned in the past, including trusts, bonds and publicly owned companies. We have considered those options, but we are convinced that none of them will deliver all the benefits that a PPP will provide. Last week, we announced that we have three robust potential strategic partners for NATS. We shall now work with those world-class consortiums to find the best option for the future of the company and of air traffic control in the UK.

I have gone out of my way to set out the grounds for rejecting the alternatives for the future of NATS and the London Underground propounded by the Liberal Democrats. Given the deplorable terms of their motion, there are those who might take the view that I have been too generous and reasonable in my response. However, let us not lose sight of the real villains of the piece: the gung-ho privatisers of the official Opposition, who, despite all the evidence, still advocate the wholesale privatisation of the underground and air traffic services. Will they never learn?

The Conservatives privatised and deregulated the bus industry, with the result that bus passenger journeys went down by a third and bus services in the countryside were decimated. The Labour Government have stemmed the decline in bus passenger numbers: through our rural bus grant, last year, 16 million new passenger journeys were enjoyed by country people benefiting from new and enhanced rural bus services.

The Conservatives privatised the railway, broke it up into 100 parts and got an appalling deal for the taxpayer into the bargain.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, even though he has never allowed the facts to intrude on his private prejudices. Given that, this year, London Underground will receive an investment that is precisely £282 million less than was provided in the last year of Conservative Government, how does he justify the expenditure by his Administration of more than £60 million on consultancy fees in connection with a botched privatisation?

Mr. Hill: That is rich coming from a member of the Conservative party, which spent £450 million on a rail sell-off that will deliver less to the travelling passenger and the taxpayer than the London Underground PPP will achieve. Let me allow the facts to intrude on the debate: were the hon. Gentleman to take the trouble to look at the forward projections of the public expenditure figures produced by the last Conservative Government in 1996, he would find that projected investment by central Government in London Underground this year was zero. He is on pretty thin ice when he condemns the Labour Government, who have invested £1.6 billion in London's underground system in our three years in office.

When the Tories left office, Railtrack was £700 million behind in its investment programme. With Labour, rail investment is now 33 per cent. higher than in 1997, and we have announced plans for a massive injection of £49 billion into the rail system over the next 10 years. The Conservatives left a £1.2 billion investment backlog in the tube; they made a £400 million cut in tube investment in their last Budget; and, if they had stayed in office, they would by now have cut Government funding to London Underground to zero. Yet now the Conservatives have the effrontery to propose the full-scale privatisation of London Underground, breaking it up into five companies competing with each other, and they still want to sell off NATS lock, stock and barrel. If we are talking about dogma, they are the dogmatists. Like the Bourbons, they have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

We have learned from the mistakes of the dogma-driven programme of the previous Administration. We are working hard to put right the mistakes made on the railways, and we have developed innovative, custom-built solutions for the underground and NATS. That is the right way forward, and that is why the House should reject the disreputable and opportunistic motion tabled by the Liberal Democrats and support the Government's sensible and forward-looking amendment.

I commend the amendment to the House.

8.30 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): In the early years of the previous century, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the Fabians had high hopes that central planning and governmental control were the way of the future. By the end of the century, the overwhelming lesson was that that did not work and never had any chance of working. Around the world—not only in Europe, but in the far east and South America—most countries, whatever the political persuasion of their Governments, are privatising industries and looking to free enterprise to deliver the goods.

A free enterprise system is more likely to generate wealth, innovation and enterprise. It is more likely to devolve decision making to millions of people who are consumers and who, through the market mechanism, make choices. That mechanism has proved over the past century to be the one that delivered the best economic outcomes. Even left-wing politicians have concluded that free enterprise is best and that one can control an agenda without having to own an industry.

The one party that seems to have a problem with that notion is the Liberal Democrats. I know that the past century did not treat them well, and if they continue in their current vein, this century will not treat them well either. The social democrats in Germany dropped their Marxist tag in 1959, the socialists in Spain did so in the 1970s and became the Government throughout the 1980s, and even the Labour party, one of the most conservative institutions in this country, dropped clause IV, because it did not see the relevance. *[Interruption.]* I hear someone mutter, "Not all of us." That is a good point—only last week an hon. Member asked the Prime Minister about renationalising the rail industry. The Labour party still has not quite adapted to the changes that its constitution has produced, but it is going in the right direction.

Free enterprise brings home the bacon and is the system most consistent with democratic government, because it devolves decision making. The Conservative party has been a defender of free enterprise for most of the past century because as a party we realise that property and a diverse economy are essential for a healthy nation. We defended free enterprise even when the Labour party tried to nationalise and control. We have always been proud of that, but not for any great dogmatic reason.

One could probably say of the private sector the same as Churchill said of democracy: he said that democracy was the worst system, except for all the alternatives. Free enterprise requires a sensible competition policy, and capitalists must be prevented from taking advantage of people, because the natural capitalist tendency is sometimes to do that. Government have a role to play in setting parameters, setting rules and ensuring that fraudsters have no place in the system.

During its 18 years in office, the Conservative party found that a shake-up of the large state sector would result in substantial gains. The burden on the state was extensive in terms of taxpayers' subsidies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made clear, what has changed and what has assisted the current Chancellor's finances is that instead of the taxpayer being a contributor to many industries, many companies that were in the public sector are contributing through corporation tax and are more efficient organisations than they were.

Many industries that were privatised by the previous Government have been able to expand overseas, investing in other countries and creating great world-class companies. We are a great trading nation, and many companies have expanded and undertaken projects that they would not have considered in an earlier generation. We now have a worldwide perspective. The lessons of that Government have been learned not only in this country but abroad, where many Conservative policies have been adopted because of the benefits that have become apparent.

[Mr. Robert Syms]

The Conservative party is pragmatic in its approach and looks at each individual case on its merits. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency was mentioned earlier. It would be surprising to find my party in the same Lobby as the Government on DERA, because there are real concerns about our relations with the Americans and our defence interests. It would be wrong to suggest that we wanted to privatise everything in sight.

With regard to National Air Traffic Services, in principle we would prefer a proper privatisation, with a listing, to create a world-class company. However, NATS is a difficult matter. If it were an easy privatisation or a popular one, I expect that Baroness Thatcher or my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) would have privatised it when in office, but the issues are complex and the benefits of privatisation are a little less obvious than in some other areas, not least because most of the income derived from NATS comes from international treaties negotiated across Europe and across the world.

The ability of NATS to generate more income is dependent on the volume of air movements increasing. Unlike previous privatisations, such as that of BAA, which is a great retailing company that has expanded across the world and opened many stores, NATS cannot generate significantly more income, as the Government evidently expect it to do.

We should remind the Government that when they were in opposition, they said that our air was not for sale. They did not include their proposals for NATS in their manifesto. What the Lords have done is sensible—they have asked the Government to think again. In the case of the British Telecom flotation, we allowed the electorate to make its choice. We passed legislation and had a general election. Only after we were confirmed in office did we proceed with the flotation. It would not be unreasonable for the Government to accept the Lords amendment, put it in their manifesto, fight an election on it and, if Labour is successful in being re-elected, carry it through.

As I made clear in an intervention, I am also interested in whether the Government will reverse another amendment to protect the pensions of NATS staff. I hope that the Under-Secretary will give us more information on that.

The Government's solution for NATS is bizarre. They began with a proposal for 49 per cent. Government ownership, 46 per cent. private ownership and 5 per cent. of shares for NATS staff. That was to be done not through a listing but by negotiating with a private strategic partner. The Government have no clear idea about how employees can benefit. There has been talk of setting up a trust to enable the 5 per cent. shares that the staff own to be internally traded. I hope that the Under-Secretary can give us more information about the way in which staff could benefit from such trading.

We are also worried about the identity of the strategic partner, and especially about foreign ownership. There is a defence element to the topic that we are discussing. Anxiety therefore exists about foreign ownership, especially by a company that has substantial state ownership. Now that the Government have received some expressions of interest, I hope that they can reassure hon. Members that the strategic partner is not likely to be a foreign company with heavy state ownership.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile his worries about foreign ownership with his desire for wholesale privatisation?

Mr. Syms: We should do our best to protect an independent British company. A strategic partnership, possibly with a foreign-controlled company, which provides air traffic services, might skew policy. I would require substantial reassurance before entering into a relationship with a foreign-owned company, especially if it was owned by a foreign Government. There was talk about the French company Thomson CSF being one of the strategic partners. I should therefore like the Minister to tell us more about the number of organisations that have expressed an interest and with which the Government are currently negotiating. There is currently great uncertainty.

The Government believe in spending money on consultants and have spent £2.2 million on them. We had a short debate in Committee about the money that would be generated from NATS. There was some confusion about it. Perhaps the Under-Secretary can give us more information about the income that will be generated. He gave us an assurance in Committee that the money would be used by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, not the Treasury. On what will it be spent? If those questions are answered, we shall have a clearer idea of the Government's thinking.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend knows that NATS has outstanding loans of approximately £300 million. That money is urgently needed to pay for the new facility at Prestwick. Will my hon. Friend press the Under-Secretary to say when the proceeds from the public-private partnership are likely to be received? If there is a delay, safety could be jeopardised because the facility at Prestwick will not be built on time.

Mr. Syms: I shall not answer my hon. Friend directly because the Under-Secretary heard the question and will doubtless take it into account. Time is limited, and several hon. Members want to speak.

The Government presented an optimistic scenario about the results of their policy. They stated in Committee that they and many people believed that the number of air traffic control centres in Europe would be reduced to two and that one of the benefits of privatisation—or PPP as the Government call it—is that Britain would be in a strong position to provide them. I cannot envisage other nations allowing their aerospace to be controlled from Britain. There is a danger that we might be the loser in that competition, especially if there is some foreign ownership, control or influence over what happens in our aerospace. Our solution is better; the Government's is over complicated, but at least they will have an opportunity to reconsider when the Lords amendments are presented.

The target date for the strategic partner has been given as March 2001. I hope that the Under-Secretary will be able to tell hon. Members whether the date remains relevant.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of safety. There is a strong culture of safety in aerospace and in NATS, and I do not subscribe to the idea that following the route that we are considering is likely to be detrimental to safety. The Minister clearly set out some of the reasons for that. Nevertheless, there are anxieties, and reassurances should be given. The Select Committee has criticised the proposal, but I shall not go into that.

We have heard that the Government intend to overturn the Lords amendment that relates to delay. We hope that the Minister will give us more information about what the Government intend to do about including protection for pensioners in the Bill.

We have a general concern about aerospace policy, and particularly the role of Eurocontrol, which we spent many happy and productive hours debating in Committee. We have concerns also about the European Community's single sky policy and how that will impact on Britain's aerospace policy.

We privatised the railways, and not for any great political benefit to the Conservative party. I do not believe that there was any such benefit to be gained by doing so. We privatised them because we felt that there would be a benefit to the nation. Mainly, we wanted to attract substantially more private money and investment into the industry. During the 40 years from 1952, the share of journeys made by rail fell from 17 per cent. to only 5 per cent. The amount of goods moved by rail dipped dramatically from 42 per cent. to 7 per cent. British Rail had been allowing our railways to go into genteel decline over many decades. If we are to have a world-class economy—ours is the fourth largest economy in the world—we must have a transport infrastructure that delivers the goods. I believe that the Conservative Government were right to privatise the railways. The benefits of privatisation will be seen only over a number of decades because of the backlog of under-investment of a nationalised industry.

I say that we did the right thing, but that does not mean that we got everything absolutely right. There are many areas where there can be improvement and systems need to be worked better. As we have heard in the debate, in various interventions, there is some division about whether the current system is safer than the previous system. The figures show that the current system is safer. However, we must all be concerned that our railways are not as safe as those in continental Europe. We should try to prevent any accidents. We must do far more in terms of safety.

The Opposition have raised several concerns, especially about the interaction of the Rail Regulator and Railtrack and the fining network. That is one area where we should examine carefully whether the post-privatisation system is working as it should. It seems somewhat perverse that Railtrack is fined if it tries to repair certain stretches of railway, and the fine level suggested by the Rail Regulator has increased quite substantially. We have concerns about that, and that is why the other day we called for the new deal that the Rail Regulator announced to be risk assessed. The regulator has no direct role in terms of safety. That was our major concern.

Overall, I think that privatisation has been successful. There was a 5 per cent. increase in passenger journeys between May 1997 and September 1999, with rail patronage now the highest in 40 years. Domestic rail freight increased by 15 per cent. in two years. More than 1,300 more trains are being run daily to meet increased demands. Since 1997, 13 new stations and more than 50 new freight terminals have opened. Rolling stock worth £1.95 billion has been ordered for delivery by 2002. There were 480 safe station car parks on the national rail network with CCTV or video surveillance by the end of January 2000. Much progress has been made, but much more still needs to be done.

London Underground caters for 3 million trips per week day, including journey-to-work trips made by 35 per cent. of those in central London. About 90 per cent. of tourists use the tube during their stay in London. It generates more than £1.1 billion in fare revenue annually. With 3,954 railway cars travelling on more than 1,140 km of track, the underground now carries more passengers than the entire rail network in the UK. It is undoubtedly the only real method of rapidly transporting large numbers of people round London.

It is important to get things right. That is desperately important for our capital. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made it clear that when the previous Conservative Government left office, investment in the underground was substantially more than it is now. This year, the tube will receive £753 billion, which is a substantial reduction on the £1,035 billion that the Conservative Government were investing in 1996–97. Part of the problem is that the tube needs a great deal more investment. The delays and the Government's decision to go for such a convoluted public-private partnership have contributed to the rundown of the network.

In the Labour party 1997 election manifesto, the Prime Minister promised London:

> Labour will improve the Underground and guarantee value for money for taxpayers and passengers.

However, the Government are unlikely to deliver on that with the plans they have set out. Labour's PPP has been described as

> half baked and either naive or dishonest

by *The Economist*; a "convoluted compromise" by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs; and

> towards the bottom of the list of options

by Peter Ford, a former chairman of London Transport. It has not had the rave reviews that the Government would have wanted. The privatisation will be botched. My concern is that they will give privatisation a bad name, as they have with NATS.

Proposals for the tube include a one-off finance deal for a 30-year period to fund the investment and maintenance backlog. That cannot finance route extensions and new lines, which a privatised underground would be able to do. London Underground will still be run by a single state-owned company, and investment decisions will be dictated by politics. The nationalised industry culture will remain and there will be few incentives for higher standards and innovation. Furthermore, Maurice Fitzpatrick, head of economics at Chantrey Vellacott DFK, has estimated that fares will have to rise by 30 per cent. under Labour's botched privatisation. That is hardly value for money. At the start of the year, fares for a single journey in zone 1 increased by 7 per cent., but people have not seen much improvement in the service.

[Mr. Syms]

We want fully to privatise the underground, and we want to issue shares to generate badly needed funds for investment. We are also keen to give shares to Londoners, members of staff and season ticket holders, so that we give the tube back to Londoners. It is important that we get the policy right. Privatisation is one way in which we could improve the tube. It would certainly reduce traffic congestion in our capital. The Jubilee line—a fine Conservative project—has air conditioning, and it has shown how important it is that whoever takes over the tube spends money on air conditioning for the system and on building new underground lines. We do not want to stick where we are; we want to improve the network substantially.

The Conservative party is pragmatic. Conservatives believe in free enterprise. We are not ashamed of anything that we have done because we have delivered a more efficient economy. Its growth over the past few years—even under this Government—has, to a large extent, been due to the fact that it is more flexible and efficient, which is a result of many of the reforms introduced by the noble Baroness Thatcher and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon. Although we are concerned about the direction of the Government's policy on NATS, we are more concerned about their plans for the underground.

We are not complacent about the railways. We appreciate that there is a long way to go to improve the network, but we still believe that the direction that we took was right. If the Government believed that we were wrong, they would have tried to change the structure that they inherited when we spent six happy months together debating all the clauses—all the bits and pieces—of the Transport Bill. Apart from the Strategic Rail Authority and the regulator, the Government have, on the whole, run the system as they inherited it because they have accepted that they can work with the system that the previous Government left them. The Conservative party will be constructive. We certainly want to improve the safety record and, if the Government do what is right, we will back them.

8.54 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I am pleased to return to the House after a week of paternity leave. A week ago, in the midst of a storm, my wife gave birth to a daughter. For that reason, my mood is naturally one of benevolence towards the Liberal Democrats, and I would have loved to agree with the sentiments expressed in their motion but for three reasons: the motion is opportunist, it is irresponsible, and it is financially incoherent.

The proposals that we are discussing must be seen in the context of Labour's 10-year plan for an extra £180 billion of investment in our transport infrastructure, to build a new integrated transport infrastructure for Britain. If I may put it simply, £56 billion of that will be private money that is being levered in by private-public partnership. The first question to the Liberal Democrats must be, where will that £56 billion come from? Will it come from another 2p on income tax?

While I am on the subject of financial incoherence—

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is prepared to acknowledge that the £56 billion of private investment is not spelt out in detail anywhere in the Government's proposals. Surely it is an indicative sum, with no backing whatever.

Mr. Davies: As I proceed, I shall isolate specific amounts of private-sector investment. Perhaps the Liberals will let us know where they would get the money.

As well as the extra 2p on income tax that the investment would inflict on the public, we must bear in mind the recent Liberal U-turn on fuel tax. Only a year or so ago, the Liberal Democrats were saying that their promised extra billions of expenditure would be predicated on environmental taxation, especially fuel taxation. They now say that for five years there will be a freeze on fuel duty, irrespective of the world price of oil. If the world price of oil falls from its current level of $34 a barrel to $10, and everyone suddenly starts driving more and doing a lot of environmental damage, the Liberals will apparently retain the freeze. That is sheer opportunism, and I fear that the leader of the Liberal party is on the waiting list for a spine transplant.

Mr. Don Foster: It does the House a great disservice to misrepresent the position of any political party. I know that the hon. Gentleman missed a debate on this subject, but he will, I hope, be well aware that the Liberal Democrats have changed their policy because they have now found better ways of targeting the key issues of congestion and pollution. When a better way can be found, it is sensible to change.

Given that we have changed, it is interesting to note that all independent commentators say that only the Liberal Democrats have transport policies that are likely to solve the country's transport difficulties.

Mr. Davies: That is false. In fact I did attend the debate that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I ask him to set the record straight.

If, for argument's sake, the world price of oil dropped to $10 a barrel in two years' time, would the hon. Gentleman's policy enable him to increase fuel duty? I think the answer is no.

Liberal policy is based on the assumption that fuel duty will not change, irrespective of the world price of oil. As I have said, that is an incoherent and opportunist position; what is more, it shoots a big black hole in the Liberal finances, ripped even deeper by the latest proposition that private money—it seems—is dirty money in today's Britain. That is an outdated and outmoded view.

Mr. Foster: I do not wish to go into the difficulties experienced by the hon. Gentleman and his party when the Prime Minister is not even prepared to support such moves as congestion charging. I simply ask the hon. Gentleman this: if on Wednesday the Chancellor of the Exchequer announces proposals to freeze fuel duty, as is widely predicted in the newspapers, will the hon. Gentleman vote against the Chancellor?

Mr. Davies: I will not support the proposal to freeze fuel duty for five years regardless of the global price of oil, as that would be foolish. I accept that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor may, in the short term, choose to

freeze duty or change it in any way that he sees fit. However, he will give himself the flexibility to alter our tax position in the light of world conditions, the environmental threat and problems faced by this country. People listening to our debate should be aware that while we have slightly higher fuel duty than the rest of Europe, we have much lower tax overall. Our tax position is correct, not the European one. We will find that harmonisation is moving towards the Labour way, not the running-scared Liberal Democrat way.

As for privatisation versus PPP, it has been suggested that privatisation and the Government's position are precisely the same. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which, in July 1999, received a report on the privatisation of our railtrack system, which took place just before the 1996 election and which, in my view, was an appalling act of robbery. The British taxpayer saw our railtrack system sold for less than £2 billion but, by July 1999, when we received the report, it was worth £8 billion. People will not witness that sort of situation under this Government. The Tories take the same position on the tube, and believe that we should sell it off cheap so that, before anyone knows it, the private sector owner will have jacked up prices and reduced the number of people who use the tube. That would serve neither the public purse nor the passenger and would be a Tory rip-off that, like the privatisation of the railways, would lead to a fragmented and incoherent shambles.

We inherited such a position, which is why we introduced the Strategic Rail Authority, which has a co-ordinating role. We shall invest an extra £60 billion through our 10-year-plan, much of which will be private money. On the issue of PPP and Railtrack, hon. Members may not know that the SRA has 1 million shares in Railtrack. If there is increasing subsidy from the public sector, one wonders whether the public think that we should take a greater equity share in getting feedback and having a proper PPP. That should be part of the future debate about the restructuring of Railtrack, not least because a greater Government stake would enable Railtrack to borrow more money for investment from the City. A greater stake would mean less public investment and more investment from the private sector.

Our debate is about how we maximise the leverage of private sector money in our transport infrastructure. That is a precondition for safety, as investment is the first thing that safety needs. The Liberal Democrat motion does not allow for the approach of trying to maximise partnership, investment and value for money for the taxpayer. The Public Accounts Committee will examine that matter when it looks at its options.

Before coming to this grand place, I was the leader of the largest local authority in London and oversaw the introduction of Tramlink. I very much hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will come and visit Tramlink, which, in six months of operation, is already the most successful tram system in Britain. It is more successful than the system in Manchester and has levered in £100 million of private money, as well as £125 million of public money. Unlike the Jubilee line, which was heralded by the Tories as a great Tory success, Tramlink was not delayed for a year and billions of pounds over-budget because we managed the contract correctly. In fact, Tramlink was delayed, which shows that the public sector does not have a monopoly in delays. However, the cost of that delay—or the risk—was transferred to the private sector.

The issue is therefore about finding value for money and transferring risk. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) to say that it is cheaper for the Treasury to borrow money, but is that so? One must look at cost and time overruns and consider their price. The matter is not just about the cost of capital, so the Liberal Democrat position is rather naive. There is a choice between Liberal Democrat dogma, Tory failure and the success of this Government.

The first question that has to be asked is—I have been asking it throughout—do the Liberal Democrats rule out a public-private partnership? If they do not, what sort of PPP do they rule in? Then we are in a different debate.

Someone asked me specifically for examples of extra cash. The channel tunnel is levering in an extra £3.3 billion, the tube £8 billion and National Air Traffic Services £1.3 billion. That is £12.6 billion. Where is that coming from? "Another few pence on income tax," is the normal response from the irresponsible Liberal Democrats.

Then we get into, "We will not do that. We will take the Canadian trust model, we will do tube bonds or whatever." The Minister has made it clear that the Public Accounts Committee will analyse the value-for-money options objectively. As a member of that Committee, I am open-minded about the different vehicles. The issue is how to get the best value for money in the right amount of time to deliver the standards that the public demand after years of neglect from the Tories. It is about independent regulation, risk transfer and investment in safety.

The next question that was posed is: can the private sector deliver safety? The dogmatic presumption of the Liberal Democrats was that private means unsafe because of profit-grabbing capitalists. We only have to compare British Airways with Aeroflot. What are the issues? They are investment and regulation, not simply ownership.

After all, let us face it: one of the reasons why there is underinvestment in NATS is because the Tory Government had other priorities for expenditure. If they wanted to spend more on tax cuts, the national health service or whatever, they could squeeze NATS. PPP gives a guaranteed cash flow and certainty for investment. It enables NATS to invest in innovation in safety, rather than leaving the situation static.

Air traffic is growing year on year at 6 per cent. To a great extent, the challenge in terms of safety is an information technology challenge: how do we get the computer systems, the IT technology, to manage the system? The question is: where are the skills in the marketplace? As a member of the PAC, I have seen many reports on public sector management of computer systems for national insurance, immigration or whatever. It is not a very good record. The skills are in the private sector. That is another reason why we need a PPP—to ensure investment, smart purchasing, smart operation and safety.

Safety is a cost—it is true—but it is also a product for sale. It needs innovation. People who give me lectures but who have never been in a business in their life might not understand that.

Again, it is about skills and technology. Who knows about that? What is the right structure? "How much public, how much private?" is not an a priori dogmatic question. It is an empirical question about what is right—what is the right mix in a certain situation. What can be tried and tested, rather than rejected through dogma from

[Mr. Davies]

the Tories, who say simply that private is right, public is wrong, or the Liberal Democrats, who also seem to have a dogmatic approach?

This country is moving from years of neglect into a new era—£180 billion, a 22 per cent. real terms increase, of investment in rail, road and all our transport to deliver a modern, safe and integrated transport system for the new millennium. I support the Government's bid to do that.

9.8 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies). I am pleased that he has had a new child, but in that case, he might have followed what I believe is current Government policy and taken two weeks' parental leave, rather than one.

It is my pleasure to focus on just one aspect of the debate: the part privatisation of London Underground. The tube is the lifeblood of our capital city. Just last week, a report by Business Strategies said that

> poor transport is jeopardising strong jobs growth in central London,

so having a smooth-running tube is not optional. It is a vital service for Londoners and visitors to London. It needs to be safe, clean, affordable and reliable. The way in which London Underground is funded is vital in ensuring that those objectives are met.

After 18 years of underfunding that left the tube with a £1.2 billion investment backlog, privatisation is the best option that the Tories can think of. Conservative Members' ideological commitment to privatisation is very reassuring. It shows that they are incapable of change, and that they will be flying the tube privatisation banner high as they lose their seats at the next general election.

Privatisation will not work for the underground. It would be a repeat of the railways disaster. Gerald Corbett said that railway privatisation was designed

> to maximise the proceeds to the Treasury. It was not designed to optimise safety, optimise investment or, indeed, cope with the huge increase in the number of passengers.

—and he should know about the effect of railway privatisation.

In view of their priorities, we can only hope that Conservative Members never get their hands on our public services again. They have already made their intentions, including at least £8 billion of cuts nationwide, very clear. That amounts to a cut of £24 million in my London borough.

If underground privatisation follows the Tories' past record of stunning business acumen, the underground will be sold off for much less than it is worth. As we have heard today, privatisation and undervaluation of Railtrack lost taxpayers £6 billion. Additionally, privatisation does not even guarantee that the private sector will invest in the tube. Railtrack has had to be dragged kicking and screaming to deliver its investment programme.

Labour's public-private partnership may seem better than privatisation, but in an attempt to get the best of both worlds, Labour runs the risk of getting the worst of both. There are a number of problems with the public-private partnership. The Minister quoted the Industrial Society, but he did not quote its statement, as reported on BBC news in September, that the Government's plans to modernise London Underground represent "poor value for money" and could put passenger safety at risk.

The Government can no longer dismiss those safety concerns—

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman should read the whole report.

Mr. Brake: The Minister should read it again.

Fragmentation of the railway industry led to deteriorating communications. How can the Government guarantee that a similar break-up of London Underground will not lead to an identical breakdown in communications? We have heard nothing from the Minister on that point.

PPP does not make sense financially. Glaister, Scanalon and Travers suggests that over a 30-year period, a bond issue would work out at about £80 million cheaper per annum. That would be a very significant saving.

PPP could also cost travellers more. Under the Government's current expenditure plans, grant funding for London Underground is to be withdrawn and the underground is to be funded by fares revenue alone, with the possible exception of major extensions to the network. I have heard rumours that the Government may cave in and accept that grant funding will remain necessary in 2001-02 and beyond. If that is correct, I hope that the Minister will confirm as much, as it would set many Londoners' minds at rest. If he cannot give us that reassurance, the public-private partnership and the withdrawal of grant, taken together, could mean that investment costs are shifted even more on to passengers.

Additionally, public-private partnership could mean that one of the problems with our tube system—affordability—is exacerbated. If fares continue to increase at current rates—the figure of 30 per cent. has been mentioned today—the tube will be out of the reach of many of London's citizens.

PPP is also about standing still—maintaining and upgrading the current system and dealing with the repairs backlog, but ignoring the desperate need for expansion and new lines.

The infrastructure charges that London Underground will have to pay to the PPP companies are expected to increase almost annually as more work is done on the network. Once contracts are signed, London Underground will have to meet those charges regardless of whether revenue increases. Responsibility for meeting any shortfall will rest, ultimately, with the Mayor and the Greater London Authority. The shortfall after two years of the operation of PPP has been estimated at around £175 million—a substantial sum.

On accountability, Labour is to bring in a system that the GLA members—London's elected representatives—do not want. They will be the ones left to pick up the pieces if it all goes wrong.

The Minister was worried earlier that he was not going to get his fix of Liberal Democrat public interest companies; he was wondering why no one had referred to them. I can reassure him that I am about to do exactly that. We believe that public interest companies provide a true alternative to the PPP fudge. Allowing those companies to raise their own capital, freed from the public sector requirement constraints, would provide a far

cheaper means of finance than the private sector—a point the Minister did not respond to. We will be happy to put up this proposal for analysis with the public sector comparator—something that the Government have still to use on PPP. Incidentally, their plans could still unravel at this very late stage.

Public interest companies can work to public sector objectives; this has been done in New York. As we know, New York's successful tube supremo Mr. Kiley has been drafted in to London Underground. He must be somewhat disillusioned with his scope for action, as he is stuck with PPP. It is as if that other foreign import, the England team manager, had been asked to put together his best team but could only use left-footed players.

With public interest companies, the tube would not lose all Government-supplied revenue, which would run the risk of raising ticket prices. Additional sources of future funding, such as congestion charging, could be used later to top up the investment fund. Public interest companies do not carry the safety problems caused by fragmentation into different parts—another point that the Minister did not respond to. He has not explained how he will address the risks of a fragmented system under PPP—risks that we have already seen following rail privatisation.

Public interest companies would provide a financing system that truly would be in the public interest—bringing in desperately needed finance, but also safeguarding the public interest, not just businesses.

The Minister talks about the delays that would arise if a public interest company if were introduced now. The PPP was expected to be completed in April this year, yet no contract has been signed for the two deep tube lines. For the sub-surface line, the fiasco of attempting to cobble together an agreement between London Transport and Railtrack—which many felt was anti-competitive—means that a deal is not expected until April 2001 at the latest, four years after the Labour Government came to power.

The Government have inherited one of William Hague's Conservatives' least attractive features—obstinacy. However, it is not too late for the Government to abandon PPP—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should know by now that we do not refer to Members of this House in that way.

Mr. Brake: Thank you for pointing that out, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is not too late for the Government to abandon the public-private partnership. The Minister should think again, learn the lessons from railway privatisation, hear the voices of millions of Londoners and dump PPP.

9.18 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The Liberal Democrats' motion is opportunist, and much of what the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said was inconsistent with their own manifesto. If we compare the manifesto with what he said tonight, we will see whether this is a case of the Liberals being consistent—or, as usual, facing both ways at the same time.

In the manifesto, the Liberal Democrats said that they would

> retain London Underground in public ownership and give it the right to seek private finance for new investment without an assured government guarantee.

We have not heard much from them today about how they propose to bring in the £7 billion that the Government will raise on the public-private partnership for London Underground. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) criticises the lack of investment in London Underground without giving us any clues about how his party proposes to raise the money.

The Liberal Democrats said that they would

> Treble the freight and double the number of passengers carried on Britain's railways by the year 2010.

Again, they did not tell us how they would raise the money. They vaguely said that they would

> require Railtrack to meet targets for greater investment and increased passenger and freight traffic

but we heard nothing from their spokesman about what that really means. It is pure words.

The only point in their manifesto with which I can agree is when they said that they would

> strengthen the powers of the rail regulators.

I must give the Government credit: the Strategic Rail Authority brings into one pot a number of different authorities, and that is badly needed for the railways. However, I will not let the Government entirely off the hook on safety, to which I shall return.

The Liberal Democrats said that they would

> withhold public subsidies from Railtrack if the targets are not met.

Goodness knows what that will do. It will surely make matters worse. If Railtrack cannot increase its own investment and there is no public subsidy, the railways will suffer.

The motion is opportunistic and the Liberal Democrats have failed to explain their policies, but this is still an important debate, in which we must get one or two facts on the record. Much has been made of the failure of my party's privatisation of the railways. Let us look at the facts. Between May 1997 and September 1999 there was a 5 per cent. increase in passenger journeys, and we now have the largest number of passenger journeys on the railways for 40 years.

Privatisation can hardly be called a failure if we have that record number of passengers—which has, of course, given rise to some of the problems that we now face. The rails are simply not standing up to the huge increase in traffic, and are suffering from metal fatigue. We want to encourage more freight and passengers onto the railways, but we must be extra vigilant on safety.

Despite what the Liberal Democrats want, domestic rail freight increased by 15 per cent. in the two years to March 1999, to a record 17.4 billion tonnes moved. There are 1,300 more trains being run daily to meet increased demand since privatisation. Since 1997, 13 new stations and more than 50 new freight terminals have opened and £1.95 billion of rolling stock has been ordered. That is not a bad record.

The Government claim the credit for increased investment in the railways, but in the next breath they

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

criticise us for privatising them. They cannot have it both ways. Their own spokesman, Lord Macdonald, said:

> I acknowledge readily that credit must be given to the railway industry for the advances made in safety management in recent times. Indeed, the number of signals passed at danger has been reduced significantly. I am pleased that Railtrack felt able to announce earlier this month that the number of broken rails in the half year in question, compared with the previous period, had declined by 32 per cent.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 October 2000; Vol. 617, c. 1201.]

To listen to some of the scaremongering, one would think that the whole system was falling apart.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that many of the achievements that he cited have happened since 1997. Does he agree that the new Labour Government brought a different ethos and attitude, and that the combination of encouragement and pressure for improved standards and better and more frequent services has come from this Government, and not from the Conservative Government, whose tactics were simply to privatise?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Government have been able to build on the investment put in by Railtrack to improve the railways as I described. That simply would not have been possible under the old public sector ethos. We all remember the dirty and delayed trains under British Rail. The system was crumbling and getting worse by the year. Now at least we are getting significant sums invested in the railways, which is exactly what they need. I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing that out.

I follow the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington in echoing my concerns for the people of London, the tourists and others who use the London underground system. There is a significant problem—we all acknowledge that London Underground has been suffering from underinvestment for many years. What worries me is that the Government have planned for a huge amount of income from the public-private partnership, yet it seems that there will be a considerable delay if ever they manage to get the scheme off the ground. Their own figures prove that: last year London Underground received £338 million in public sector grants, while this year the figure is only £89 million, and next year it is planned to be £102 million. I suggest that the reason for those significant reductions is that the Government were planning for the income to come from the public-private partnership. If that money is not forthcoming, and if the public subsidy drops, the passengers of London Underground will continue to suffer considerably more pain yet before things get better—if they ever get better under this Government.

Whatever happens, I call on the Government to get on with their public-private partnership. We would prefer a full privatisation, but whatever the outcome, there needs to be a significant increase in investment in the London underground system for all the passengers who travel on it. I have travelled on it recently—*[Interruption.]* I have travelled on it ever since I was a small child. I remember when I was five years old being stuck on the underground for two and a half hours with my mother. That was in the 1958 floods, as it happens—but not many people can remember that far back. That demonstrates that we need more investment. I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will be able to explain what will happen in the interim before the money comes in from the public-private partnership.

The privatisation of National Air Traffic Services is also an important part of the debate. How will the Government fund the £300 million needed for the new investment at Prestwick? Everybody who is involved with air traffic control agrees that the facility at Prestwick is urgently needed. As I understand it, the Government were relying on the proceeds of the NATS privatisation for that £300 million. When are the Government confident of getting the Bill through the House, and when are they likely to receive the money from the NATS privatisation? Will that pay for the Prestwick facility, and can they give an assurance that it will be built on time?

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the previous Government's plans for a private finance initiative delayed the Prestwick centre by several years?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: This Government have been in power for almost four years. They have had more than sufficient time to sort out any problems regarding Prestwick. The previous Government introduced the PFI for the new facility at Swanwick, and that facility will come on stream, as the Minister said, by the end of 2001 or the beginning of 2002. I am quite certain that had the Conservative party been elected by the British people in 1997, we would have sorted out the problems and the hon. Lady would have had the facility in Prestwick by now. I do not think that there can be too much criticism there.

What do the Government propose to do about the golden share? The Minister said quite emphatically that this was not a privatisation. However, the Government are selling off 46 per cent., with another 5 per cent. being sold to the employees. They are keeping a golden share and retaining 49 per cent. Is that compatible with European law? Will the European Commission allow the Government to keep the golden share? If not, they may have to sell off a majority stake. In that case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) said, how can they prevent a French company from purchasing NATS?

I should also like the Minister to tell us whether the Government are in favour of the European skies policy, and how it will affect the public-private partnership of NATS. That policy has not been mentioned this evening. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister would listen instead of laughing and talking all the time, he might learn something. That policy is of considerable concern to the military, which will not, as it does now, have reserved airspace over Europe, and which is worried about operational safety.

The Liberal Democrats, who tabled this evening's motion, favour some sort of bond issue.

Mr. Don Foster: Some have.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Are the Liberal Democrats in favour of a bond or not? My understanding was that they were. PricewaterhouseCoopers, the well known firm of accountants, has estimated that assuming an AA rating—if that can be assumed—a bond issued by London transport would have to pay 1.2 per cent. more than a

Government gilt. If one has to pay over the odds to issue a bond, why not let the Government borrow the money in the first place? Even better, the money could be raised far more cheaply by privatising London Underground and relieving the pain that commuters on the underground have to suffer under this Government. At the next election, the commuters of London will give their verdict on having had to suffer that pain.

9.31 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I have listened to some of the debate with increasing incredulity, partly because the Liberal Democrat motion does not distinguish privatisation from public-private partnerships. Conservative Members claim credit for the improvements in rail usage, saying that it results from privatisation. That is fantasy. The reality is that privatisation left the legacy of disinvestment and disrepair in our railways that we have all seen in the past few weeks. The Government's determination and pressure has resulted in increased rail use and greater investment by Railtrack.

Let us get the facts straight. We inherited from the previous Government a huge investment backlog, ever increasing traffic, crumbling roads and 20 years of public transport neglect. Rail privatisation broke the network into 100 parts, and we know that it was a bad deal for taxpayers. Between 1986 and 1996, the proportion of public transport journeys fell by 11 per cent. and the number of car journeys increased by 21 per cent. Bus journeys outside London fell by 31 per cent. in the last 10 years of Conservative Government, who left us with a funding backlog of £1.2 billion for London Underground.

Comments that Railtrack's increased investment was due to the legacy of privatisation do not bear scrutiny. By May 1997, Railtrack was £700 million behind in its rail investment and maintenance programme and—day by day, week by week—we see the effects of that legacy. The proportion of freight carried on our rail system has decreased; congestion on our road has grown by 66 per cent., and there are 70 more cars per mile of road since 1979.

Conservative Members have elaborated a fantasy; it is a myth to suggest that privatisation has somehow enhanced the experience of the travelling public and those who use public transport and our railways. Let us consider what was the intention of the Tories. In 1994, the right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) said:

> Increases in fuel duty, and motorway tolling, will help people to make . . . informed choices—[*Official Report*, 30 March 1994; Vol. 240, c. 930.]

We were told:

> Private enterprise given its head to build toll roads could get Britain back on the move.

That is what Conservative Members told us then. Their agenda is purely one of privatisation, and their call for the privatisation of London Underground does them no credit.

The Liberal Democrats argue that we should not take the public-private partnership route, but their approach contains a significant gap of £56 million in public transport investment. Where do they intend to find £8 billion for London Underground, £3.3 billion for the channel tunnel rail link and £1.3 billion for the National Air Traffic Services? Those sums would be needed for a significant improvement in our public transport system, and they would have to come from private sector investment. That approach is similar to the usual Liberal method of funding: it involves fairy-tale politics and returns us to the 1p—the longest 1p in history—or, in this case, 2p or 3p, on income tax.

I shall recount two examples, with which I have been directly involved, that show how PPPs can work well. The first involves the docklands light railway extension to Lewisham. Lewisham council, of which I was leader, joined with the private sector—we produced money from our resources in local government and from central Government—to extend that railway to Lewisham. That brought significant benefits, including reduced risk, on-time delivery of the network and regeneration of the local economy in Lewisham. I am proud to have been involved in that PPP. The extension brought immense benefits to a part of south-east London that has suffered severe transport difficulties, not least because of the appalling rail service that goes through south London to Lewisham.

My second example is London Luton airport, which I am pleased to have in my constituency. I want to put the record straight—a PPP will not undermine the safety of airways. London Luton airport has never been run through NATS; nor were other airports, including Birmingham, and Sheffield. More airports are run under private arrangements than are covered by NATS. Do the Liberal Democrats truly believe that the skies over those airports are unsafe? That is nonsense.

If we had not entered into a PPP for London Luton airport, the massive increase in passenger throughput during the past few years would not have occurred. Significant investment in a new air terminal and rail interchange has brought life to the notion of an integrated transport policy. The Government advocated and implemented that approach—a combination of commitment and investment and a determination to lever in private sector investment that would not otherwise have been available. *[Interruption.]* Despite the protestations of an Opposition Member from a sedentary position, Luton airport benefited significantly from a PPP. The airport has increased its passenger throughput by several million; the figure should rise to 5 million during the next few years.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Moran: Time does not permit me to accept an intervention.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I gave way to the hon. Lady.

Ms Moran: The hon. Gentleman did not give way to me, and time does not allow me to give way to him. I hope that I will be able to let him intervene another time.

For every million passengers who pass through the airport, 1,000 extra jobs are created in my constituency. That is good news in terms of investment and new infrastructure, and it is excellent news for the travelling public, my constituents' employment and the local economy. The evidence clearly shows that PPPs work. The airport is retained under local authority control, but with a PPP that enabled the investment to occur. The effort will continue during the next few years.

[Ms Moran]

Those are just two examples of the benefits that PPP can bring to our transport system and to our local economies. I wish that Liberal Democrat Members were a little more clear-headed as to the difference between privatisation and PPPs. The way in which they intend to end PPPs does them no service whatever.

9.40 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a few, brief points in relation to the closing words of our motion, on the dogmatic privatisation of public services in general.

No one has yet mentioned the health service. In my constituency, it is of considerable concern because our lovely, new cottage hospital, which is just about to be built, will be of the type that deals only with minor operations and day surgery. We have heard from several Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen that, in future, such procedures will be carried out only in the private sector. That means that the privatisation of the new hospital in Newbury would be almost inevitable, were the Conservatives ever to come to power again.

That is a considerable worry to my constituents. I hope that Ministers agree that if that were to happen, it would be simply awful and that, if the Conservatives continue with that policy, they deserve to lose every vote in west Berkshire.

9.41 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): The debate has been interesting—except for those of us who served on the Transport Bill Standing Committee, for whom it has merely been a repetition of many, old arguments. Although Liberal Democrats might have been accused of opportunism on a few occasions, such accusations come ill from members of two parties that have shifted position so quickly—albeit in a heavy-footed way—during the past few years and especially during the past few months.

I shall focus on the privatisation of NATS. There is mounting public concern about privatisation in the transport sector. As there is raging uncertainty across the sector, the ill-conceived plans to privatise air traffic control should be scrapped. There is no public support for the proposal and little need for the Government to sell any NATS shares.

Frequently, the Government advance their case for privatisation by highlighting investment requirements and the need both to involve private sector expertise and to separate safety regulation from practitioners. As we have often pointed out, we do not dispute those objectives but the route proposed to achieve them.

Our proposal for an independent, publicly owned corporation or trust satisfies each of those requirements, but—crucially—retains public sector control. That means that it will retain public confidence.

Since our previous debate on NATS privatisation, two significant developments have occurred. First, the Civil Aviation Authority produced proposals for the regulatory regime after privatisation. Secondly, the shortlist for the strategic partner has been published and has already been whittled down.

Our central concern about the privatisation of air traffic control is the nature of the market in which NATS operates. Competition—rightly—does not exist and revenue is heavily regulated; thus profit-driven corporations will be forced to cut costs to deliver their objectives. Cutting costs sits uneasily beside the paramount importance of safety. That is at the heart of public concern about the privatisation of NATS.

It is especially alarming that the first attempt by the CAA to set out a post-privatisation regime for economic regulation of air traffic control has been condemned by NATS itself. NATS described the proposals as "totally inappropriate", not least because

> the severe cuts in operating costs and investment are inconsistent with the proper carrying out of its functions—

especially its—

> prime duty . . . the safe provision of air traffic control.

The criticism is breathtaking—in civil-service-speak, perhaps even brave. Equally breathtaking is the silence that followed. To date, there has been no ministerial comment and no resolution of the conflict at the heart of privatisation. How can any bidder seriously prepare to take on the role of strategic partner next March when the market rules after privatisation are still unknown? It is a real mess.

We now know the final three bidders in the beauty contest to become NATS' strategic partner. The list of bidders exposes the serious problems at the heart of the NATS privatisation proposal. I shall briefly highlight the conflicts of interest that each bidder involves.

Novares is a partnership principally between Lockheed Martin and the Airways Corporation of New Zealand. Lockheed Martin is a huge multinational corporation with many different interests but, as we know, it is the prime supplier at Swanwick and it is believed to have lost between £150 million and £300 million through the delay and ineffective control of that project. It has more recently won the contract for the new Scottish centre, and the blunt truth is that it has a great interest in controlling the paymasters of that project. The Airways Corporation of New Zealand is an overseas air traffic control outfit which has also run into controversy recently, because it has changed its two-centre strategy—which has been the core of many concerns, not least in Scotland—to a one-centre strategy with very little public support.

Nimbus is another bidder and one of the main components of that, Aeronautical Radio Inc.—ARINC—is an equipment supplier for NATS and falls foul of the same conflicts of interest as Lockheed Martin.

The final consortium is the Airline Group. It is interesting that it specifies that it is a not-for-profit organisation. Perhaps that reveals what it thinks of bringing the profit motive into this sector. However, it cannot escape from the basic reality that eight airlines—including British Airways, Virgin and British Midland—are in the consortium and that they generate the vast proportion of NATS' revenue. It is no wonder that they want to get their hands on it if it is to be privatised. Sitting beside the airlines as advisers are three air traffic operators from overseas. They are all on board, but it is not clear what relationship they would have with NATS after privatisation. In particular, we do not know the implications that there might be for national security. It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us what the Ministry of Defence says about that.

Our motion rightly condemns the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in public services while the Government amendment

welcomes the Government's policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground.

However, bereft of principles and bereft of arguments, the Government have raised pragmatism to the status of the dogma, doggedly pursuing an agenda out of touch with public opinion.

In the privatisation of air traffic control, the bidders are riddled with conflicts of interest. NATS does not believe that the Civil Aviation Authority's proposals will work and the public have no confidence in the plans. They should be scrapped.

9.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): This has been an interesting debate. I am not sure that those of us who are veterans of proceedings on the Transport Bill have heard many new arguments, but we have heard one or two old arguments presented in a slightly different way.

As I listened to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) huffing and puffing about the wickedness of privatisation, the thought idly passed through my mind that there might have been no privatisation at all if the Liberals had not voted with the Tories to bring down the Callaghan Government in 1979. I hope that the House will forgive a little trip down memory lane, but the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) took us back as far as Beatrice and Sidney Webb, so I thought that I would chance an outing back to 1979. We all change but, at that time, the Liberals preferred a Government led by Mrs. Thatcher to a Government led by Mr. Callaghan. That had consequences that we can all vividly recall.

I am opposed—and so are the Government—to the dogmatic pursuit of privatisation in the public services. Such a pursuit of privatisation was a characteristic of the previous Government. I exempt the hon. Member for Poole since, as he explained, he is pragmatic. Most members of the previous Government believed as a matter of principle that the public sector was bad and the private sector was good—and some of them said so in such stark terms. Tory Ministers believed at the time that privatisation was a panacea, and that has led us to all sorts of problems—not least the mess following privatisation of the railways that they have left us to clear up.

The Government's approach has been entirely different—*[Interruption.]* Stay with me. We are seeking to combine the strongest features of both the public and private sectors. We want to work together for the public good.

Mr. Don Foster: It says here.

Mr. Mullin: Yes, it does say here; I wrote it.

As the Under-Secretary said in his opening remarks, the public-private partnerships that we are putting together for the London Underground and National Air Traffic Services represent carefully devised, appropriate and pragmatic—yes, there is that word again—solutions to problems that have arisen from years of under-investment and poor project management in the two services.

The Government will retain a major stake in NATS, allowing it to retain a significant degree of influence over the management of the business. If the hon. Member for Bath will forgive me for saying so, he made several irresponsible points about safety. Safety, far from being undermined, will be enhanced. It will remain with the public sector—the Civil Aviation Authority—and will be entirely separate from day-to-day operational control. As for London Underground, strategic control will remain with the public sector, reporting to the Mayor. In 30 years' time, the assets, far from being permanently privatised, will revert to the public sector.

The advantage of a public-private partnership is that it is the best way in which to lever in private sector investment and project-management expertise while preserving the safeguards that the travelling public rightly demand. Various alternative models have been proposed. The Government have examined them all and concluded that PPP is superior.

The main alternative—I am sure that it is one that would find most favour on the Liberal Democrat Benches—is for the Chancellor to write out a cheque. I have lost count of the number of times during the past three years that the Liberal Democrats have spent their extra penny on income tax—a point made by my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) and for Luton, South (Ms Moran). We have not heard so much about it recently. Now they want to help the Chancellor spend his surplus—a surplus, incidentally, that he would not have had but for his sound management of the economy.

As you may have noticed, Mr. Speaker, the Chancellor has not been short of advice from a variety of quarters in the past few weeks on how he might spend his surplus. Even the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) has been at it. He wants tax cuts and more public spending. Well, life is not like that. It is folly to pretend that everyone can have more of everything.

The plain truth is that if we are to cope with all the demands for more investment in public services, we must make some choices. Where investment can be raised from the private sector without jeopardising the public interest, it makes sense to do so—quite apart from which we need some of the private sector project-management skills that some parts of the public sector so obviously lack.

I turn to some of the points made in the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) and for Luton, South rightly pointed out the little-known fact that, at more than 30 small and medium-sized airports around the country, air traffic control is in private hands, and has been so for many years. We have all been landing and taking off at those airports without even noticing the fact—whether it be at East Midlands, Bristol, Luton or Newcastle airport, where I took off this morning. If it were true that only the state can manage industries where safety is essential, we would all travel on Aeroflot rather than British Airways. *[Interruption.]* I know that that is an old joke, but I am sure that not everyone has heard it before.

The hon. Member for Poole made a thoughtful speech. He comes from the civilised wing of his party and is not one of the true believers who sit on the Conservative Back Benches, not that there are many of them present tonight. He said that the Conservative party is pragmatic—he can say that again. Had he attended our previous debate,

[Mr. Mullin]

he would have heard his hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) call for the restoration of the link between earnings and the state pension—a link that the Conservative party broke many years ago. That is pragmatism for you.

The hon. Member for Poole asks whether March 2001 was still the date for the sale. Yes, the Government intend the sale to go ahead on that date. He asks whether we intend to reverse the Lords amendment relating to pensions. Yes, the position of existing employees is already adequately protected. He asks about overseas ownership, and the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) mentioned the three companies on the final shortlist. We do not accept the argument that only a British strategic partner can be the right one. The right partner will be the one that provides the best solution and future for NATS; that is the basis on which we shall assess the bids. Incidentally, we have some plans to protect the Tory party from foreign ownership: part IV, chapter II of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will prevent foreign donations, and not before time.

The hon. Member for Poole made a serious point about safety. He expressed concern about the interaction between the rail regulator and Railtrack and about the fact that Railtrack could be fined for not meeting punctuality targets and for delays to trains. We recognise the seriousness of that issue, so we have asked Sir Alastair Morton to consider with the industry the contractual and regulatory regime. The framework was created at the time of privatisation, but we shall have to consider what revision is needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked what effect a delay to the PPP of the sort proposed by the Lords would have. We intend to reverse that Lords amendment. Were it to stand, it would jeopardise the PPP.

Ms Osborne: Will my hon. Friend confirm the implications for the new Scottish centre of the Lords amendment standing and the NATS' PPP being delayed until after the general election?

Mr. Mullin: As I say, the programme for the new Scottish centre, which, after initial difficulties, is now going quite well, would be jeopardised.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) quoted the Industrial Society report and suggested that it said that passengers would be put at risk. In fact, the report stated that the society did not subscribe to the view that the PPP was inherently unsafe, and it welcomed the Government's efforts to ensure that safety was kept in public sector control.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) asked whether the Government were confident of being able to retain a golden share. Yes.

In conclusion, the Government have no desire to repeat the mistakes of Conservative privatisations, in which public assets were simply looted. Our aim is to channel badly needed private sector funding and management skills into our transport infrastructure for the benefit of all. Ours are not the "flog it and forget it" exercises that the Conservatives continue to advocate. We are retaining a significant Government presence precisely for the purpose of protecting the public interest.

The London Underground PPP enables us finally to reverse the historic decline of the tube. It offers billions of pounds of investment—

Mr. Tyler *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 43, Noes 272.

Division No. 319] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Heath and
Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*

Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):*

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 68.

Division No. 320] **[10.11 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin

Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Dénis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Day, Stephen
Fabricant, Michael
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Damian
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. David Heath.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House deplores the previous Government's incompetent privatisation of the railways which left the network fragmented, cost taxpayers billions of pounds and brought rail travellers hours of delays; welcomes the Government's creation of the Strategic Rail Authority to give direction to the industry from an industry-wide perspective rather than from the narrow interests of individual companies; recognises that the Government's 10-year plan is delivering the largest investment programme for the railways for generations to tackle the problems caused by years of under-investment in the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's pragmatic policy of developing Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground, enabling much needed investment and private sector financial and management skills to be introduced to the public services while safeguarding safety and the public interest; and regrets the official Opposition's dogmatic pursuit of privatisation for the London Underground and the National Air Traffic Services.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

SOCIAL POLICY AGENDA

That the House takes note of European Union Document No. 9964/00, a European Commission Communication on a European Social Policy Agenda for the next five years; and supports the Government's welcome for the Commission's analysis of the challenges facing employment and social policy in the next five years and for the emphasis placed on increasing employability, on combating social exclusion, on promoting entrepreneurship, whilst opposing proposals that impose unnecessary burdensome new legislation particularly upon business, and remaining convinced of the need for proposals to codify, adapt or improve existing legislation or for new legislation to be made clear and workable; and notes the Government's intention to negotiate to this end, and to ensure that the proposals take proper account of the legitimate concerns of employers and the need to raise employment rates across the Community.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Pensions and Pensioners

10.23 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Many of my constituents have asked me to present a petition on the same theme as the debate that my party called earlier this evening. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members leave the Chamber quietly? An hon. Member is presenting a petition.

Mr. Taylor: My constituents declare that

last year's increase of 75p in the basic state pension is derisory and is keeping pensioners in poverty.

The issue is particularly important in my part of the world, where so many elderly people live and have lived on low incomes throughout their lives.

The petition continues:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security—

as we did in tonight's debate—

to reconsider and give all pensioners an increase in their basic state pension that reflects a real share of the nation's wealth.

Liberal Democrats have campaigned with the petitioners for increases on top of inflation, ranging from £5 a week for single pensioners to £15 for single pensioners over 80, and nearly £30 for pensioner couples. I hope that on Wednesday the Chancellor will finally listen to the huge campaign that has been run for such increases, first by pensioners alone and then with the support of Liberal Democrats around the country.

To lie upon the Table.

Horticulture Research International

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10.24 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Stockbridge house near the village of Cawood is a horticultural research facility in my constituency. Like everything else in Selby at the moment, it is very wet indeed, and it would be remiss of me not to begin this debate by noting that, last week, the whole site and, indeed, the whole village of Cawood were under imminent threat from flooding. The products of years of research at Stockbridge house were threatened but, fortunately, owing to the heroic efforts of many villagers, led by parish council chairman David Jones, the flood waters were kept at bay. However, many of my constituents further downstream were not so lucky.

For years, I have been accustomed on Thursday morning to seek out as my first read of the day a copy of the *Selby Times*. Since Horticulture Research International's shock announcement in September that it was closing Stockbridge house from the end of March 2001, my reading habits have changed. At Thursday breakfast time, I now turn first to a paper called the *Grower*. As chronicled in the *Grower*, the normally classy world of horticulture has been in turmoil in recent weeks.

I want to do three things in this debate. First, I want to outline the importance of the horticultural sector and the current programme of research. Secondly, I want to discuss and examine the restructuring plan of Horticulture Research International and, finally, I want to suggest a way forward that will preserve the integrity of the restructuring plan—which, after all, Ministers have approved—while giving a new future to Stockbridge house.

Horticultural output has risen steadily over the past few years. The farmgate value of horticultural produce is £2.5 billion and makes up more than 15 per cent. of the UK's total agricultural output. A recent study by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food indicated that, of 11 autonomous sectors studied, horticulture is the most important for value added. The UK horticulture industry is characterised by many small and medium-sized businesses, which is why our research capacity is important. Many horticultural businesses find it hard to get the information that they need to develop their products, protect them from disease and find new markets.

Our debate will focus on the role of Horticulture Research International, a non-departmental public body, and it is worth noting that it is one of only 28 contractors for MAFF's programmes. In 2000-01, 80 per cent. of planned spending on horticultural research and development is expected to go to HRI. HRI's health is crucial to the industry, but it is essential that it has strong competitors to keep it honest. As the recent report of the Select Committee on Agriculture vividly described, HRI is, to put it bluntly, in a bit of a financial mess. Since 1990, MAFF has pledged £125 million of research and development contracts to HRI and invested £60 million in restructuring plans.

The Select Committee discussed the recent failure of the HortiTech business unit that was launched with a fanfare by the current HRI chairman, Mr. Peter Siddall, in 1998. The unit was designed to generate commercial income by transferring technology to industry and creating a commercial philosophy throughout HRI. HortiTech income is about £2.7 million, compared with a target of £4.35 million. The relative failure of HortiTech is the root of HRI's financial problems. The restructuring plan announced in September by Mr. Siddall involved a loss of about 150 posts—including about 50 at Stockbridge—which is more than 20 per cent. of HRI's total work force. Jobs will be lost as a result of the failure of the board and its chairman to balance the books.

Stockbridge house, to the astonishment of the industry, was chosen for closure. Of all the development sites run by HRI, Stockbridge house seemed to be in the strongest financial position, as Colin Harvey, chairman of the Horticultural Development Council, observed. Fifty per cent. of HRI's £22 million annual income comes directly from MAFF. However, MAFF funds only 10 per cent. of Stockbridge house's costs, with 47 per cent. coming from the Horticultural Development Council—in effect, the growers who pay the council a levy—and the remaining 43 per cent. from commercial organisations.

HRI's website boasts that "over the years" Stockbridge house

> has built up a worldwide reputation as a practical centre for horticultural research and development.

The SOLA—specific off-label approval—programme of pesticides research is particularly important to smaller growers. That is based at Stockbridge house. It provides them with the crop protection products that they need to remain competitive. Indeed, the programme is funded largely by the HDC. Mr. Siddall's plan depends on closing Stockbridge house, but transferring the contracts to other sites. There are practical difficulties in doing that.

Other criticisms of HRI's plans are as follows: first, there was a complete of lack of consultation with the industry. The management tactics employed might have been learned by studying a National Coal Board management manual from the 1980s. As the Tomato Growers Association put it in its press release:

> The Tomato Growers Association views with dismay the announcement by HRI of the intended reduction of more than 20 per cent. in its staff numbers and, in particular, the closure of its Stockbridge House site. Had HRI consulted the industry over its plans, it would know that Stockbridge has recently enjoyed the closest working relationship of any HRI site with glasshouse salad crop growers, and not just those in the north of the country.
>
> The TGA has no confidence that HRI can maintain or replace the expertise which is threatened by the closure . . . As an example, research on the control of spider mites, which is led by Stockbridge staff, is seen as pivotal to the achievement by growers of their objective of eliminating all pesticide use in UK tomato crops.

There is a strong feeling that HRI is turning its back on its original objectives. When it was set up in 1990, its brief was to

> carry out horticultural research and development and to transfer the results to the UK horticultural industry—

very much an applied practical brief, the sort of work that Stockbridge house excels in and that growers throughout the country, particularly in the north, find so useful.

I quote *The Commercial Greenhouse Grower* editorial of last month:

> The industry has made its voice very clear on the Stockbridge House closure.
>
> It feels badly let down that it was not consulted, but if you read the evidence submitted by HRI's chairman Peter Siddall . . . to the House of Commons Agriculture Select Committee you get the answer.

In his evidence Mr. Siddall aptly made clear that re-shaping HRI meant "more science and less development." And just in case we are accused of taking phrases out of context he also said "It is about focus, focus on science and the higher value end of the spectrum."

On consultation, it was shameful that, when Mr. Siddall announced his plan, no one had bothered to check with MAFF about the future of the tied cottages at Stockbridge house. Families who had given their working lives to the site were left for weeks wondering whether they would lose not just their jobs, but their homes. Thankfully, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has intervened to secure those homes.

There is an element of civil service politics about all this, which reveals the limitations of the model of a non-departmental public body. When I was invited to an extremely useful meeting with the Minister to discuss the matter, sitting on his left was one Mr. Tony Burne, his chief adviser on research. Wearing his other hat, Mr. Burne is on the HRI board. In effect, he was advising the Minister on a restructuring plan costing the taxpayer more than £4 million. As a member of the HRI board, Mr. Burne had already approved that plan and committed himself to it.

I draw three conclusions from that evidence. First, as regards the status of HRI, there is wide consensus on the immediate way forward. As long ago as 1993, the HRI management statement referred to intended primary legislation which will establish HRI as a statutory corporation with functions and powers to carry out its remit and define its relationship clearly with MAFF. Who knows? Given my new found knowledge on the subject, I might be persuaded, if I am successful in the forthcoming ballot, to introduce a private Member's Bill on the subject.

That brings me to my second conclusion. I will want first to see a new chairman of HRI. Mr. Siddall should emulate Kevin Keegan and not seek reappointment to the role when his three-year term is up in January 2001. No one in the industry has been impressed by the aggressive attitude that Mr. Siddall has adopted, most notably at a recent meeting with the National Farmers Union and the HDC, which he needs to win over. Apparently, he banned the chief executive from attending a previous meeting with the HDC.

Mr. Siddall is a management consultant by trade. His website, Siddall & Company, reveals the following philosophy:

With our clients we act as catalyst, coach and safety valve so that groups can work together more effectively.

Our clients regard us as trusted thought partners.

Enough said—HRI is too important to be an experiment for a management consultant.

The final conclusion is on the future of Stockbridge house and HRI. Earlier, I mentioned the fact that, for HRI's restructuring plan to work, HRI has to keep on-side the seven key research scientists at Stockbridge house and the HDC. None of the key research scientists are prepared to move, because of family reasons. The HDC has expressed concerns about HRI's ability to fulfil the SOLA contract at another site.

Last week, a very constructive meeting was held between representatives of HRI, the National Farmers Union and the HDC. There now seems to be a real and shared commitment to ensuring a viable and effective approach for HRI. Chief executive Professor Michael Wilson is now adopting a more pragmatic approach, making it clear that he does not rule out in the future employing the services of some of the seven key research scientists at Stockbridge house, perhaps on a contractual basis. The HDC is particularly keen that some of their skills should be employed in fulfilling the extremely important SOLA research programme.

Last week, I spoke to Professor Wilson on the telephone. He told me that he would not stand in the way of another body—perhaps the Central Science Laboratory, in York, which is another arm of MAFF and in need of glasshouses—taking over the site, and that it was up to that body to draw up a business plan. Indeed, if Professor Wilson is to contract work for the SOLA programme to some of the current research scientists, they will need continuing facilities at Stockbridge house. It is possible that some or all of the staff based at Stockbridge house could be transferred to CSL, saving some of the redundancy costs. There are also moves among local growers to establish a Stockbridge house trust to fund work on the site. I formally ask Ministers for a meeting within the next month to discuss those ideas.

Last week, I also asked Professor Wilson what he thought of accusations that HRI would implement a scorched earth policy at Stockbridge house so that no one else could take on a viable site. He assured me that the glasshouses would remain untouched, but made no commitment on the tractors and other equipment.

It is also a little unclear to what extent HRI is willing to provide financial and personnel information on Stockbridge house to enable CSL, or anyone else, to prepare a business plan for the site. Perhaps Ministers will consider dispatching the ubiquitous aforementioned Mr. Tony Burne, chief research adviser to MAFF and HRI board member, to encourage all the parties involved to give a fair chance for alternative plans for Stockbridge house to be prepared and to be carefully considered by Ministers, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food promised to do in his most recent press release on the subject.

10.38 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on securing this debate. I certainly understand why he has chosen to raise this particular issue; it is not only important, but of enormous concern to Horticulture Research International staff, to its many customers and to my hon. Friend's constituents. I very much appreciate that in securing this debate, my hon. Friend has been motivated both by concern for the jobs of some of his constituents and by the concern to secure a viable horticulture industry, and horticultural research industry, in the United Kingdom. Like officials and other Ministers in my Department, I hold very dear those concerns about the horticulture industry and the horticultural research industry.

My hon. Friend began by referring to the danger of flooding at the site in his constituency. I join him in paying tribute to the efforts of those who have worked so hard in trying to ward off the problems caused by flooding in his part of the world.

The Government very much regret that HRI is having to take the action that it has announced, including the closure of its Stockbridge house site and the redundancies

[Ms Joyce Quin]

across the organisation. Indeed, it is important to stress that all HRI's sites are affected by the restructuring programme, not just Stockbridge house—although I fully accept the severity of the impact on Stockbridge house, as outlined by my hon. Friend.

I know that HRI's board and senior management are committed to providing every possible assistance for staff who are being made redundant. That includes career consultancy, resettlement training and access to independent counselling. MAFF has made available its own personnel and welfare services. That in turn includes doing our best to identify suitable vacancies at the offices of MAFF or our agencies. When my hon. Friend met my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, they discussed some of these concerns.

The Government believe that however difficult HRI's restructuring measures may be, they are necessary to redress a very difficult financial situation and to ensure that HRI can continue to provide an efficient and cost-effective service into the future.

My hon. Friend mentioned some of HRI's financial problems, and it is true that it is forecasting an annual deficit for the four years ending March 2004 of about £2 million, falling to £1.3 million. Some £3 million must be cut from operating costs, and assets must be brought into line with foreseeable income streams. That is why the board and management had to review the financial strategy, and to take difficult decisions as a result. The horticulture industry and the farmers' unions share the view that to maintain HRI and provide for its crucial work for the sector, the restructuring is necessary.

The Government believe that HRI's board and senior management have assessed all the options and identified the one which, in their view, can best secure the organisation's future and maintain its service to the UK horticulture industry. HRI is a non-departmental public body, and decisions about the day-to-day operation of its business are, of course, matters for its board and senior management. It has an experienced board, which includes senior representatives of the horticulture industry, the scientific community and business.

I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that, as HRI's sponsor Department, the Ministry has scrutinised the plans very thoroughly. We have agreed to provide a grant of £4.5 million to enable the restructuring to be implemented. My right hon. Friend the Minister met my hon. Friend with a delegation from the industry on 21 September, to listen to their concerns directly and to discuss the restructuring plans, including the closure of the Stockbridge house site.

One of the points arising was the industry-funded work at Stockbridge house and its future. Not surprisingly, my hon. Friend referred to the arrangements that HRI has in hand to ensure that it can continue to deliver the important project work currently based at Stockbridge house, and its chief executive has given the Minister an undertaking that those arrangements will be fully discussed and explained to the industry.

To that end, HRI has had lengthy and detailed discussions with senior representatives of the industry to explain the rationale behind the restructuring plans and the arrangements for managing work currently carried out at Stockbridge house. I am pleased to be able to report that on 2 November HRI, the National Farmers Union, the Horticultural Development Council and the East Malling Trust for Horticultural Research issued a joint statement, in which they all committed themselves to moving ahead together for the benefit of the UK's horticulture industry. In particular, they have agreed to seek a satisfactory continuation at HRI of the important SOLA—specified off-label pesticides approval—work currently carried out at Stockbridge house.

The statement affirmed all those bodies' belief in a healthy and vigorous HRI, and in the need for all the stakeholders to work together to ensure that its valuable programme of work continues in such a way as to benefit the horticulture industry directly.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that the horticulture industry is a major contributor to the economy and to the nation's diet and health. My hon. Friend and I must have read similar briefing information before this debate, as I, too, want to refer to the fact that the farmgate value of produce exceeds £2.5 billion, which, as he said, is more than 15 per cent. of total UK agricultural output. That is a significant contribution. Horticulture receives very little support from the common agricultural policy, and has one of the freest markets in operation in agriculture.

Consumer preference has been a strong driver and the sector has shown itself to be tough, competitive and resilient. I want to stress the importance that Ministers attach to the future of the horticultural sector. As a Minister with a particular interest in the sector, I have had discussions with various people in the industry, as well as seeing for myself many of our excellent horticulture establishments. I am convinced that the sector can expand and can take the place of some of the produce that is currently imported, ensuring that in future we provide more of our produce domestically.

Current levels of public funding represent a firm commitment to HRI and to its work in support of the UK horticulture industry. MAFF continues to account for about 50 per cent. of its income. Since 1997, the Government have invested about £58 million in the organisation. HRI has also been awarded £2.26 million from the capital modernisation fund to create a new European centre for organic top fruit and nursery stock at its East Malling site.

I spoke of some of our imported produce being replaced by domestically grown produce, and that is especially relevant to organic production. There is considerable room for more such production here. The commitment to the new European centre was part of the action plan for farming launched by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the farming summit on 30 March. In addition, HRI has been awarded £151,000 from the invest-to-save budget for collaborative projects with other public sector research establishments, and has recently been granted more than £11 million for capital investment and other purposes, including £4.5 million to enable the present restructuring plans to be implemented.

My hon. Friend, quite understandably, concentrated on plans for the future of the Stockbridge house site. May I respond directly to his request for a meeting with Ministers and officials about the developing situation regarding the future of the site and of HRI's work? I am happy to give him the assurance that we will have a meeting with him to deal with the issues about which he is concerned. He knows, however, that our intention is

that once HRI vacates the site we shall sell it, so that the receipts will partly offset the cost of financing the restructuring plans, including redundancy payments to staff who are not transferring to other sites.

I know that there has been speculation about a possible role for MAFF's central science laboratory at York. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced on 6 October, CSL is considering the business case for consolidating some of its own research work at Stockbridge house when HRI leaves.

My hon. Friend referred to a scorched earth approach to the Stockbridge house site. I assure him that that is not the case. The discussions will include consideration of some of the facilities that already exist on that site, about which I know he is concerned.

My hon. Friend also referred to HRI's science activities. I do not believe, as some allege, that HRI is expanding its "high science" activities at the expense of its development role. Indeed, HRI's chief executive has given Ministers an assurance that it will continue to cover the full spectrum of research and development from basic research to the dissemination of research and development findings and good practice direct to the industry. I know that he is keen to strengthen further HRI's links with the horticulture industry, something to which I also attach considerable importance. The chief executive is also seeking additional funding schemes through public-private partnerships so as to stabilise HRI's financial position and ensure that it continues to benefit all its stakeholders.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the role of Tony Burne, who is on the board of Horticulture Research International. He is one of 10 members of the board, and although he also has a role advising Ministers and considering issues affecting research in this sector through his work at MAFF, he does not derive financial advantage from that role. It is important to say that. There has been a representative from MAFF on the board of HRI from the outset. In that sense, Mr. Burne is fulfilling a normal responsibility, which has existed from the beginning.

The Government believe that HRI has a good reputation for providing high quality research and development and services to its customers. As such, it is rightly—and should continue to be—the premier horticultural research establishment in the United Kingdom. Obviously, we intend the restructuring plans to reinforce that position and maintain the ability to service the United Kingdom's horticulture industry. The Government hope that all HRI's customers will rally round the organisation and give it their support. We believe that we have to look ahead, through this difficult restructuring, to the industry's ultimate benefit.

It is important to see this research work in terms of the wider research work that can benefit horticulture and agriculture. I also believe that it is important to consider such issues in a national and a regional context to see the role that horticulture can play in the development of regional economies as well as in the economy of our country as a whole.

I accept my hon. Friend's point when he stressed the importance—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at six minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 14 November.

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER GROUP TREASURY PLC (TRANSFER) BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 14 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

IGC Agenda

1. **Mr. Christopher Gill** (Ludlow): If he will make a statement on the agenda for the current intergovernmental conference regarding Community law. [135160]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The intergovernmental conference is about making the institutional reforms necessary to allow enlargement to proceed. The issues remain those set out at the beginning of the conference; that is chiefly the size and composition of the Commission, the reweighting of votes in the Council of Ministers, the extension of qualified majority voting and closer co-operation between individual member states.

Mr. Gill: I know that you, Mr. Speaker, prefer brief questions, so will the Minister simply tell us whether the Government of whom he is a member will, at Nice, veto article 280A which seeks to create the position of a European public prosecutor?

Mr. Vaz: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have made it quite clear that we do not support the idea, the concept or the proposal of an EU public prosecutor.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Is my hon. Friend aware that double standards are to be found in the position adopted by Conservative Members given that it was a Conservative Prime Minister who went the furthest to abolish the right of veto and introduced majority voting? Is it not a fact that, in any enlargement of the European Union—which the Opposition claim to support—it would be necessary to have an extension of qualified majority voting; otherwise the whole institutional framework would came to a grinding halt?

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. As he correctly said, what is important is that the European Union and the Commission operate efficiently. As I have said to the House before, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude)—St. Francis of Maastricht as I have described him—signed the Maastricht treaty and agreed to qualified majority voting on 42 occasions during the passage of the Single European Act and the Maastricht treaty. In 1996, 80 per cent. of the votes taken at the European Council were taken on the basis of qualified majority voting. The right hon. Gentleman will also know that in 1998 Britain was on the losing side only twice. Therefore, we want an extension of qualified majority voting when that is in our interests.

I say to my hon. Friend that the issue is not a question of double standards, but of treble standards. Conservatives have so many different views on Europe that I have lost count of them.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): May we have an assurance that the Government, in any consideration of the expansion of the European Union, will not contemplate smaller countries being treated as second-class nations within the European Union?

Mr. Vaz: I certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. We believe strongly not in a two-speed Europe, but in a Europe where all the member states are treated equally. That is why we have said on several occasions that we support enhanced co-operation. However, we support it only on the basis that the decisions to be taken do not undermine the single market and treat all states the same. We will not tolerate a Europe with a hard core of countries; all countries should be treated equally.

EU Modernisation

2. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What support has been received from other EU member states for the ideas on modernisation of EU institutions expressed in the Prime Minister's speech in Warsaw. [135161]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): My right hon. Friend's speech in Warsaw has been widely supported throughout EU member states and was warmly welcomed by the four Prime Ministers of candidate countries who were among his audience. My right hon. Friend set out a vision of Europe that harnessed the economic and political strengths of its member nations to achieve more together than they can alone, but which respected the separate identity and democracy of each member state. Yesterday, President Prodi said:

> I agree entirely with the British Prime Minister. I do not want Europe to become a superstate.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will take this opportunity to welcome that clear support for British policy from Romano Prodi.

Dr. Ladyman: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be aware that my constituency of South Thanet receives objective 2 aid and, because it is in east Kent, most local businesses look to the continent as their natural trading area. Both those benefits would be put under threat if the British public continue to feel disconnected from the institutions of Europe. In that context, does my right hon. Friend not agree that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's idea of a second Chamber in Europe where national parliamentarians can be heard is not only exciting and innovative, but might be exactly what the British people need to make them feel connected again to Europe?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend states one of the great truths about our membership of the European Union, which is that almost 60 per cent. of our exports go to other EU members. That is why it is so important for us to make a success of that membership. Part of that success will be reconnecting the democracy of Europe with EU institutions, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister proposed that there should be a place in those institutions for British democracy and the democracy of other states through their national Parliaments.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): As part of the modernisation of the EU, how many of the 50 British vetoes will have to be surrendered to pursue the national interest as the Foreign Secretary is suggesting? Will not the British veto and our right to self-government disappear into the Bermuda triangle that is the Government's European policy, and that they are not in line with the EU and their colleagues, but are struggling from the rear?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman will be relieved to hear that we are confident that we will keep to our bottom line of having no extension of majority voting to defence, taxation, social security, treaty changes or border control. Those will remain subjects for unanimity, and I am sure that he will welcome that.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will be disappointed to hear that the Government could not, even if we wished, increase majority voting and abolish the veto to the extent that the previous Government did when he was in the Cabinet.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way to protect the democracy of member states is to preserve the veto, and that any erosion of the veto erodes that democracy?

Mr. Cook: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend that any erosion of the veto is necessarily against British interests. We are pressing for majority voting on a number of matters in the treaty. For example, it would be in our interest to have majority voting on the rules of procedure of the European Court of Justice to get round those who impede its effectiveness and efficiency. It would be in our interest to remove the veto on the site of the European Parliament which enables France to insist that it continues to sit in Strasbourg.

Majority voting would be in our interest in several matters. In the past two years, we have succeeded in majority votes more than any of the other large countries, which could have exercised their vetoes on proposals that we supported if they were subject to unanimity.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Why does the Prime Minister still refuse to press for the flexible, multi-system European Union that the mainstream majority of the British public want? If he is serious, as he says he is, about wanting to make way for enlargement, why does he not press for reform of the biggest single obstacle to enlargement—the common agricultural policy? Why have not the Government even asked for that to be on the agenda at the Nice IGC?

What is the difference between the European Union becoming a superpower, as Mr. Prodi and the Prime Minister have suggested it will, or becoming a superstate? How reassured is the Foreign Secretary that the President of the Commission, who has talked about the Commission becoming the Government of Europe, says that he agrees with and supports the Prime Minister?

Mr. Cook: On the issue of a superpower, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in his speech that we want Europe's economic strength to be harnessed, but not in ways that create the mechanism of a superstate. In Nice, we will be preparing for a treaty that will pave the way for enlargement by making reforms, so that Europe will be ready to receive a record increase in membership.

The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) has pledged that his party will demand a referendum on that treaty and campaign strongly against the treaty. Would he care to go to Warsaw and make a speech explaining to the countries of central Europe why the Conservative party will block steps that are necessary to enlarge the European Union?

Mr. Maude: I make it very clear that nothing in the Nice treaty that is controversial is essential for enlargement. The right hon. Gentleman well knows that the biggest roadblock to enlargement is the common agricultural policy, and the Government are not even discussing that.

On the charter of fundamental rights, which is part of the modernising agenda, does the Foreign Secretary agree with the Commission, which has said that the charter will become mandatory through the courts' interpretation of it, whether or not it is incorporated in the treaty, or does he agree with his Minister for Europe, who says that it will be no more useful than the *Beano*? Will he confirm that whatever the treaty of Nice contains, it has already been agreed that another intergovernmental conference will be held to discuss further treaty changes when the ink is barely dry on the last?

Mr. Cook: If the right hon. Gentleman is insisting that I choose between the Commission and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, I will happily choose the view of my Minister of State, who expressed himself robustly and clearly.

Returning to the right hon. Gentleman's position on the treaty of Nice, is he now telling us that there is nothing controversial in the treaty? If so, why do the Tories continue to resist it? Has the right hon. Gentleman dropped his demand for a referendum on that treaty? Has he dropped his commitment to campaign strongly against it? Is that because the penny has dropped that it would make the Tory party as totally unpopular among the 12 applicant countries, as they are already with the 15 member states?

Telecommunications (Gibraltar)

3. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): If he will make a statement on telecommunications in Gibraltar. [135162]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): As we made clear in our response on 31 October to the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Gibraltar, we have stayed in close contact with the European Commission, emphasising the urgency of the situation and our expectation that the Commission will uphold Gibraltar's rights in the European Union. We have informed the Commission that we consider the complaints made by operators in Gibraltar to be well founded. In consultation with the Government of Gibraltar, we are continuing our efforts with the Spanish Government and the Commission to resolve this important issue.

Mr. Hoyle: I am sure that my hon. Friend shares my concern at the fact that Spain still refuses to recognise the international code for Gibraltar and that businesses in Gibraltar are being held back by the lack of available telephone numbers. That has been highlighted recently by the failure of the Spanish Minister of Defence to telephone the Chief Minister over a visit to the submarine HMS Tireless. We are all aware of the difficulties, and I look forward to an early resolution of them.

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. I know of his great interest in these matters as a member of the Gibraltar parliamentary group and owing to his many visits to the country. The issue is important. As he knows, 30,000 telephone numbers have been allocated through the Cadiz exchange, and they will run out next year. Therefore, for the people of Gibraltar, the issue is very serious. I have discussed the matter with Chief Minister Caruana, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle). I spoke yesterday afternoon to the Governor of Gibraltar. I assure my hon. Friend that we have raised the concerns with the Commission and expect it to do something positive to resolve the situation; otherwise, my hon. Friend will not be able to ring his friends in Gibraltar and they will not be able to ring out.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): These soothing bromides simply will not do. What is the precise nature of the renewed efforts to which, in their response to the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report, the Government committed themselves? Did the Prime Minister raise the matter at the Anglo-Spanish talks last month? What exactly was the result?

Mr. Vaz: I shall not rise to the challenge to appoint the hon. Gentleman as our special envoy to sort out the problem because it requires very careful dialogue. That dialogue has continued over the past few months. Of course the matters have been raised. The Prime Minister raises issues concerned with Gibraltar on every occasion when he meets the Spanish Prime Minister; my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has done so with the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs; and I have done so. We will continue to work carefully and appropriately in order to resolve the issue. That is a better approach than that suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

Kosovo

4. **Mr. Robert N. Wareing** (Liverpool, West Derby): If he will make a statement on the situation in Kosovo. [135163]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): We welcome the successful and peaceful conduct of the local elections in Kosovo on 28 October. It sends a clear message that Kosovo is making further progress towards democracy and tolerance. We look forward to working with the newly elected members of the municipal authorities in tackling the many tasks ahead.

Mr. Wareing: The Defence Committee has reported that 98 per cent. of the unguided bombs dropped by the Royal Air Force on Kosovo and the rest of Yugoslavia during the recent conflict missed their target. Would it therefore be an appropriate gesture at this time for Her Majesty's Government to send an apology to President Kostunica and to offer compensation? How many times has the Minister visited Kosovo and other Balkan countries?

Mr. Vaz: I am surprised at my hon. Friend. Here is a golden opportunity to welcome the elections and to look forward to a period of peace, democracy and stability in the Balkans. We are not in this House to be apologists for Milosevic. We believe firmly that the people of Kosovo deserve our support—not empty gestures, but practical support, such as that the Government have put into KFOR and UNMIK. We shall continue to provide the people of Kosovo with such support, so that there is real peace and stability in the region. I would have thought that my hon. Friend would support that process.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): What progress is being made with the Balkan stability pact, with special reference to Albania, Kosovo's neighbour?

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister will continue to work with the stability pact. The Government have a duty to ensure that it is a success. We receive reports from time to time at the General Affairs Council and will continue to support the work of the pact. It is not just a matter of individual countries in the region. The pact is intended to bring peace and stability to the whole region, and to make sure that the people of the Balkans, and Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, have a stable future.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): What would be the impact on the delicate situation in Kosovo, were George W. Bush ever to have the opportunity of carrying out his threat to withdraw United States forces from the Balkans?

Mr. Vaz: I do not have a vote in the election today. I understand that the report has been denied.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Does the Minister realise that on the ground in Kosovo there is considerable concern about the apparent lack of co-operation between certain of the military forces and, even worse, as I tried to expound in the defence debate last week, there is uncertainty about where and how the United Nations is carrying out its mandate? Will the Minister look into that? The last thing that we want is to let the people down by not ensuring that what we are doing is helpful to them.

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian. He will know that that is an agonisingly difficult problem. We give full support to the work that is being undertaken by UNMIK, which is there to implement resolution 1244 and bring communities together. There are 4,200 civilian police officers trying to keep the peace between the communities and rebuild the confidence that was destroyed by Milosevic. It will take time, but the way forward is to make a contribution and to support the work of KFOR and UNMIK, which the Government will continue to do, following the work of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and the initiatives that they have taken.

International Criminal Court

5. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will make a statement about progress on the establishment of an international criminal court. [135164]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Good progress is being made. Twenty-two countries have already ratified the treaty, out of the 60 needed for establishing the international criminal court.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that a Bill in the Queen's Speech to ratify the international criminal court would have cross-party support? Does he also agree that whoever is the new President of the United States, that country should take a greater role and ensure that those who commit crimes against humanity are brought to justice?

Mr. Hain: We would, indeed, like to see the US sign up to the treaty and give the international criminal court its agreement, as its participation would be important. My hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on the contents of the Queen's Speech, but I hope that when the Bill is introduced into Parliament, which we hope to achieve as soon as possible, it will receive all-party support. I hope that the official Opposition, and in particular those on the Front Bench, will not obstruct the Bill, but will allow it a quick passage, so that Britain can become one of the first 60 countries to ratify the treaty and bring it into force.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Given that the Minister believes in an ethical foreign policy, can he tell the House what active steps he has taken to encourage Libya and China to sign up to the international criminal court?

Mr. Hain: We encourage all countries, including Libya and China, to sign up to the international criminal court. In our bilateral diplomacy with all countries in the world, we consistently pressure them to do so. We are committed to the court. It is a way of catching war criminals and ending the situation whereby the Pol Pots, Pinochets and all the dictators of the world continue to act with impunity. It is part of our agenda for human rights, of which we are proud. Our record is a proud one.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): In common with many other hon. Members, I welcome the publication of the Bill to ratify the Rome statute and look forward with optimism to its inclusion in the Queen's Speech. Does my hon. Friend accept that as long as the Bill remains silent on the issue of state immunity, there will remain a potential legal loophole through which past and serving Ministers who may seek refuge in this country may be able to escape?

Mr. Hain: I sympathise with my hon. Friend's point. We have listened closely to representations made to us during the consultation period on the draft Bill. I think that he will be encouraged by the response when he sees the Bill published in its final form.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I endorse everything that the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) set out in his main question? When the war crimes tribunals sit, there should be retribution for the past and a deterrent to obscene atrocity in future. I express some concern that it is taking as long as it is for Britain to ratify the process and to get it under way.

Mr. Hain: We are committed to achieve ratification as quickly as possible. I am delighted that we shall have the hon. Gentleman's support. It is a unique experience for me, but I am delighted to agree with virtually everything that he said.

Israel

6. **Mr. Bob Laxton** (Derby, North): If he will make a statement on the situation in Israel and the occupied territories. [135165]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I visited the countries of the middle east peace process last month. In the course of three days, I twice visited Prime Minister Barak and twice visited President Arafat. In all my meetings and in every public statement, I appealed for an end to the bloodshed and a return to the negotiating table.

Britain continues to press these two urgent priorities on all parties to the peace process. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister received the Foreign Minister of Israel. This afternoon, after Question Time, I shall meet Nabil Sha'ath, the foreign spokesman for the Palestinian National Authority.

No one should underestimate the challenge to the peace process from the bitterness and hostility created by the recent bloodshed. Both Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat have agreed to visit Washington over the next week. We hope that this can pave the way for substantive talks on a peace settlement, without which there will be no secure peace for the peoples of the middle east.

Mr. Laxton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that what has happened over the past five weeks clearly demonstrates that the Palestinian people want the removal of 33 years of military rule over the occupied territories? Does he agree also that the Camp David agreement appears not to be working? Will he join with me in calling for a peace negotiation that is based upon UN resolutions 242 and 338, and following from that the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the west bank and Gaza?

Mr. Cook: The peace process, which was launched at Oslo, is built upon those resolutions. Britain played a key part in the drafting of resolution 242, and is cognisant of its terms. Unfortunately, no agreement was reached at Camp David. However, we came much closer to it at Camp David than we have ever been during the other eight years of the peace process. The area of territory that was still in dispute at the end of the Camp David talks was down to 2 or 3 per cent. I hope that the bloodshed of the past two months will not prevent us from returning to where we were after Camp David and completing the task. If we do not, it is difficult to see an outcome in which there can be any permanent guarantee against future bloodshed.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the right hon. Gentleman, acknowledging the great difficulties that exist, nevertheless, with all his support and authority, impress upon the Israelis the essential nature of a more proportionate response to these difficulties? Will he agree that all of us who understand the awful history, difficulties and tragedies of the Israelis over the years, find it impossible to understand how they can use heavy guns, machine guns and heavy weapons on children?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the sensitive way in which he has approached a difficult issue. I can assure him that we have already raised in our high level meetings with leaders of the Israeli Government our concern about the need for a proportional response to crowd control. We will continue to do that.

Many people throughout the world, whatever their view may be of the peace process, have been moved by the death of, and injury to, young children, often those who may not have been taking part in the throwing of rocks. It is important that we find a way forward in which we do not escalate the violence. Every fresh funeral breeds another crowd and breeds also further bitterness, which prevents us from securing a peace settlement.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons for the current situation has been the failure to increase the living standards of the Palestinian people? How much of the blame for that does he attribute to the Palestinian National Authority, and Yasser Arafat in particular, for diverting aid intended for education and economic development to other activities, including training terrorists?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend correctly draws attention to the fact that, during the peace process, the living standards of residents of Gaza and many west bank towns went down, not up. There are many reasons for that.

Israel has to accept its role in the development of Gaza and the west bank. An immediate problem involves the closure of access to the Israeli labour market—more than 100,000 residents of Gaza have been put out of work. If the residents of Gaza and the west bank are to move away from violence and street demonstrations, it is important for them to find a way back to employment and to give them the opportunity to have an occupation.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Although the security of the state of Israel is of paramount importance, does the Foreign Secretary agree that equality of treatment between the Palestinian state—the Palestinian authority—and the state of Israel is critical? In my view, the Palestinians believe that they do not get a fair deal.

Whatever the outcome of today's United States elections, will the United Kingdom Government contact the new President with a view to steering peace back on to the real agenda in the middle east?

Mr. Cook: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall of course make early contact with the new Administration, who will not take over until the end of January. President Clinton will remain in office until then, and I am sure that any incoming President will support his work in the middle east peace process. His knowledge of and commitment to the peace process is wide and deep. During his remaining two or three months in office, I hope that both sides will use his commitment and expertise to find a way forward.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I support all my right hon. Friend's efforts in the peace process. Does he agree that Israel's determination to dominate, control and set out the future of the Palestinians is the biggest obstacle to peace in the region? Does he also agree that if there are to be future negotiations, the Israelis should treat their partner in those negotiations—the Palestinians—as equals? That failure to do so made it clear to Palestinians—young and old, and angry and moderate—that what was achieved at Sharm el-Sheikh, Camp David and Oslo was not good enough. A successful future must be based on the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) and,

in particular, on Israel's acceptance in the peace process that Palestinian refugees have the right of return. If not, there can be no peace.

Mr. Cook: I have already discussed with the Israeli Foreign Minister the importance of including refugee return in any overall package. I stress that good progress was made at Camp David. I strongly suggest to the House that we return to first principles in the peace process—we should pick up from the progress that was made and appreciate how far we got at Camp David. In the immediate future, we must try to secure an absence of bloodshed, which will enable the negotiations to recommence. That is why it is important for both sides—not simply Israel—to honour the commitments that they made at Sharm el-Sheikh to put an end to violence.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The whole House will share a common concern about the recent, tragic turn of events in Israel and the occupied territories, and the Foreign Secretary's hope that the agreements made at Sharm el-Sheikh will be implemented. We of course recognise Israel's right to live in peace and security and the right of Palestinians to self-government.

Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that one lesson of the past few weeks may be that it might be unhelpful to press impracticable issues—I refer in particular to the final status of Jerusalem—further and faster than the parties feel able to move? With hindsight, the situation may have moved too far, too fast, with the result that events have moved decisively backwards and the peace process has taken a turn for the worse.

Mr. Cook: In reality, the peace process has reached the stage of final status talks, to which all the difficult issues were reserved, including that of Jerusalem. It is important for Israel that any peace settlement should include a statement of an end of the conflict by the Palestinian side, but it is difficult to see a Palestinian leadership making such a statement without a resolution to the division of Jerusalem. That is why we may now be in a position in which those difficult issues have to be resolved as part of a package, and both sides will have to recognise that they will not necessarily obtain everything that they want on every element of the package, but that the package itself offers them security, stability and peace for their people, which is the greatest prize of all.

Iraq

7. **Mr. Donald Anderson** (Swansea, East): If he will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Iraq and those items which the Iraqi Government are currently allowed to import. [135166]

12. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): If he will make a statement on the impact of sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Iraq. [135171]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We continue to take the lead in alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people at the hands of a ruthless dictator who cares nothing for their welfare. Under Security Council resolution 1284, the oil for food programme will provide more than $16 billion for the Iraqi people this year alone, paying for a wide range of civilian imports from food and medicine to equipment to improve water and sanitation facilities, to spare parts for the oil industry.

Mr. Anderson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the solution to sanctions is in the hands of Saddam Hussein himself by his taking the comparatively simply step of complying with the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. An hon. Member is censuring me for the way in which I call Members. I will not allow that, and the hon. Gentleman should take himself from the Chamber.

Mr. Anderson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the solution to sanctions is in the hands of Saddam Hussein by his complying with the relevant United Nations resolutions in respect of informing the international community of his weapons of mass destruction? My hon. Friend has mentioned the sums available to Saddam Hussein, but to what extent is that being spent for the benefit of the people or on self-aggrandisement and palaces for the dictator himself?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend. Britain wants to see sanctions suspended, but the only vehicle for achieving that is the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1284. In return for allowing in arms inspectors—a new team headed by the widely respected international diplomat Hans Blix—who will check on the capabilities in nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, sanctions could be suspended within a matter of months. We should all unite—critics of sanctions as well as supporters of the United Nations policy in international law—in achieving that, rather than playing Saddam Hussein's game and allowing him to score cheap propaganda victories by humanitarian flights. We should also bear in mind that, while his people have been suffering over the years, he imports thousands of bottles of whisky, wine and beer and cigarettes by the million, and surrounds himself in obscene luxury.

Mr. McCabe: I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) that Saddam Hussein must bear considerable guilt for the suffering experienced by the poor people of Iraq, but does my hon. Friend the Minister believe that it is right for Britain to pursue an open-ended sanctions policy against Iraq, which results in suffering for innocent children and others, while simultaneously pursuing a preferential trade arrangement with the authorities in Iran? Is my hon. Friend aware of the extent to which the mullahs in Iran are acquiring weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Hain: We are concerned about Iran's capability in weapons of mass destruction, especially its acquisition of large numbers of missiles, and we continue to press the Iranians on that matter. But I do not think that my hon. Friend will compare the Iranians' relations with their neighbours and with their own people with Saddam Hussein's record, which is uniquely brutal.

I must disagree with my hon. Friend on sanctions. Our commitment to sanctions is not open-ended. We want to see the sanctions suspended. We spent eight to nine months at the United Nations in New York achieving the new resolution which provides for that very opportunity.

All that is required is for Saddam Hussein to sign up to that resolution and the sanctions could be suspended within six months. Everyone should work together to achieve that objective.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not it obvious that policy towards Iraq is based on containment by utilising the deterrent effect of credible military force? What possible contribution do non-military sanctions make to that policy? They do grievous harm to the ordinary people of Iraq, they have no effect on Saddam Hussein, his whisky or his brutality, they give him an enormous propaganda advantage and they cause grave disquiet throughout the Arab world. Ten years after the end of the Gulf war, is not it time for the United Nations to lift the non-military sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I respect the right hon. and learned Gentleman's record on the matter, and his broad support, which I acknowledge, for the policy of the Government and the United Nations. However, $16 billion of oil for food money is now available to alleviate and end the suffering of the people of Iraq. That sum, per Iraqi, is equivalent to three times the amount that each Egyptian spends on food and medicine each year. It is a massive amount of money, and we must work to ensure that Saddam Hussein stops blocking it and allows all of it to reach his people.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about targeted sanctions, lifting commercial sanctions could allow the entry of dual-use goods, and allow Saddam Hussein to re-equip his infrastructure and rebuild the weapons of mass destruction, which he has used against his people in the north—the Kurds—and his neighbours.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): The Minister said that sanctions could be suspended provided that United Nations weapons inspectors were allowed back into Iraq. Will he confirm that that is the unanimous view of the Security Council?

Mr. Hain: It is the policy of the Security Council, which Britain will work extremely hard to implement. There is no hidden agenda; if we can get Saddam Hussein to comply with admitting the arms inspectors, we shall work tirelessly to implement the full Security Council resolution. I am confident that we shall be able to achieve that.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): What methods do we use to harm Saddam Hussein that do not harm his people?

Mr. Hain: We implement sanctions that contain his ability to threaten his people. He has done that repeatedly, for example, by inflicting chemical weapons on the Kurds. He has also threatened his neighbours by invading Iran and Kuwait. From oil smuggling—equivalent to a small proportion of his total oil production—he has been able to surround himself with a considerable security blanket and amass considerable wealth. However, like Slobodan Milosevic, all dictators learn that they cannot survive for ever.

In retrospect, our sanctions policy will be perceived to have worked to achieve our objective.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that Iraq's humanitarian predicament must be viewed in the light of its treatment of 605 mostly Kuwaiti prisoners, including women and students? What pressures can be brought to bear to get the Iraqis to provide information, even information such as whether those prisoners are dead or alive? Does he agree that humanity and decency demand that?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I pursued it with the Kuwaitis when I visited Kuwait last week. Hundreds of Kuwaiti families are in the dreadful position of simply not knowing what has happened to their relatives who have disappeared. The Iraqis have shown no accountability. We continue to take all opportunities to press them to deal with the issue, and to discuss with Ambassador Vorontsov his work on behalf of the United Nations to resolve the problem.

Sweden

8. **Mr. Martin Linton** (Battersea): What assessment he has made of the state of relations between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of Sweden. [135167]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Relations are excellent. A month ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had talks in London with Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Sweden in May, and I visited in September. There have been 25 other substantive ministerial visits in both directions so far this year, covering most Departments, as well as ministerial contacts in the margins of the European Union and other multilateral forums. The main aim has been policy co-ordination on European Union issues, especially with a view to the Swedish European Union presidency, which begins on 1 January.

Mr. Linton: Is the Minister aware of the Swedish Government's determination, forcefully expressed to me in Stockholm last week, to drive forward European Union enlargement during their presidency? Will he ensure that the United Kingdom Government do all that they can to support them in their desire to make clear progress on broadening European Union membership and negotiations with applicant countries?

Mr. Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his highly successful visit to Stockholm last week. As he knows, the United Kingdom is the best friend of enlargement. Through the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary in Budapest and Warsaw, we have set out clearly our desire for the European Union to be enlarged as quickly as possible. That is why we need to complete the intergovernmental conference on time. It is essential that we give a message to those countries that we want them in.

As my hon. Friend knows, there are three Es to the Swedish presidency: employment initiatives, environment and enlargement, to which I add a fourth—Mr. Sven Goran Eriksson. I am sure that his appointment will build on relations between our two countries.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is not Sweden our natural ally in securing major reform of the common agricultural policy? Is it not a tragedy that, over many years, we have failed to build effective coalitions of like-minded nations which would have secured that reform much earlier?

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is right. We failed to build those alliances because we had a Conservative Government until May 1997, but, since then, British Ministers have been out there in the European Union fully engaging with their European counterparts, ensuring that Britain's interests are put first and foremost on the agenda of Europe. We will continue to do what we have to do to reform the CAP.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): May I point out that the enthusiasm for the success of Mr. Eriksson is not universally shared in the Chamber?

The Swedish Government intend to push the creation of employment as one of the objectives of their presidency. If they are successful, it will clearly demonstrate that employment generation does not depend on a single currency throughout Europe.

Mr. Vaz: I thought hard before adding the fourth E, for the reasons that were outlined by my hon. Friend.

I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to work with the Swedish Government on a range of issues. On the single currency, he knows that our position is absolutely clear. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members may laugh, but the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) has recently resigned from the No Turning Back group. He cannot, however, turn his back on the likes of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and the hon. Members for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), whose policy is completely different from the policy of Conservative Front Benchers.

Our policy is very clear. In principle, we are in favour of joining the single currency. In practice, we will do so only when the economic conditions are right. We will assess those conditions early in the next Parliament in the interests of this country and this country alone. In the final analysis, the people of Britain will decide whether we join the single currency.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Has the hon. Gentleman discussed how Sweden's traditional neutral defence posture can be reconciled with the proposed EU defence structure, given its concerns? I remind him that the Prime Minister described plans for a merger between the Western European Union and the EU as an "ill-judged transplant operation". What has changed?

Mr. Vaz: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, we on the Government Front Bench have to deal with real Ministers and have real bilateral contacts. We do not have to quote selectively from documents. I assure him that we are totally at one with the Swedes on those initiatives. They are fully involved in the initiative that was put forward by the Government, with the support of the French. We will continue to work with them as EU partners to ensure that the common security and defence policy is a success.

Sierra Leone

9. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the situation in Sierra Leone. [135168]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I spoke to President Kabbah of Sierra Leone at the weekend. He warmly expressed his people's strong welcome for Britain's continued commitment to building a safe future for them.

We have completed the initial training of the first three battalions for the Sierra Leonean army. We will continue our programme to equip the Government of Sierra Leone with an army that can defeat the rebels. In the past week, we have confirmed that we will provide the United Nations headquarters with a British chief of staff. We will pursue with determination our goal of a Sierra Leone free from fear and rid of the rebels.

Mr. Brake: The Foreign Secretary will know that 1 million people in Sierra Leone are not receiving humanitarian aid because they happen to be in rebel-led areas. He will also be aware of the risk of the conflict spreading to neighbouring countries. Will he confirm that the United Kingdom will adopt a higher profile in Sierra Leone, that it will commit itself to UNAMSIL, and that it will remain committed in Sierra Leone until stability is achieved in the region?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman has raised real concerns about the gravity of the situation, and I strongly agree with him about the humanitarian position. I should point out, however, that the Government have done more for humanitarian aid to Sierra Leone than has any other country: in the past year alone, we have provided £30 million worth of such aid. We will, of course, continue to do all that we can to get it to the people who need it.

As for UNAMSIL, I stress to the hon. Gentleman that Britain is already making a bigger military commitment to Sierra Leone than any other western nation. We have more troops on the ground there than many contributors to UNAMSIL. We are performing a task that no one else is performing: we are equipping the Government of Sierra Leone with an army that can take the fight to the rebels. We have also committed ourselves to a rapid reaction response in the event of its being needed by the UN forces. We cannot do all that and also contribute to UNAMSIL. I am confident that ours is the right priority, and it has been agreed to by President Kabbah.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My right hon. Friend is right in saying that this country has done more than any other western nation to support the legitimate democratic Government of Sierra Leone. If, however, we are to create a climate in which people throughout Sierra Leone can live without fear, what more pressure can be brought to bear on those who profit from its diamonds—

neighbouring African countries—on those who are happy to provide the rebels in Sierra Leone with arms without asking any questions about their use, and, in particular, on those who seek closer relations with the European Union while at the same time providing weapons with which the people of Sierra Leone are being murdered?

Mr. Cook: Speaking from experience, my hon. Friend draws attention to an important dimension of the problem: the extent to which some neighbouring countries—one in particular—support the rebels, and profit from the conflict and atrocities in Sierra Leone. Britain has taken the lead in proposing a scheme to monitor the diamonds that are leaving Sierra Leone, and we have UN backing for it. I hope that that will make it increasingly difficult for the rebels to sell their diamonds, and to acquire the weapons that they need to maintain the conflict.

I assure my hon. Friend that, together with the United States, we are increasing the pressure on countries in the region that are assisting the rebels rather than assisting peace.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the Foreign Secretary provide a clear statement of purpose, telling us exactly what we are trying to achieve in Sierra Leone, what resources—both military and civil—we are putting towards that, and when he expects the task to be completed?

Mr. Cook: The House has been given a number of statements explaining precisely what military commitments we are making.

The hon. Gentleman asks what we are trying to achieve. I will answer that very simply. I went to Sierra Leone in the summer, and visited a camp for amputees where I saw 2,000 people whose arms or legs had been lopped off by the rebels—including babies who were unable to crawl before their arms were lopped off by crazed rebels. My objective in Sierra Leone is to prevent anyone else from having arms lopped off by the rebels.

Conflict Diamonds

10. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): If he will make a statement about conflict diamonds. [135169]

14. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): If he will make a statement about conflict diamonds. [135173]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): The Government have led the way in the creation of an international certification scheme to deny conflict diamonds access to world markets, and help to protect the legitimate trade on which so many livelihoods depend.

Judy Mallaber: I welcome the hard work done by my hon. Friend and the Foreign Office in cleaning up the diamond trade; but does my hon. Friend accept that sanctions-busters are still taking diamonds from Revolutionary United Front rebels in Sierra Leone and from Unita in Angola, and supplying them with weapons that are used to perpetuate these murderous wars? Does he agree that Victor Bout is a major supplier of arms to the rebels? What action is being taken to stop him breaking UN sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend that sanctions-busters are continuing to perpetuate the conflict in Sierra Leone and Angola, with the result that countless lives are being lost and mutilations are taking place. Victor Bout is indeed the chief sanctions-buster, and is a merchant of death who owns air companies that ferry in arms and other logistic support for the rebels in Angola and Sierra Leone and take out the diamonds which pay for those arms. All the countries that are allowing him to use their facilities and aircraft bases to ferry that trade in death into Sierra Leone and Angola are aiding and abetting people who are turning their guns on British soldiers, among others, in Sierra Leone. It is important that they stop doing that.

Mrs. Williams: Will my hon. Friend tell me what pressure has been put on the Governments of Liberia, Rwanda, Togo and Burkina Faso to stop sanctions-busters dealing in illicit diamonds and operating in their countries in blatant defiance of United Nations sanctions?

Mr. Hain: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised that matter, as one of the cruel ironies and tragedies of the appalling conflict in Sierra Leone and Angola is the fact that fellow Africans are allowing sanctions-busters to operate within their boundaries, and carry in arms and take out diamonds. That practice perpetuates such conflicts. All the Governments named by my hon. Friend, including some Presidents and senior Ministers, have been complicit in that barbarous trade, and it is vital that they cease it immediately, comply with UN sanctions and help end those wars

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Is not it essential that the conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone cease to be such as soon as possible, and that the areas affected are returned to the control of the Government? Would it not have been better if that had been achieved by a British-led UN force or, indeed, a British-led Sierra Leonean force in the first instance, so that the Sierra Leonean Government had regained control of those diamonds early on? How long will it take us to train the Sierra Leonean army to achieve that task on its own?

Mr. Hain: We have already helped to train 3,000 members of the Sierra Leonean army and another 3,000 will receive further training in the coming months. One will not end the conflict, win the war or create peace unless one takes control of the diamond-mining areas, and the hon. Gentleman is right to point that out. The way to achieve that is for the Sierra Leonean army to go in, with UNAMSIL filling in behind, to take control of those diamond mines and stay there permanently, or at least for the foreseeable future.

The new national certification scheme that the Sierra Leonean Government have introduced will allow the proceeds from those diamonds to make the people of Sierra Leone rich, instead of poor and torn apart by war.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Although I welcome the initiative on conflict diamonds, will the Minister explain what happened to joined-up government? He will be aware of the civil war in the Congo and the problems there, and know that the Zimbabwean army is operating in the Congo. I am sure that he is also aware that a British Army team is training the Zimbabwean army that has gone to the Congo, where its sole purpose is to protect the diamond trade that is lining the pockets of Mugabe and his henchmen.

Mr. Hain: I agree that it is intolerable that the Zimbabwean army is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo helping to perpetuate that war, draining Zimbabwe's own budget and assisting with the collapse of that beautiful country. However, the British military advisory and training team in Harare is not contributing to that effort. It is not there to train the Zimbabwean army, but to support a regional peacekeeping initiative and work with the UN to bring stability to the region. That is the purpose of that British team's operation.

Yugoslavia

11. **Mrs. Alice Mahon** (Halifax): What help the UK will be giving the new Government of Yugoslavia to further advance its integration into Europe. [135170]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We warmly welcome the powerful rejection of Milosevic by the people of Serbia. We acted immediately to lift European sanctions. We have admitted Yugoslavia to the European stability pact for the Balkans. Britain is also supporting Yugoslavia's admission, at the ministerial meeting later this month, to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Since the fall of Milosevic, the European Union has allocated 200 million euros for immediate aid and reconstruction. We promised that if the people of Serbia voted for democratic change, we would bring down the barriers between them and Europe. We are delivering on that promise.

Mrs. Mahon: I welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks on aid for Yugoslavia. One of the main consequences of the war was the blocking of the Danube, because bridges over it were bombed. I am therefore glad that the Secretary of State has made it clear that aid and not loans will be made available. However, does he not agree that circulating planted questions—in the hope that a hapless Back Bencher will stand up and call those of us who opposed the bombings abusive names—will do nothing towards achieving peace and reconciliation in the Balkans?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the House that I did not plant the question that my hon. Friend asked.

Far East Prisoners of War (Ex Gratia Payment)

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): With permission, I should like to make a statement.

In April this year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister held a meeting with representatives of the Royal British Legion to discuss the British groups who had been held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war. He subsequently initiated a reconsideration of the longstanding policy of the Government towards those far eastern prisoners. The review took time to conduct because of the complexity of the issues involved, but it has now been completed.

I am very pleased to be able to inform the House that, as a result of the review, the Government have decided to make a single ex gratia payment of £10,000 to each of the surviving members of the British groups who were held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war, in recognition of the unique circumstances of their captivity. In cases in which a person who would have been entitled to the payment has died, the surviving spouse will be entitled to receive it instead.

As hon. Members will recall, on a number of occasions in recent months, in debates in which many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken, the House has debated the situation of those who were held prisoner in the far east during the second world war. We had those debates because what happened to those prisoners was often so appalling that, for many, it has remained with them for the rest of their lives.

Many hon. Members will be aware of the stories told by now frail constituents about that terrible time, and members of the public will be familiar with the books and films about it. However, if we look back at the histories, we come across a simple, stark fact that makes clear to everyone the enormity of what happened: of the 50,016 British service personnel who were reported captured by the Japanese, 12,433 died or were killed in captivity. In other words, conditions were so bad that one in four did not survive.

We are all very thankful that such a situation did not occur anywhere else during the second world war and has not recurred since. The unique nature of Japanese captivity in the far east was recognised in the 1950s, when those who had been held became eligible for modest payments from Japanese assets, made under the provisions of the 1951 San Francisco treaty of peace with Japan. As hon. Members are aware, the maximum payment available at that time was £76 10s.

In the intervening years, the former far east prisoners pursued the issue of additional compensation with Japan. More recently, they have also campaigned for the British Government to make a payment. However, as hon. Members on both sides of the House will be well aware, it has been the policy of successive Governments over many years not to make payments in such circumstances.

We are now making an exception for the British groups that were held prisoner by the Japanese during the second world war in recognition of the unique circumstances of their collective captivity. Those who will be entitled to receive the payment are former members of Her Majesty's armed forces who were made prisoners of war, former members of the Merchant Navy who were captured and imprisoned, and British civilians who were interned. Certain other former military personnel in the colonial forces, the Indian army and the Burmese armed forces who received compensation in the 1950s under United Kingdom auspices will also be eligible. As I said earlier, in cases in which a person who would have been entitled to the payment has died, the surviving spouse will be entitled to receive it instead.

We estimate that up to 16,700 people may be eligible for the ex gratia payments, which will accordingly cost up to £167 million to make. I will not go into detail about the new payment scheme now, except to say that this single ex gratia payment will not be taxable, nor will it be taken into account for benefits purposes. We intend to make these payments as quickly as possible, although it will take a little time for the appropriate regulations to be made. We expect everything to be in place by February.

Further details of the scheme are being published today in a leaflet by the War Pensions Agency, which will be administering it. A copy will be placed in the Library of the House. The leaflet and a claim form will also be available on the agency's website.

The Government recognise that many UK citizens, both those serving in the armed forces and civilians, have had to endure great hardship at different times and in different circumstances, but the experience of those who went into captivity in the far east during the second world war was unique. We have said before that we believe the country owes a debt of honour to them. I hope that I am speaking for everyone here when I say that today something concrete has been done to recognise that debt.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): On behalf of the Opposition, I wholeheartedly and without reservation welcome what is frankly a generous settlement. As the Minister knows, we support the inquiry and the settlement and there is no question but that he has our support today. I also congratulate the Royal British Legion and far east prisoners of war on conducting a dignified and successful campaign that has finally brought their case to the Government's attention and resulted in a settlement.

The Minister was clear about the appalling death rate and special circumstances that apply to all those who were Japanese prisoners of war, and on that basis we all welcome his statement today. The settlement applies to all service men, to those who served in the merchant marines as well as to civilians. That was a key area of concern and I welcome the Government's generosity.

I particularly welcome the Minister's reference to widows. There is no question but that war widows occupy a very special place in the hearts and minds of the British public for the privations that they suffered, first not knowing what had happened and then discovering the terrible circumstances under which their husbands suffered. I also welcome the generous inclusion of those who served in the ex-colonial forces—the Indian army and the Burmese forces. It is a generous gesture and quite right and proper. The fact that the settlement is not being taxed and will not affect benefits is also a welcome gesture.

This week of all weeks, it is absolutely right that the Government should make a proper and final settlement. During the war, those who served in the far east became

[Mr. Iain Duncan Smith]

known as the forgotten army. Sadly, after the war, they became known as the forgotten heroes. It is so right that we have remembered them today.

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words and associate myself with everything that he said. I am glad to say that this is not a party political issue. Governments of successive hue have held a consistent line on the issue for many years. I am glad to say that today we have changed that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): This is indeed good news, including for the widows. Are we not today recognising our debt of honour to these very brave people who suffered so much? Obviously, compensation should have been paid by the Japanese; failing that, we have done our duty and rightly so. Would it not be appropriate at this stage for us to remember again all those who were held as prisoners—military and internees—who were never to return home and who suffered and died as a result of the starvation diet, the slave working conditions, the cruelty and often the torture? It would be a sad day if this country ever forgot them or forgot to honour their memory.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. He, with other Members on both sides, has played a major part in keeping the matter at the forefront of our attention. We shall take on board all that he has said about recognition.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): This has been a victory—if victory it be—for Back Benchers, and I congratulate those on both sides who have pressed the case with vigour and robustness over a long period. Does the Minister agree that, welcome though £10,000 may be, the true measure of his announcement for many of those who will receive the money will be the public recognition, albeit belated, of the terrible privations that they had to endure? I hope that that will help the recipients, if not to forget, at least more easily to come to terms with those terrible experiences.

Dr. Moonie: I entirely agree. No financial sum can be adequate compensation for what those people suffered. This token ex gratia payment will, I hope, go some way to relieving their distress.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): Will my hon. Friend pass on to our Government the congratulations of my constituents, particularly ex-service men? Does he agree that we, as a civilised and decent society, should recognise all the—often young—men and women who have put their lives or health on the line for their country? Does he agree that they all deserve recognition of this nature? That said, I do not wish to spoil today's events, and I congratulate the Minister and thank the Government.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend. The announcement will clearly be welcome in all parts of the country, and I join him in paying tribute to all those who have given their lives or suffered for their country.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): On behalf of the all-party group, I thank the Government for the announcement. When the Government come to organise the detail of the payments, will they consult the Royal British Legion and POW groups so that we can be sure not to miss any individual who may be entitled to claim compensation?

Dr. Moonie: I pay tribute again to the work of the all-party group on this subject. I guarantee absolutely that we shall consult all those involved to ensure that no one misses out on the payment.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I am delighted to participate in a rare moment of unanimity in a defence-related debate. On behalf of my constituents and the Select Committee on Defence, which I chair, and in my role as honorary adviser to the Royal British Legion, I am delighted to express my gratitude to all the Departments that participated in this welcome statement. The Government appear to have covered all possible angles of criticism by including widows, merchant seamen, civilians and those from the Commonwealth and empire who fought on our behalf.

I ask the Minister to pass on our rare collective congratulations to the many organisations that fought through all adversity and overcame every obstacle to achieve justice. Finally, and without ringing a note of disharmony, I hope that the Japanese Government are hanging their heads in shame at the fact that it was left to the British and Canadian Governments to repair the damage caused by something that was not their fault and to take the responsibility for it.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend. It has taken us a long time to come to this decision, largely because of its complexity and the need to ensure that all those who are properly due the payment will receive it. A lot of hard work was done by our officials, and I am happy to say that it has paid off.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank and congratulate the Government, but must ask the Minister to ensure that the old and frail are not faced with filling in complicated forms before they can have the money.

Dr. Moonie: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall do all in our power to ensure that compensation is as simple and easy to understand as possible. I am well aware of the difficulty that elderly people have with filling in forms.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I join my hon. Friends and other hon. Members in expressing a heartfelt welcome for the statement. Many of us have hoped for such a move for a considerable time. Can the Minister confirm whether compensation for civilians who were prisoners will be paid to those who were children at the time, or whether it will apply only to their parents? Does he join me in hoping that there will be no move in the House to condemn the Japanese Government at this time? Demands have been made for an apology from the Japanese and I understand the feelings behind those demands, but at this time we should welcome the move by the British Government, and that of the Canadian Government previously, to give some—[HON. MEMBERS: "Question!"]

Does my hon. Friend agree that, today, we should simply be glad that the veterans and former prisoners of war will now at last receive some compensation?

Dr. Moonie: I can confirm that all the prisoners are entitled to the payment. Of course, those who were children then are no longer children now. The position of the Japanese Government has been clearly stated and recognised in international law. They have expressed regret for what happened and, today, I think that I should leave it at that.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I congratulate this Labour Government on taking a courageous decision—a decision that was deferred for far too long by successive previous Governments. In congratulating the Government and welcoming the announcements, may I ask whether the Minister agrees that the decision, which will be widely welcomed by all who were affected, would be greatly enhanced if, even at this late stage, the Japanese Government had the decency to apologise?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. There is little that I could say to disagree.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): In welcoming this announcement, for which many of us have campaigned, I must mention Arthur Titherington and Keith Martin, who have steadfastly maintained the campaign for many years. We must also have regard to the Prime Minister's victory. For 50 years, Foreign Office lawyers said that the money could not be paid, Ministry of Defence bureaucrats said that it should not be because it would set a precedent, and Treasury officials said that it must not be because it would cost money. While those wonderful people resisted the Japanese army for five years, this Labour Prime Minister has defeated Whitehall—and for that we should all give thanks.

Dr. Moonie: I am certain that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will have listened closely to my hon. Friend. Something was needed to break the logjam of many years and my right hon. Friend provided it.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): May I underline the comments of the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), including those on the Japanese? I congratulate the Government. This announcement will be very welcome in Kent among members of the Buffs, the Royal West Kents and other elements of the armed forces who served in the far east. Finally, as the grandson of an Indian army officer, may I say how welcome are the provisions on certain members of that army?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He has for some time been associated with the efforts of Labour Back Benchers in this matter and I recognise his contribution.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): May I add my congratulations to the Government on behalf of the many far east prisoners of war in my constituency who were caught up in the surrender of Singapore, in particular Mr. Ian Mitchell and Mr. Bill Griffiths, both of whom have written moving books on the subject? On top of all the generous tributes that have rightly been paid to the Government for removing a logjam of 40 years, as has been said, this may be an occasion at least to press the Japanese Government, however gently—even if they feel incapable of offering a formal apology at the moment—to make more effort in their schools, education and curriculum to tell the truth about the second world war and the situation of those prisoners of war.

Dr. Moonie: We are well aware of the situation, and recognise what my hon. Friend says.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): On behalf of the Japanese Labour Camp Survivors Association, of which I am president, I thank the Minister for the announcement. It is a debt of honour, long overdue, paid to a band of British heroes to whom we owe so much for their service and sacrifice. As politicians generally—because this is not a party political issue—perhaps we might reproach ourselves that it has taken so long.

Dr. Moonie: I pay tribute again to the sterling work undertaken by the hon. Gentleman on this matter. After his three and a half years in this place, he will realise that it is sometimes difficult to move Governments from their chosen path—especially when the Government are trying to do that to themselves. I am happy that we have managed to succeed on this occasion.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): May I add my thanks on behalf of many of my constituents? I also congratulate those organisations and individuals involved in the matter. I add personal thanks because my father fought in Burma and never lost the fear that he might be taken prisoner.

As we prepare for the weekend when we shall honour the dead of those wars, is this not the best way in which we can repay our debt of honour to many of those survivors who are still living, and to surviving spouses?

Dr. Moonie: It is significant that we have managed to do so at a time when we shall be returning to our constituents at the weekend to join them in remembering those who died in successive conflicts.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The Minister will remember our exchanges over the years on this subject. I offer my unreserved congratulations on his announcement today. The statement was comprehensive; he and his right hon. and hon. Friends are rightly to be complimented on it.

I remind the Minister of the remarks made by Members on both sides of the House—his hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) was the first to mention the matter: a Japanese Government should have been making this gesture. If the Government of Japan want to see their country join the full community of civilised nations, they will hang their heads in shame that we have had to make this gesture today.

I have a question on one detail—not to carp, but to ensure that no problem arises. After the Minister's statement today, it will inevitably take several months to see the whole matter through. Am I right to assume that the announcement refers to those survivors or widows of survivors who are alive today? Unhappily and inevitably,

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

some of them will no longer be alive by the time the process is complete. If the Minister cannot clarify the matter now, will he write to me?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to pay tribute to the passion with which the hon. Gentleman fought his case during several debates. I am also happy to assure him that what he says is absolutely right. All those alive today will benefit. We shall do everything in our power to make the payments as quickly as possible; we do realise that some people will die before we can make them.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I thank the Minister for his statement. For many of my constituents who were Japanese prisoners of war, the Japanese Government's expression of regret is still not enough.

It must be recognised that, despite the Minister's modesty in pointing out that the issue is not party political, it took a Labour Government to deliver the settlement. For many of the survivors, the £10,000 is not the real point; it is the fact that they carried a psychological burden for many years and that society has now recognised the trauma that they suffered. This is a day of celebration for those former prisoners of war, because they have finally received that recognition.

Dr. Moonie: Yes, I am happy to associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend about the many people who suffered during that conflict.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I thank the Government and I congratulate the Minister on the announcement. After hearing the graphic account of my constituent, Arthur Christie of Porthmadog, who suffered with many of his colleagues at unit 731 in Manchuria, I know why the statement was necessary; it should have been made a long time ago.

The Minister mentioned that widows alive today will all—quite rightly—benefit. Does that include widows who have subsequently remarried?

Dr. Moonie: That is the case.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): The announcement is welcome not least because it is inclusive and generous and also because it is based on an ethical decision rather than on the expediency of the past.

Will my hon. Friend join me in regretting that it has taken so long? In fact, it has taken so long that my constituent, Mr. Ian Mason-Summers, who waged a long and futile battle with the War Pensions Agency for some recompense, has died. I am glad that his widow will now benefit.

Will my hon. Friend give the House a clear assurance that the Government will continue to put pressure on the Japanese Government to issue an apology to those who were subject to such persecution that we had to make this payment? For those who survived, it is a matter not of compensation but of principle. That principle demands that in due course—indeed, the sooner the better—there should be an apology from the Japanese Government.

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance that I will be bringing his views and the views of many here to the attention of my colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Given that a number of the far east prisoners of war will have died since the 1951 treaty of San Francisco, either unmarried or without a surviving spouse, will the Minister—I accept the generosity of his statement and congratulate him on it—consider making a payment to a suitable military charity or charities in memory of those prisoners of war and to assist with their work?

Dr. Moonie: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes an interesting point. We have managed to be generous today and to recognise the unique suffering and the unique collective experience of those who were in Japanese prisoner of war camps during the second world war.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): As one of those who have pursued this issue with the British Government and the Japanese Government in the past 17 years, I welcome what my hon. Friend the Minister has said this afternoon; but is it not important that we remember that, for former prisoners of war and their families, money can never compensate for what they endured in the wartime years? Should we not recognise that most of them believe that the Japanese Government should be paying the money, not the British Government, and that Japan's financial position now is very different from what it was at the time of the San Francisco agreement in 1951?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to take full note of what my hon. Friend says.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I welcome the fact that all members of families who were interned will receive the payment, and that there will not be just one payment per family. May I bring it to the attention of the Minister that it is in the nature of such families that many have not returned to Britain or may not live here? Will he assure me that where they are living will make no difference to whether they receive the payment?

Dr. Moonie: I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is certainly the case.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): In welcoming this good news, may I relate to the Minister my experience of only this morning? I spoke with four constituents of mine who are survivors of the far east prisoner of war camps. When I spoke about the announcement, it was telling that not one of them asked, "How much?". What was important for them was that the statement was taking place at all. While £10,000 may change the financial position of some of the survivors, my conversations with them reinforced for me the fact that what was important was that at last a Government of whatever political persuasion had recognised their unique suffering, and for that I thank the Minister.

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to accept what my hon. Friend has said and to recognise the quiet dignity with which

people have borne over many years the suffering that resulted from their captivity. We all know that money is no full recompense for that, but we have at least marked our recognition of what they went through.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I wish to call every hon. Member who is standing. I will be helped if the questions are brief.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I thank the Minister and the Government for the statement. I, like the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), am the son of someone who was lucky enough not to be captured, but did serve in a far east theatre. May I ask for a couple of points of clarification? Will the Minister's colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office request that the money be repaid to the British taxpayers by the Japanese Government? Where someone is the surviving widow of a far east prisoner of war, will she still receive compensation even if she has remarried, perhaps after nursing her first husband for many years?

Dr. Moonie: It is not a matter of making a request to the Japanese Government. They are well aware of our views. They have been repeated many times. I am happy to say again that if someone has remarried following the death of her husband, she will still be eligible.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the announcement and I hope that he accepts the congratulations of my constituents who are surviving POWs and their relatives. I have to say that the Japanese Government should be making the payments. Does my hon. Friend accept that on days such as this I realise how important it is to be a Labour Member of Parliament, because it has taken a Labour Government to make this announcement and make the payments?

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and I recognise what he says on the subject.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): As the daughter of a Japanese prisoner of war, may I on behalf of my mother and my constituents, particularly the civilian internees, thank the Government for the announcement? Will the Minister clarify whether the War Pensions Agency's records on pensioners will enable it to pay the £10,000 without their even asking for a claim form? May I double-check that the £10,000 will not be taken into account under the capital rules for benefits?

Dr. Moonie: As a point of amplification, I confirm the latter point. One of the reasons it has taken so long to make the announcement is that we have had to ensure that we get the regulations watertight.

On the hon. Lady's first point, clearly, not everyone will be registered with the War Pensions Agency. Although to some of us it might appear to be a simple form, many elderly people might require help to fill out what they regard as a complicated form. I am sure that many organisations are ready to give a hand to identify all those who are entitled to the payment and to ensure that they receive help in filling out the necessary forms. We shall also ensure that additional staff are available at the War Pensions Agency to cope with the extra work.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My hon. Friend the Minister will probably be aware that people from Norfolk were disproportionately represented among those imprisoned in Japan. I probably have met, know and represent disproportionately more former prisoners of war than any other Member. I therefore thank my hon. Friend wholeheartedly for this decision. However, given that the one thing that will be said almost universally about the decision is that it is late, will he ensure that, whatever computer hiccups there are, everything will be done so that, in the weeks to come, we do not have to apologise for any further delays? Will he ensure that, having made the right decision, it is followed through and payments follow rapidly?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance, but it will take a little time to make sure that the regulations are properly in place to allow us to implement our decision. However, we shall do that with all possible expedition.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's announcement and thank him on behalf of my constituents, including Mr. Yerbury, who came to my surgery in Frome soon after I was elected and expressed to me in no uncertain terms just how bitterly the view that these prisoners had been ignored and perhaps actively misled by successive Governments was held.

I have one specific question. I very much welcome the extension of the provision to civilian prisoners of war, but do we have adequate records to ascertain the whereabouts of those of them who do not receive war pensions and are therefore much more difficult to trace?

Dr. Moonie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He has put his finger on a problem. We do not know where all these people are; it would be impossible for us to do so. Initiative will be required by the people involved or by their relatives and friends, who, I am sure, will know who might be eligible for the payments. As I said, we are happy to employ extra staff to deal with the matter and to ensure that all inquiries are properly answered. I am certain that the decision will be widely publicised, and we shall do everything that we can to ensure that everyone who is entitled to the payment receives it.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): On behalf of my constituents—in particular, Brian Brown, James Miller and Hugh Irvine—I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the statement and congratulate the Government on the decision. Those constituents were former Japanese prisoners of war and they have campaigned for decades for this day; thankfully, they have lived to see it. However, will my hon. Friend take this early opportunity to lay to rest the speculation in today's

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

press that some of the money may be creamed off the top to pay the lawyers who have represented far east prisoners of war in litigation in Japan?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that the payments will be made to the individuals concerned and not to the lawyers.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I thank the Minister for the announcement. Although he said that it can be only a token payment, it is more than a gesture; it is a recognition of the sacrifice that so many have made for us.

On a practical note, in the search for the former prisoners of war and their relatives, will special targeting be carried out, with the assistance of the Royal British Legion and other associations, of the nursing and residential homes where former prisoners of war and their relatives may now be?

Dr. Moonie: That is an excellent idea and we shall follow it up.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): In expressing my appreciation of this thoroughly welcome announcement, may I ask to what extent Her Majesty's Government have been able to discuss the matter with the Governments and service authorities of India, Pakistan and Nepal, to identify potential recipients? People in those countries served the empire, shared the sacrifice and, as the Minister said, are equally entitled to the benefits.

Dr. Moonie: I am not sure of the exact mechanisms involved, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will take steps to ensure that all those people in the categories that I mentioned receive the payments for which they are eligible.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In welcoming what the Minister said, I note that he referred to the appalling conditions in which far east prisoners of war were held. Will he confirm for the record that many thousands of people did not come back because they were deliberately executed, including several members of Her Majesty's Fleet Air Arm who were killed after the war had ended? Will he also confirm for the record that, as the late Lord Cheshire VC explained, the Japanese would have murdered all remaining prisoners of war in their captivity, but that that was pre-empted by the dropping of atom bombs? Will he also consider a small group of members of the British services who were incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps? They have not been mentioned, but they underwent similar experiences and suffered similar privations.

Dr. Moonie: I recognise that other groups suffered. Today's announcement recognises the unique collective nature of what happened in the far east, as the hon. Gentleman's remarks graphically illustrate.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that the payment will also apply to the widows of those who died in captivity before the end of the war. In dealing with the veterans of the Indian army who have properly been included in the statement, will he make it clear that it would be wholly unacceptable if members of the Indian army who deserted in captivity to join the Indian national army received the payment?

Dr. Moonie: I should point out that only a relatively small number of people who served in other armed forces are eligible for the payment. As for widows, we have tried to be as inclusive as possible.

Points of Order

4.7 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I correct a comment that I made yesterday following the statement on floods? I am delighted to say that Yorkshire Electricity has assured me that it will not levy any charge on victims of the floods who have had to be reconnected. My constituents at Stockbridge should refuse to pay any future reconnection fees and should report such requests to the West Yorkshire police.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it not totally out of order for a Member of the House to stand by your Chair and harangue you in the middle of Foreign Office questions, thereby disrupting a very important question on Iraq? For how long will that Member be banished? Will you make it plain that you will no longer stand for such bully-boy tactics?

Mr. Speaker: I have dealt with the matter.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. With reference to the forthcoming business, some hon. Members find the motion on the business of the House somewhat opaque. It would help the House enormously if you could give an idea of how business will be conducted. Irrespective of whether the House agrees to the business motion—I hope that it will not—do you propose that debates should be structured, or should different elements of the motions and the amendments be dealt with separately?

Mr. Speaker: I have been very good to the right hon. Gentleman—two of his amendments have been selected for consideration. I intend to make a statement that will explain the structure, which will be fair to all concerned and will, I think, satisfy the right hon. Gentleman.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That at today's sitting the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Programming of Bills and Deferred Divisions not later than Ten o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and those Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

4.9 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This motion is yet another attempt by the Government to truncate debate on—arguably—one of the most important matters that has come before the House, perhaps in its history, but certainly for a very long time. It proposes to alter the balance between the Government, the Executive and the House of Commons. Given that, one would have thought that even this Government would want the House of Commons to have sufficient time to consider properly the matter in its totality, including the amendments to the motions, which you, Mr. Speaker, have kindly selected.

However, we find that the opposite is the truth. In what can only be a calculated insult to the House, the Government have had the gall to suggest that such vital matters, affecting, as they might if hon. Members agreed them, the very balance between the Executive and the House, can be disposed of at an arbitrary hour—in this case 10 o'clock. That strikes me as gratuitous and completely unnecessary—and, might I add, insulting.

That is even more true given that the Order Paper on Thursday and then yesterday revealed that the Government were to attempt to cut this business even shorter, by finishing it at 8 o'clock. That is notwithstanding the fact that we have had an important statement today, and therefore time is even shorter. That cannot be right. One would have thought that agreeing such radical and fundamental changes to Standing Orders, and therefore the relationship between the Executive and the House—and, in the matter of deferred Divisions, the basis on which the House has been used to debating and voting for many centuries—required proper time for consideration.

Under the motion, the House is asked to agree that justice can be done to such matters by 10 o'clock, even though we have started to consider them after 4 o'clock. Indeed, the situation is worse than that, because, subject to your guidance in due course, Mr. Speaker, the Government are suggesting that we debate all matters at once and then vote on them in a group after 10 o'clock. In other words, the House will not be able to consider its decision on one matter before it moves to another. That is unnecessary and highly irregular.

Surely it would have been appropriate, in this of all debates, to have given Members, as has happened in debates not just in this Parliament but in many previous Parliaments, proper and ample opportunity to deliberate these matters until whatever time we think appropriate, rather than presenting us with what can be described only as a guillotine on the ending of the traditional role of the House of Commons.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does my right hon. Friend think that it is particularly ironic that the Government should be seeking so to undermine

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

parliamentary democracy in the few days immediately after Guy Fawkes night? Nearly 400 years since the successful foiling of the previous attempt to damage this House, the Government are trying to blow up parliamentary traditions.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; with much greater elegance than I am ever able to muster, he has summarised the nature of the decisions before us. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members obviously find this amusing. The distressing thing is that they would, wouldn't they? Given what we have come to know as the collective contempt of Government Members for this House, its traditions and conventions, and more particularly for the role that Members of Parliament have assumed until now that they can play in holding the Government to account, it would appear that there is a remarkable similarity. The Government, in the guise of the Modernisation Committee—for this purpose the two are identical—have decided to assault the House of Commons.

As has become the custom in such cases—I regret to say this, with the Leader of the House in her place—there has not even been an attempt by the Government or anyone else to explain to the House why the motion is on the Order Paper, and why the Government believe that discussion of these vital issues, which touch on the most fundamental relationship between the House and the Government, must be truncated and limited as is proposed.

As usual, we are all at sea. We do not know the rationale behind the proposal. The assumption seems to have been made, as ever it is by the Government, that the House will meekly accept this outrageous attempt to limit us before we get to the substance of the matter, when the Government and the Modernisation Committee will attempt irrevocably to change the relationship—

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will my right hon. Friend remind the House that the normal practice has been that we would debate such matters, and orders would later be tabled for the House to decide on, having considered what the debate had produced? That will not happen today.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. That is yet another flaw in the proceedings. Neither the Government nor the so-called Modernisation Committee have any idea at this stage how far the House agrees with the thrust and the principle of what they are trying to do. Not for them an attempt to seek the views of the House, and in the light of those to present proposals to change Standing Orders. Instead, we are faced with a peremptory effort to change the principles and the subject of the matter, and rolled within that, an attempt to change Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, you have said kindly that you will guide us as to the procedures that will be followed—but if I may say so, even subject to that, I doubt very much whether we will be able to do justice to the issues before 10 pm. That should be a matter for the House to decide; it is not for the Government to say that we have from now until 10 o'clock to decide these matters.

The business motion that we are considering represents as good a summation as one could get of the contemptuous attitude with which the Government are dealing with the matter. It is not good enough, and I shall seek to divide the House on the motion, so that hon. Members who are as unhappy as I am about it will be able to express their views on this attempt to gag the House even in such a vital matter.

4.17 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I support the general remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). Even at this late stage, I appeal to the Leader of the House to fulfil that role, as she well can and as she frequently has, and to serve the House by withdrawing the motion and allowing us to debate the general principles behind a number of very different issues.

It is possible that some Opposition Members are in favour of some of the Government's propositions and violently opposed to others. I hope that this will be a parliamentary occasion on which hon. Members on both sides will examine each proposal on its individual merits and decide whether it will advance the interests of Parliament to pass the motion.

The only sensible, logical and fair way of doing that is for the Leader of the House to allow us to have a general debate this afternoon on the principles proposed. After all, we do not have the state opening of Parliament until 6 December and we need not prorogue until 4 or 5 December. We have ample time for each of the orders to be tabled separately and for the House to concentrate on it, debate it and pass it or reject it.

The Leader of the House would be serving the House and fulfilling her historic role if she listened to this plea for common sense and logic, as I hope she will.

4.19 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Sometimes in the House of Commons the language used seems to suggest that particular items of discussion are considered solely on a party basis. I therefore want to make my position clear. I have looked carefully at the wording of the motion and I am deeply disturbed that we should be proceeding with major changes, apparently on a timetabled motion. I am not quite clear why the Leader of the House has not chosen to introduce the business motion; presumably, she will comment at the end of the debate.

These are not small matters. They may be presented as a moving of the furniture and an alteration here and there. They may even be presented as modernisation, by those who basically do not approve of the close examination of legislation and somehow feel that whatever the Government say must automatically be right. Long acquaintance with Governments of all parties has taught me that Members are wise to examine carefully what is being presented to them—and not only in terms of whether it fits in with their individual ideas or with the ideas of their party, on which they accepted nomination. They should consider carefully whether what is being presented affects the interests of their constituents.

Timetable motions, however they are presented, reduce the time available to the House to debate major matters. It is not only a matter of convenience. Were I a cynic, I might say that the accident of the decision to have the debate today, when many Members might be expected to want to go elsewhere and to enjoy the no doubt abundant

hospitality of well known embassies, might have an effect on the attendance within the Chamber. I am sure, however, that that is not the case.

I have opposed timetable motions under many Governments, not only the present Government. I feel strongly that the Back-Bench Member has only one real weapon, and that is careful scrutiny. Back Benchers can be bought off occasionally with patronage; they can be encouraged and frightened. Occasionally they get themselves into positions which some of us would feel are slightly uncomfortable in relation to their masters and mistresses. However, they have the power to question what lies behind particular pieces of legislation. They can examine the use of particular words—the semantics that present major changes as minor changes, and present essential alterations as though they were methods of making life convenient for individual Members.

I am delighted to know that the proposals are being presented so that I may know in future more securely what my day will be like. That will be a tremendous improvement on the past 35 years. But I did not think that I was coming to Parliament to have my day secured. I rather thought that I was coming to this place to examine in considerable detail laws that carry sanctions against people's lives.

There are parts of the reports that make it clear what we are supposed to be doing in the House. Parliamentary draftsmen have spelt out the difference between the wording of laws and the wording of information leaflets. They have made it clear why Members must accept the responsibility of dealing with complex legislation, which in its terms and in its English leads them to experience difficulty, and to require explanation.

I say sincerely that I shall accept some of the suggestions that will be discussed today, while others I find unacceptable. However, they are major changes, not small alterations. They will have an enormous impact, and every Government will benefit from them. In due course, every Front-Bench team will want to agree them, irrespective of its political power and irrespective of where it comes from, or what it presents itself to the electorate as representing. That should be a warning signal to individual Members, and make them ask why suddenly such matters can be dismissed so quickly. Is it because awkward questions may be asked?

I support the strange old-fashioned idea that a lot of us are elected to the House to ask awkward questions and to get some fairly straight answers. My experience is that those who seek to curtail debate—whatever their reasons and however they express them—should be distrusted, if only mildly. We should treat them with affectionate respect, but we should also listen carefully to what they say. That is not simply a question of saying, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Believe me, it is always wise for Back-Bench Members to beware of motions proposed by Front Benchers who argue that the proposals in the motion are for the convenience of Back Benchers.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You safeguard the interests of Back Benchers. Bearing in mind the opaque nature of the motion, would it have been appropriate for the Leader of the House, whose role is to represent the interests of all Members of the House, to have begun with an explanation of that motion? That would have made it clear where we stand. Alternatively, Sir, bearing in mind the fact that you announced that you intended to make a statement, would it be appropriate for you to say, on behalf of the House, how you believe that those important questions, which are about the fundamental nature of the House, should be dealt with? The decisions that we take today will be binding.

Mr. Speaker: The answer is no.

4.26 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I, too, oppose the motion. First, although it is deplorable for any debate to be curtailed, it is particularly deplorable and appalling for debate on a motion that will curtail our rights to be curtailed. Those important rights—rights of debate and of assent to legislation—are central to our work.

Secondly, the proposed changes are fundamental. In essence, they, and in particular the proposal to defer Divisions, will change the parliamentary week. They could turn us into a one-day-a-week Parliament.

Thirdly, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said, the changes will be convenient for Ministers of either political complexion, and may be convenient for some hon. Members, but they will be irreversible, and should therefore be debated at greater length.

If the motion is agreed to, we shall bury one of the principles of our democracy tonight. If we are to do that, we should at least do it with some thought, without curtailment and with a certain amount of dignity. I very much regret that a procedural change designed to stifle debate should itself be stifled by a guillotine motion. I join my hon. Friends in asking the Leader of the House: why the rush? There is no other urgent business on the Order Paper, and there is plenty of time before the end of the Session. Big issues are at stake on programming motions and deferring Divisions. If the Leader of the House is so keen to have a vote by the 10 pm deadline tonight, why do we not have a longer debate, and why does she not try out the proposals? We could defer the Division until tomorrow, which would allow us to debate the motion at greater length.

4.29 pm

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): I shall be brief. I share many of the concerns that have been expressed.

I have always supported the sensible programming of Bills, and although I have some concerns about the orders, Parliament should take that step. I have many more concerns about the proposal to defer voting.

In many ways, the proposals fundamentally alter my terms and conditions of employment. I was sent here to do a job, and it has been put to me that in many ways, the proposals will make my job easier. But I was not elected to have an easy job; I was elected to scrutinise legislation. When I ask the fundamental questions—whether the proposals will make the business of Government easier, and whether they will make it more difficult to scrutinise legislation—I have to answer yes to both. Therefore, it is imprudent of the Government—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to interrupt the

[Mr. John Bercow]

hon. Gentleman, whose contribution the House is listening to with interest, but I hope that you have noticed that the hon. Member speaking is incorrectly recorded on the monitor as being the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe).

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We did not need that explanation. It is fairly obvious to all of us. We all know who we are.

Mr. Pearson: I certainly know who I am, and I am prepared to say what I believe on the matter before us, even though it might not be acceptable to some of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

I was not put here to have an easy job; I was put here to scrutinise the Government, and I believe in doing that. It is imprudent for the Government to timetable a motion on a fundamental change to my terms and conditions of employment that will make life easier for Government and for Back Benchers, but which will produce a result which is far worse for democracy. Therefore I shall vote against the timetable motion.

4.31 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I rise to make two important points. The Modernisation Committee has not seen, let alone discussed, the orders on the Order Paper. The principles behind them have appeared in reports, but when it comes to the detail of how the orders will apply, they may well represent a different view and approach, which the House might wish to consider and debate.

Mr. Forth: Is my right hon. Friend suggesting that the words before us today are the Government's interpretation of what the Modernisation Committee wanted to say?

Sir Peter Emery: I do not know if "wanted to say" is right. The words are the Government's words, interpreting the reports which have been before the House for some time. In as detailed a matter as this, I should have expected the method by which the alterations would be applied to have come before the Committee, which has been dealing with the matter for some months, so that it could have seen the way in which the Government wanted matters to operate in the House.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does not that reinforce my plea to the Leader of the House that we should debate the principles this afternoon, and the motions should be tabled at a later date?

Sir Peter Emery: I am delighted to have given way to my hon. Friend, but he has stolen the last line of my speech.

My second point is that it is most unusual for the person who leads for the Opposition on the Modernisation Committee to come forward with a detailed Opposition paper on the recommendations under consideration. That report is a detailed outline by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) of how the procedures might better be applied. I urge all hon. Members to read the report; it will not take more than a few minutes. It suggests a different pattern and sets out a slightly different view of the final proposal, which was agreed only by the Government and the Liberal Democrats; Conservative members of the Committee opposed it.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I do not want to continue a Modernisation Committee discussion, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the principle of better timetabling in the House has been the subject of numerous debates? Was not it the view of the Modernisation Committee that the place to discuss the important matter that we are considering today was the Chamber, so that the whole House could make a decision by the end of the Session? That was the wish of the whole Committee, and we are realising it today.

Sir Peter Emery: The hon. Lady is an assiduous member of the Modernisation Committee, and has most ably contributed several views, which are not always popular with her party. Her comments reinforce those of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). She is right to say that the Modernisation Committee believes that the changes should be presented by the end of the Session so that they can apply next Session. However, that does not mean that we have to do it all in a rush tonight; after all, the Queen's Speech will not take place next week. We are sent away Friday after Friday; the Government therefore do not have so much business that they cannot hold a debate on the matter, hear the views of the House, consider them and present recommendations.

I am most critical of one matter. I believe that there are ways in which one should assist in getting measures through the House, but every aspect of a Bill should be considered in Committee. That does not often happen; it should happen far more. For a long time I have argued that when timetabling, we should ensure that every part of a Bill is considered. However, that point is not made in any of the orders. If it is not in order to ensure that a Committee considers every aspect of a Bill, I wonder whether it is right to proceed with the motion that we are considering, because it will curtail the sort of discussion that the House has the right to expect the Leader of the House to provide for our convenience. Although the Leader of the House is a Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, whose expertise in procedural matters is widely acknowledged in the House, but I must direct his attention to the fact that the contents of the motion relate not to whether we should proceed but to whether the correct amount of time has been allowed.

Sir Peter Emery: I am delighted that you interrupted, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you remind me of what I am trying to say. I am obviously not saying it well enough, and I need much longer, to ensure that I do.

The timetabling that the motion suggests is unfair to the ordinary Back-Bench Member. The duty of the Leader of the House to the House means that she must always be fair to hon. Members from all parties, not only to the Government. I perceive no reason—if there is a reason, perhaps the Leader of the House will provide it—for not proceeding with a general debate on the two reports, with reference to a third. Any thoughts that arise from those could be put forward in a new motion to the House.

which would alter Standing Orders. All that can be done before we rise. We have the time. Why will the Leader of the House not consider that appeal? I hope that from the noise that greets me when I sit down, she will realise how strongly the House feels about it.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

4.40 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I have listened with no small interest to the contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the House in this short debate. I confess to a sense of stupefaction at what I have heard. The image of the Chamber that has been presented is in marked contrast to my practical experience of the Chamber during the years that I have been a Member.

I acknowledge that my experience of this place is not as long as, for example, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who posited the possibility that the debate had been introduced because there was an overwhelming desire among the majority of Members to be the guests of friendly embassies, but she will be aware of at least two occasions, which I experienced, when debate in the Chamber was kept deliberately long in order that the majority of Members would not be distracted from watching television screens during an important football match. On another occasion, a debate was kept deliberately long to facilitate some dinner organised by Her Majesty's Opposition to celebrate someone who requires no kind of celebration at all. The basic argument that we have heard is that the Chamber's overriding business is to scrutinise the Executive—would that it did.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Lady has missed the point. We are asking for the same treatment that the Government and the Leader of the House will give to the Liaison Committee report on Thursday. It will be debated in principle on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. Presumably, at a later date, there will be a proper opportunity—there certainly should be—to vote on the report's specific recommendations. We are asking for a debate in principle on the Modernisation Committee report's far-reaching proposals—some of which might be acceptable, some of which will not—so that the House can come to a general view and then specifically debate each order when it is laid.

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I regret to say that I disagree. He has markedly failed to understand my point. He is arguing, as the majority of Members consistently do, that longevity equates with acuity. It does not. As I am sure he is aware, it is simply not the case that, via these proposals, a debate in the Chamber will be in any way curtailed. The Chamber will be allowed—

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Jackson: May I finish the point? I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

The Chamber will be entirely capable of debating any issue until 4, 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning if that is its wish. There is no basic change in that respect. If Members genuinely wish to hold the Executive—this or any other Executive—to account, surely we should be looking for much longer and more detailed Question Times and the shortening of Back-Bench speeches. If Members cannot say what they wish to say within 10 minutes, they have little to say.

Mr. Redwood: In that case, can the hon. Lady explain how modernising has so far helped us to hold the Executive to account? We have had a halving of the number of Prime Minister's Question Times, no statement on Biarritz and no statement on the fuel protests because Parliament was on an extended holiday. How does that help us to hold the Executive to account?

Ms Jackson: By failing to listen to what anyone else says and being more concerned with producing some party political soundbite, the right hon. Gentleman has yet again fallen into the terrible trap that reduces the respect that my constituents believe they should be able to have for the Chamber. What is proposed by the Modernisation Committee is, despite the outrage that has emanated in the Chamber, minor in the extreme. What is not minor is what I believe to be serious inroads into the democratic remit of this place in relation to those who send us here to represent them. What happens in the Chamber, certainly as far as my constituents are concerned, is becoming increasingly irrelevant because of the games that are played in it—games that have nothing whatever to do with genuine scrutiny of legislation, and do virtually nothing to enable our constituents' concerns to be represented at a time when they wish them to be.

Why is there such a vast lobby out there? Why have we seen people organising themselves in various ways? Because this Chamber—via its Standing Orders, which were created by Members for a different age and, in the main, for an exclusively male representation—does not meet the needs of our constituents, and cannot do so until we begin to examine those Standing Orders in detail and argue for modernisation.

4.46 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I support the six right hon. and hon. Members who have so far spoken against the imposition of the guillotine. They have expressed very different political opinions, they have spoken in different tones of voice, and they have made different kinds of plea to the Leader of the House.

I find it sad that the Leader of the House is not listening, and has made no statement about why she wishes to crash on with the business in this thoroughly undemocratic way. She does not even listen to the sensible advice of her hon. Friends, let alone Opposition Members who have a passion for Parliament similar to that of many Labour Members who are offended by the proposal.

The Government have already gained the all-comers record for the imposition of the guillotine. Guillotines are always very contentious. When they were imposed by Conservative Governments, there were times when some of us felt uncomfortable about that; but Conservative Governments imposed nothing like the number—with nothing like the ruthlessness and consistency—imposed by this miserable Government so far.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I know that the right hon. Gentleman would not want to give the House incorrect information. It is not true that the present Government hold the record for guillotines; it is held by the Conservative party.

Mr. Redwood: If the right hon. Lady looks at the annual rates, she will see that—as she well knows—the Government hold the all-comers record by a mile. It was foolish of her to try to make that point.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Would the right hon. Gentleman care to qualify his statement by giving the actual figures?

Mr. Redwood: They are on the record in *Hansard*, having been given in an earlier debate. I shall not delay the House by putting them all on the record again—although my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who is now looking for them in the text, may well return to them himself. However, I well remember the burden of the argument, and the evidence of the figures is overwhelming—as the hon. Lady will find if she cares to check them.

We are engaging in an important set of debates, or perhaps a single debate, on the big issue of how the House of Commons is to hold the Government to account.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Perhaps I can assist my right hon. Friend by answering the point made by the Leader of the House. Between 1946 and 1949, under Labour, there were three timetabled Bills; between 1951 and 1963, there were 15; between 1966 and 1970, under Mr. Wilson, there were five; under my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), there were five; under the subsequent Governments of Wilson and Lord Callaghan, there were 12; under Lady Thatcher, there were 34; under my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), there were 17; and under the present Prime Minister, between 1997 and 2000, there have been 34.

Mr. Redwood: I hope that the Leader of the House will now withdraw what she said. I did indeed remember correctly, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

This is symptomatic of how the House is treated by the present Government. Not only do Ministers not want to come here and make statements; not only do they not want to come here and answer questions; but when they do come here, they attempt to mislead the House in an appalling way. The only statements that they wish to make are those that will gain cross-party support, or show them in a good light.

This place is here to hold the Executive to account. How can we do that this afternoon and this evening if major procedural changes are to be rushed through, and if we cannot even have an explanation of why time is so limited that the debate must be truncated?

Mr. Bercow: Given that the Order Paper contains no fewer than 10 specific proposals from the Government and 11 amendments tabled by other right hon. and hon. Members, does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is essential for the public to understand that the Leader of the House thinks it appropriate that, on average, each of those matters should receive approximately a quarter of an hour of the House's attention?

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I fear that several big issues will receive no attention whatsoever because the Leader of the House is proposing to the House that debate should take place in a dreadful way.

Why are we short of time today? We had 13 weeks off, but when the Opposition asked for the House to be recalled to discuss important matters, we were denied the opportunity to do our job in September or early October. We have now been sitting for two weeks, but the business does not often stagger through to 10 o'clock because it is not of great interest to many right hon. and hon. Members, especially those on the Government Benches. We have now been told that we are so short of that precious commodity, time, that our debate has to be steamrollered.

Conservative Members and, I believe, some Labour Members, think that this matter is being deliberately steamrollered on a busy news day outside this place. The Government want to make their life easier and do not want difficult questions to be asked, and certainly have no intention of answering them. They do not want to find time to debate legislation in detail because so much of it is drafted so appallingly badly that they know it would not stand up to proper scrutiny.

The Government are trying to push the matter through on a day when the United States of America is busy electing the most powerful man in the world and an awful lot of briefing is taking place on what will be in the pre-Budget statement tomorrow—which, of course, should be kept quiet until the Chancellor makes his speech to the House. Once again, the Government are showing contempt for the House by briefing the press and speaking to journalists long before Members of Parliament.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): A moment ago, my right hon. Friend referred to bad drafting. Is he aware that the motion that we are debating is badly drafted? A careful reading makes it clear that if our current debate goes on until after 10 o'clock, it will not be possible for us to vote on the following two motions, which will be dropped.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful for the important point made by my hon. Friend. If the timetable motion is passed tonight, followed by that on the business of the House, Parliament will get an unflattering name for itself. Historians and the British people have a habit of giving Parliaments names, so we have had the Merciless Parliament, the Addled Parliament and the Parliament of the Saints—which one could hardly call this Parliament. I fear that this Parliament will go down in history as the Useless Parliament without backbone, thanks to the reluctance of so many Government Members to hold the Executive to account and stand up against the guillotine tonight. All that they seem to want is to do their knitting at the base of guillotine as the tumbrel falls.

The silence of the babes on this matter is eerie, and it is about time that they started to represent the views of their constituents to the Government, instead of just

representing the Government to their constituents. They could start tonight by speaking out in favour of proper parliamentary procedure.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): My constituents tell me that they find this place embarrassing. They find contributions such as those of the right hon. Gentleman the most embarrassing, as they are the yah-boo of this place. One reason that my constituents sent me here is that they want Parliament modernised and changed. They want the Executive to be held to account and they want legislation to be properly scrutinised. I want that to happen, but I do not see it happening under current procedures. Today, we are debating a way of improving that.

Mr. Redwood: I look forward to the hon. Lady joining us in the Division Lobby, should there be a Division on this matter. She must accept that there cannot be proper accountability if guillotines are imposed on every piece of business and votes are divorced from the argument. Everyone outside knows that when a discussion or debate takes place, the issue is put to the vote, and voted on then and there. One does not invite people who were never part of that debate to come in up to a week later to vote on the matter. However, the House is being asked to do that, and the motion is designed to strengthen the power of the Executive, not the House.

Of course, people out there want change. They want a Parliament of people who speak up for their rights and they want Members of Parliament who tell the Government that they are wrong on the fuel tax, the Budget and how they are trying to run the country.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does the right hon. Gentleman not feel at all guilty about the night on which the Conservative party forced through 17 orders on the poll tax—which consisted of 32 pages on matters including imprisonment and other things—when there was only an hour and a half to debate all those orders?

Mr. Redwood: I think that that was a mistake, and, eventually, the previous Government saw that it was a mistake. Eventually, the previous Government listened to public opinion and removed that tax. If the hon. Gentleman would like to look at the record, he will see that I was the Minister who was given the rotten task of removing that tax and introducing one that was a bit more palatable. It is a very good example of why Parliament should not have been sidelined. That Government should have listened then, when the voices were very clear. This Government should now listen to the fuel protesters and to all the other members of the public who dislike what the Government are doing in health and education and in the Budget.

Above all, however, will Labour Members join us today in demanding proper scrutiny and discussion, and tell the Leader of the House that she speaks for no one but the Government in trying to stifle debate and stop proper voting?

4.55 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): I did not plan on speaking in the debate, until the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) spoke. If I remember correctly, when he was the Government spokesman on the poll tax, I was an Opposition local government spokesman and, therefore, had to endure the same procedures that he had to endure. I am sure that members of the public watching this debate who are familiar with the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that there is nothing quite like the zeal of the convert.

I remember when the right hon. Gentleman was pushing and prodding through legislation, and he and I had the type of private chats that spokespeople have. He would say, "I have to do this because there is no other way that we can get the business through." He knows how Governments work.

Mr. Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman not remember that, when I was a Minister, I asked the shadow spokesmen how they would like to organise the time? I was always very keen that the Opposition had sufficient time to deal with the two or three big issues that mattered most to them. Will he confirm that that is so?

Mr. Henderson: I can confirm that the right hon. Gentleman used to consult Opposition spokespeople on statements that he was about to make to the House, and I thank him for doing that. However, he was not his own man, as his Whips sometimes had other ideas about how business should be conducted, and his view did not always prevail. The Whips often wanted to timetable business, because they recognised that the Government had to get their business through.

I am speaking in this debate not as an apologist for the Government, but as someone who has constituents to represent. My constituents, like those of my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), would laugh us out of court if they saw this debate, in which some hon. Members seem to be saying that the future of democracy depends on how and when we do our business. Consumers do not judge cars on the basis of when they were made or the circumstances in which they were made, and people do not judge lawyers on the basis of when they gave advice or the circumstances in which they gave it. People, and consumers, care about results.

I believe that the public hold this place in disrepute more than ever before in my lifetime, largely because of the way in which we conduct our affairs. The public want decisions to be taken well and Government legislation to be scrutinised. I think that any British citizen would tell us, however, that the best way of scrutinising legislation is not to use 650-plus people, but to use small groups of people to examine the detail, to cross the t's and dot the i's. That belief is based on their experience of life—the way in which they work, participate in social clubs and become involved in charities.

The public are far too wise to believe that relying on set-piece speeches in the Chamber that last halfway through the night is a sensible way of conducting parliamentary affairs. They are far too wise to believe that there should be seven or eight Divisions when one would be enough to clarify the issue. I believe that the public are looking for the results of our action to improve health, education and other services, and that, at the next general election, they will be judging all of us on those results. It surely makes sense for us to have procedures that lead to good decisions being made as efficiently and effectively as possible.

[Mr. Henderson]

I shall support the guillotine motion. I have said all I wanted to say, but I should like to do hon. Members the courtesy of allowing them to intervene.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Does he not realise that the logic of what he is saying is that the ability of hon. Members to speak for their constituencies would be reduced to a series of administrative decisions? Indeed, one way in which we could produce very rapid decisions with apparently a certain amount of consultation would be to have us all e-mail our views and then to collate the result. Does he not realise that one of his privileges here is to be able to speak openly? Although many people may deeply disapprove of hon. Members expressing views that are not regurgitated from their Front Bench, that is fundamentally what Parliament is about.

Mr. Henderson: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend about the fundamentals of Parliament; I am arguing about how it is done. I do not think that it takes 20 minutes to make a point. It is possible to make a point in two or three minutes, as many other Parliaments around the world require. Quite frankly, to be flippant and derisory about e-mail is to live in the last century. The business community does not spend endless hours at face-to-face meetings dealing with detail. Most people deal with the principles face to face and leave the detail to e-mail. We may have to involve e-mails in Committees in future. I do not know about that, but I would not be derisory about them.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Does he not appreciate that although some people will have the privilege of serving on a Committee and examining legislation in detail and at length—but even that is likely to be programmed—others, for whatever reason, will not be selected to serve on that Committee? We, as Back Benchers, have a responsibility to examine legislation in detail, if we so wish and if we have responsibilities as constituency Members of Parliament representing particular interests. We should not be denied that.

Mr. Henderson: Of course I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but when the opportunity arises on Report or whenever for an hon. Member to make an observation on a Committee recommendation that he or she has not been part of, it should be expressed succinctly at a reasonable hour and we should vote on it at a reasonable hour. That is what the public would expect.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he realise that we are being asked to vote on a motion that the public would find perverse as it says that we should vote at 10 o'clock regardless of where the discussion has reached and whether or not we have had an informed debate or reached the end of business? Does he really support the idea of a guillotine on our procedures?

Mr. Henderson: The public, like many right hon. and hon. Members, would find the wording of the motion rather strange, but they would expect us to be able to discuss it in a set time, to allow various points of view to be expressed and for the House to reach a decision. I believe that if we cannot do that in four or five hours tonight, we will never do it. Not everyone who wishes to continue the debate after 10 o'clock tonight wishes to extend it in order to demoralise those who seek change and encourage them to go to embassy parties a little earlier. I am not saying that every hon. Member who seeks an extension of the debate is motivated by that, but those of us who have been here a little while know that an awful lot of them are.

5.3 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) was correct in saying that this Labour Government have imposed more guillotines than any other Government since the war. In fact, annexe C to the Select Committee report indicates that there have been 36 guillotines, 18 of them having been agreed between Front Benches and 18 having been imposed by the Government. Of course, the report was written before the Government got into their full stride and before the end of July, since when there have been at least another two.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman so early in his remarks, but he has said something very important and I am grateful to him for placing it clearly on the record. He makes no distinction—and it is a perfectly legitimate point—between programme motions that have been agreed across the House for the convenience of scheduling proper debate and guillotines that have been imposed by the Government. It is important that we recognise that he has made that point.

Mr. Shepherd: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for clarifying her position. The fact remains that the Government have imposed more than 20 guillotines, in addition to, as she and I agree, guillotines agreed between the Front Benches. We have rehearsed the arguments about guillotines over many years. I lived through 34 guillotines during the Thatcher years—but that was 11 years. I lived through 17 guillotines during the Major years, and have since lived through more than 20 during the Blair years.

To curtail freedom of expression used to be considered one of the greatest offences against parliamentary practice. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said, if this House stood for anything, it was for the right to stand up and speak, no matter how lonely that task might be, for one's constituents or for one's country. That is an important consideration. The House can justify itself to the outside world in no other way.

Mr. Forth: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Shepherd: Not for the moment.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) spoke true when she said that the House is in crisis. No one believes that Members of Parliament have any role. As I go around my constituency, I encounter, as do other hon. Members, business men and constituents who ask what is the point of us. "You never change anything the Government say", they tell me.

We have reached the stage, in this modern world, in which Governments may talk directly to the nation. Traditionally, the nation responded through its elected representatives, but we are no longer a House of representatives in any true sense. In fact, those elected here are impatient to support their Government. That, ultimately, is why we have a motion before us that will ensure that we guillotine everything. There lies the essence of what has gone wrong with the House. No one knows how to talk back to the Government. We are all, in a sense, bought placepeople.

I recognise the role and importance of party, but surely some importance must be attached to being ourselves and standing up for what we believe. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate was right in one sense. I have no problem with the hours at which the House sits. The motion before us is incomprehensible to almost anyone; it was probably written by someone with a PhD from the London School of Economics. I doubt whether many hon. Members have actually troubled to read it from beginning to end.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are discussing the business motion? I hope that he will not anticipate what he might say if he catches my eye later on the substantive motion.

Mr. Shepherd: Of course not, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My point is that this outrageous guillotine is inappropriate because of the nature of the business that it would guillotine. That must require some discussion of the length and complexity of that business. That must be a fair point.

The motion is inexplicable, and we have, indeed, had no explanation of it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) have made the important point that this debate is the only one in which we may discuss the principles—if one can call them that—set out in the report of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, "Programming of Legislation and the Timing of Votes". We shall come later to the substance of what is a change to our Standing Orders.

No one had seen the motions before last week. Some principles had been enunciated in the report, but the proposals were never put before the Modernisation Committee in the form before us now. Nor were they referred to the Select Committee on Procedure so that it might deliberate on whether they provided an appropriate way to achieve an end.

We need time to debate many issues. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) was very concerned about our sitting hours. Did the Modernisation Committee discuss those? Does the issue appear in the report? Is it the way to solve the problem?

Essentially, this—the business that we are being denied the opportunity to discuss fully within the terms of this motion—is a bluff. We never looked into whether, in this modern world, the House could sit at 9 am and rise at 7.30 pm. We never looked at the rhythm of the parliamentary year. Why? All those matters have been discussed long ago. If we look at the Crossman diaries, which were circulated to all the Committee members, we can see where the power lies in this matter—it lies in the Cabinet. So, create a diversion and grab something while one is at it.

I am convinced that this proposal will mean the aggrandisement of Government on a scale that is unacceptable to the House, or should be. It is saying, "We shall get our business." That rules out the views of individual Members, as the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) said, and of the hundreds of others who have served in the House in the years that I have been here. The Government should not always get—

Mrs. Fitzsimons: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the final verdict is in the Lobby? That is the most powerful way to express how one feels.

Mr. Shepherd: The hon. Lady forgets our traditions. Our process has never been merely a question of x divided by 2 + 1; it is the process by which one gets there. The Opposition, or those who oppose the might and weight of a Government's argument, must be allowed to make their case. The hon. Lady, who will doubtless support the timetable motion, asks, "Why have a debate? We have just announced our policy. We can determine the matter in the Lobby." That is essentially what is behind all such arguments. We are asking the outside world to listen to these arguments. When we speak, we are meant to be the people's elected representatives.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Is not the essential difference between the two sides of the House the fact that far too many Labour Members think that they were elected to support the Government, not to represent their constituents?

Mr. Shepherd: To be fair, I have been in enough Parliaments in which that could have been said of Government Members of whatever party.

This is meant to be a House of Commons debate about us as Members of Parliament. I am trying to point out that this guillotining of a debate on a fundamental principle, without allowing the House first properly to discuss that principle, is wrong. It is as simple as that. The Committee did not consider whether the House could meet at 9 am or 10 am and rise at 7 pm or 7.30 pm, without the need to impose such guillotines.

Let us remember what is behind this guillotine on a motion to guillotine for ever—albeit initially only for the next Session. It is meant to assure the Government that they own the House in the most positive way.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): To put the record straight, I spent 18 years practising what the hon. Gentleman claims is a good method. It fails because we play with time in this place, which brings the House into disrepute. The proposal before the House is a way to improve the quality of legislation and of not legislating in the middle of the night. That is what it is about and that is what we should get on with.

Mr. Shepherd: That failure is no reason to insist on how another Opposition should conduct their business, but that is the conceit behind the proposal. Now, Governments tell Oppositions how they should perform their job. That is outrageous, and yet the outrageousness marches through the business motion, and through the next motion on the programming of Bills.

How do we discuss in detail these individual parts that are the jigsaw that makes up the totality of the absoluteness of the Government's control over this

[Mr. Shepherd]

House? In truth, the House is nothing but an instrument of the Executive as long as we do not pause to ask why Labour Back Benchers could not have insisted that sitting hours were a reasonable matter for consideration by the Modernisation Committee—whose Chairman, the Leader of the House, is a member of the Cabinet—and should be in the proposal before us, and further insisted that the Committee should examine why the House cannot sit.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate made a fair point, which is appreciated by many Conservative Members, that the House will seem dead to the outside world if it discusses business at 10 pm, 11 pm, midnight or 1 am. We want to be vital contributors to the arguments in the country. This proposal does nothing to meet that need. It ensures only that our debates will take place at the traditional times—perhaps starting at 5 or 6 pm.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My hon. Friend has pointed out that we are putting the House into the hands of the Government. Are not Governments—whoever is in power—resistant to changes in hours, because Ministers cannot be in the Chamber in the morning? That is why the House cannot sit in the morning. The Government and the Cabinet resist changes that some Members might find convenient.

Mr. Shepherd: That is why I drew the attention of the House to the Crossman diaries—the entry to which I referred is that for Thursday 17 November 1976. Cabinets oppose such changes. However, Ministers are in the House at an early hour. They have to take Bills through Standing Committees and answer Adjournment debates in Westminster Hall. It would liberate the House if we could all go out and make our party political speeches after 8 o'clock. It would enable Opposition Front Benchers to do so.

Until this Session, the Prime Minister voted extremely casually—in only 5 per cent. of the votes. He is now up to 10 per cent. No Prime Minister has either attended the House so rarely or voted so little. That is also true of Ministers, who expect their measures to be voted through by Back Benchers—such as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate—at 10 or 11 o'clock at night. That is what we have come to. So confident are they—so assured in their hold over those elected to the Chamber—that Back Benchers will do almost anything. Ministers do not have to give any time to such matters.

The matter is all in the Crossman diaries—what goes around comes around. Such matters are repeated time and again, but never so much as under the Labour Government. In Opposition, Labour Members vigorously criticised the Conservative use of guillotines—I agreed with the Labour Back Benchers who did so—but the Labour Government now say that was all a terrible waste of time because they are in government and they must use the guillotine as often as they want.

The assumptions in the report—we will not have the opportunity to consider it now—are extraordinary: the Government must get their business. What new constitutional principle do the Government propose by that? If the House believes that is right for the country, we must accept that principle; but if the House believes that it is wrong for the country, we must reject it. That is the most basic assertion of the representative functions of the House, but we are setting it aside.

Mr. Pike: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not want to mislead the House. Does he agree that the whole purpose of today's motions is to move away from the use of the guillotine and towards sensible programming? That will ensure better scrutiny of legislation. That is why we are holding the debate.

Mr. Shepherd: The distinguished hon. Gentleman is a member of the Modernisation Committee. The only evidence offered to us on the supposed programming of Bills was mixed. It is set out in an appendix written by the Clerk. The hon. Gentleman is aware that, even when such programming was agreed between Members of the Front Benches, we did not discuss all parts of a Bill.

The debates on the poll tax offer a powerful and instructive example. Individual Members on both sides of the House took the opportunity—and had the time—to set out why the tax was defective and could not be borne. That began to turn the tide of opinion in the Government. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham said, he eventually had to ameliorate the legislation under another Prime Minister. Do not doubt the importance of holding in the hands of the House the ability to check Governments. However impatient we are, if business were conducted during the day, most of us would not regret being here for an extra half hour or hour. There would not then be the need to impose guillotines. I hope that the new Labour hon. Ladies and Gentlemen are not fooled by this device of guillotining everything.

A distinguished Leader of the House, now Lord Biffen, when confronted with the precursors to the Jopling proposals said, from where the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), is sitting now:

> All Governments are tomorrow's possible Opposition.—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1986; Vol. 92, c. 1088.]

As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich and the hon. Member for Dudley, South said, that is the truth of the situation. Do not deny that right.

Ms Glenda Jackson: The thrust of the hon. Gentleman's argument up to this point has been that Back Benchers must be assured that they will have the time to hold whatever Government are in power to account. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is simply not the case that the present structures of the House afford that opportunity to every Back Bencher. If we are genuine about affording to Back Benchers of whichever party the opportunity to hold the Executive to account, we must consider structures that will afford that opportunity to all Back Benchers. They certainly do not do so at the moment. Unless the Speaker chooses to limit speeches to either 10 or 15 minutes, the majority of debating time in the Chamber is taken up by the most asinine, childish debate, usually rooted in empty party political badinage, which has nothing to do with scrutiny and not only brings this place into disrepute, but is contemptuous of the people who sent us here to represent them.

Mr. Shepherd: The hon. Lady is talking about Second Reading. We are talking about Report stage. The hon. Lady does not give evidence that she has even troubled

to read the report that is before the House. Annexe C deals with what has happened to what we call agreed guillotines as opposed to imposed guillotines. If she had troubled to read that, she would know that her analysis is not borne out by the evidence is not there to support her contention.

Ms Jackson: My analysis was not of the report, which I have read; my analysis was of the hon. Gentleman's argument.

Mr. Shepherd: I do not see how, by guillotining absolutely everything, the hon. Lady achieves what we are arguing for on this side of the House.

Mr. Redwood: The great weakness in the hon. Lady's argument is that if everything is guillotined, a small group of trusties who support any Government can come in and take up practically all the time available for debate and prevent independent-minded Back Benchers on either side from getting their views across. That is what we object to.

Mr. Shepherd: That is the fundamental argument. I am not rehearsing all the arguments, I am talking about the guillotine.

Helen Jackson: I appreciate the fervour with which the hon. Gentleman regularly talks to the House about guillotines, but does he agree that he is making a blinkered refusal to recognise the difference between the old-fashioned guillotine, which stops debate on a Bill, and the new modern approach to programming legislation, which is fully supported by the Hansard Society and many other Parliaments around the world? The new approach has at its heart the need to discuss and scrutinise Government Bills thoroughly. Such a distinction exists and, by basing his argument on the assumption that there is no distinction, the hon. Gentleman loses the whole point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That intervention was far too long, but it illustrates that we are becoming much more involved in the substance of the motions to come. I realise that this motion cannot be entirely divorced from the others, but the hon. Gentleman has had some scope to develop his argument. We should not have too much more debate on the substance, given that the House has yet to reach a decision on when it will tackle the other motions.

Mr. Shepherd: I absolutely agree, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, this is a guillotine motion and the issue is whether we shall have the time to discuss the substantive issues. The Modernisation Committee's report examined whether guillotine motions allow for full consideration of all the constituent parts. It considered the programmes motions on the Northern Ireland Bill and the Transport Bill. About the Transport Bill, it said:

> 42 groups of amendments were selected by the Chair; 11 of them were debated, but 31 (of which 4 consisted of minor and drafting amendments) were not reached.

The belief that one can fix a timetable that is necessarily appropriate means that we do not discuss legislation. That is now done by the other place, which is the working part of our constitution. We have become the dignified part of the constitution.

A Cabinet Minister tabled a motion that proposes fundamental changes to the Standing Orders of the House in the hope that it will fulfil the half-baked idea that a fixed programme will get people home at 10 o'clock. However, that will make the House more and more irrelevant and that is why this debate is so timely.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we vote for a guillotine on such extraordinarily important matters, we shall not be able to discuss sitting hours or what the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) believes is the abuse and misuse of Question Time? We will not be able to discuss those points, because we will not have the time.

Mr. Shepherd: I am only too conscious of that point. I regret that my speech has already lasted 25 minutes, but the fact is that more Members have attended this debate than any other on a procedural matter. That suggests to me that many of them wish to speak.

I know full well what will happen, because I have served in many Parliaments. Therefore, I put the hypothesis to the Leader of the House—a Cabinet member—that if we discuss the procedural motion until 10 o'clock, the attitude will be, "Go hang the debate on the substantive matter. We'll just pass it on the nod." People will then say, "You see just how ridiculous the House of Commons is."

Mr. Forth: It might help my hon. Friend if I inform him that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), the Government Deputy Chief Whip, is hovering by the Speaker's Chair and that he is on the point of asking for a closure motion. The Government might not even allow us a proper amount of time to finish this debate.

Mr. Shepherd: I do not know what the Deputy Chief Whip will do, so I shall not consider that point.

As I understand the Order Paper, the business of the House may be discussed until any hour. However, if we discuss this motion until 10 o'clock, we shall not be able to discuss the motions that the Government so desperately want.

Mr. Tyrie: To reiterate a point that I made earlier, if this debate goes beyond 10 o'clock, the House will not have an opportunity to vote on the motions on the programming of Bills and on deferred Divisions. The business will therefore fall.

Mr. Shepherd: I would have loved the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire to have been taken on board. There should have been a debate on the principles that lie behind the motions and on the report itself. The Government should have made their proposals after such a debate.

5.30 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I want to make a brief contribution, not only because I care about the House, but because I am also a member of the Modernisation Committee and as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) knows, I am happy to support some of the proposed changes to Standing Orders. However, I want the House, and the Leader of the House in particular, to know that I think that the Government's handling of the matter is totally unacceptable.

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

I share the view expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills and for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) who, picking up on remarks made by the hon. Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson), said that we should debate the general principles and issues contained in the Modernisation Committee's report as it relates to programming, the establishment of business sub-committees and, of course, deferred Divisions.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Is it not the case that the Leader of House could help the House enormously if, when my hon. Friend finishes his speech, she accepted the principle that has been raised by so many hon. Members?

Mr. Winterton: As an eternal optimist and a believer in democracy, I would—to use a most unparliamentary phrase—love the right hon. Lady to do just that. She has it within her discretion and power to heed the concern that has been expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I found some contributions rather sad, not least the remarks of the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) about the new programming. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said that programming is another word for guillotine. I think that it is a more rational word and that programming might lead to improvements that are not available within the guillotine system. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North appears to think that under this guillotine motion, which covers all the business that will subsequently come before the House, the concerns, responsibilities and role of Back Benchers will be properly safeguarded. I do not believe that they will be.

I am deeply worried about some of the proposals—in particular, the fact that Back Benchers will have less opportunity to do what they are here to do. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, we are here to represent our constituents. As hon. Members have said, Members of the House might not have the privilege of serving on a Standing Committee and, because of the number of people who want to speak, may not be able to speak on Second Reading of an important Bill. Therefore their only opportunity to make a contribution would be on Report or during remaining stages. If even those stages are to be programmed and limited, many Members on both sides of the House will be very unhappy that their responsibilities are being removed, reduced and undermined.

I am surprised that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North—who, as a distinguished Minister, did very well in the positions that he held—has so little understanding of the impact of what the House, under a guillotine motion, will decide this afternoon.

Mr. Doug Henderson: Did the hon. Gentleman understand my point? I did not say that Back Benchers should have less opportunity to speak, but that they should have at least as much opportunity as they have now. My point was that they should speak more succinctly within a programmed motion. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Winterton: I am hearing murmuring to the effect that that is not in the proposed amendments to the Standing Orders. I must agree with my hon. Friends and those on the Government Benches that that point is not dealt with. However, I must still say to the hon. Gentleman—a distinguished ex-Minister—that there are occasions on which Members believe that the interests of their constituents or constituency deserve more than two or three minutes, in which he says hon. Members should be able to get their point across. If he is right, why do Ministers and shadow Ministers take so long to speak from the Dispatch Box? Even the hon. Gentleman when a Minister took rather longer than two or three minutes. Why should he as a Minister be treated any differently from me, an evergreen Back Bencher?

Mr. Henderson: I hate to prolong the debate, but I was not for a second advocating that Ministers should be allowed lengthy periods in which to speak. They should be equally succinct.

Mr. Winterton: I note what the hon. Gentleman says—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must debate the business motion. How long Ministers have spoken or intend to speak has nothing to do with the business motion—perhaps another time.

Mr. Winterton: I accept your courteous reprimand, Mr. Speaker, and shall seek to keep my remarks to the business motion.

Mr. Redwood: Has my hon. Friend noticed that one of the many ironies of this debate is that we have now spent almost two hours discussing how the business is to proceed? If the Government had let us debate the substance right from the beginning, we might have found that six hours was sufficient to expose the problems with the proposals. Have not the Government contributed to making it impossible for the House to consider the matters properly?

Mr. Winterton: I believe that I implied that in saying that I fully support the request of my hon. Friends the Members for South Staffordshire and for Aldridge-Brownhills and of Government Members.

Mrs. Dunwoody: As someone who has been in the House a very long time, can the hon. Gentleman tell me of an occasion on which debate on a business motion of such importance was not opened by a statement from the Government Front Bench?

Mr. Winterton: I have to be a little careful in how I respond to that question because I fully accepted the Speaker's reply to my point of order on that matter. I felt that the debate might have been so opened, but I must fully support our Speaker; he does not have any role in who wants to speak and who does not. If the Leader of the House had provided an explanation of the business motion, it might well, as the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire suggested, have enabled the House to make more progress and proceed with the debate in a much more orderly and informed way.

Mr. Hawkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that one thing that is upsetting so many hon. Members on both

sides of the House is the constitutional outrage of the Government's guillotining something which itself will guillotine future debate?

Mr. Winterton: I was intending to begin my brief speech by saying that the motion is the guillotine of all guillotines. I am sad because, as I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the former shadow Leader of the House, would agree, we had established some common ground for progress. However, in certain other areas of the Government's proposals, the Opposition are deeply concerned that their role and that of Back Benchers will be eroded.

One great problem in debates on matters that relate entirely to the House, and should therefore be House of Commons matters, is that, however impartial the individual in question may seek to be, these are presided over by a member of the Cabinet. That causes me some concern because, as has been said, none of the details on the Order Paper today have been discussed by the Modernisation Committee. The motions have clear implications for the way in which the House can operate. The House would be far better to proceed by having a general debate on the issues contained in the Select Committee's report, and then having separate debates on the important changes to Standing Orders.

I make a plea to the right hon. Lady. I know that she has a difficult job to do, and that in general she does a very good job in the Committee. I respect her for it and praise her for it, but will she not listen? As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge–Brownhills, who is no longer in his place, said, referring to words originally spoken from the very position in which the right hon. Lady is sitting, today's Government is tomorrow's Opposition. The House needs to proceed with agreement and by agreement on such important matters.

5.41 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Leader of the House has heard representations from both sides reflecting how strongly right hon. and hon. Members feel about the two motions before us.

The House will recall that only last week, the right hon. Lady proposed that our deliberations tonight should be curtailed at 8 pm, rather than 10 pm. I ask her to reflect carefully on the reason that she gave me at business questions on Thursday for the timetabling of debates of such importance to the House:

> It is more time than we spent debating the parliamentary calendar and as much time as we spent debating whether we should set up the experiment in Westminster Hall. There is therefore nothing unprecedented about the time allowed for the debate.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 854.]

From the contributions that she has heard tonight, the Leader of the House must know that there is a world of difference, particularly in respect of parliamentary representation of the democratically elected representatives of the people. There is a world of difference between motions of the magnitude of those before us, and the arrangements for Westminster Hall and the parliamentary timetable.

I hope that the right hon. Lady has taken on board the feeling of the House. As several hon. Members on both sides have said, this is not a party political matter; it is a matter for Parliament. It is at the heart of our democratic proceedings. The way that we deal with it tonight will be seen as a reflection of the extent to which the Government, of which the right hon. Lady is a member, respect the right of individual hon. Members to challenge the Executive, and the right of an official Opposition to have sufficient time and opportunity to challenge the Government of the day, whichever party is in government.

I see the right hon. Lady's papers on the Dispatch Box. I hope that she will address that issue. No doubt the House will want to consider other important matters of a constitutional nature, and it would be wrong of the Modernisation Committee—I say this as a new member of the Committee—to give equal weight to matters such as Westminster Hall and the motions before the House tonight.

There is one litmus test that should be applied to our deliberations tonight, whether in this debate or on the substantive matters to follow: do the proposals strengthen the Executive, or do they strengthen the right of hon. Members to scrutinise, question and debate? That is the test. It is not a matter of hon. Members' personal arrangements for attendance in the House. The fundamental question has been reflected in many of the contributions that we heard.

I shall not take up any more of the time of the House, but I hope that there will be an opportunity later to make a more substantive contribution to the discussion of matters that will change the House and our proceedings in the next Session, to the detriment of hon. Members on both sides, who are here to represent their voters.

I hope that the right hon. Lady will reassure us that she understands the importance of the motions and that, as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, she will reflect carefully on the differences between matters that have constitutional significance and those that are simply procedural and deal with the efficient running of the House.

5.45 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I shall speak briefly because I want the substantial debate to begin as soon as possible. The past hour and a half has demonstrated to my mind beyond doubt how much better it is for the House to come to an agreement between the parties, including Back-Bench Members as far a possible, on the programming of business.

Over the past hour and a half we have taken up time when it is important to discuss substance, not the ethereal issue of whether we think that a guillotine is a guillotine or a programme motion. To my mind, a programme motion is the sensible way to make our business more orderly and to provide opportunities to Opposition Members to ensure that their issues are properly addressed. There have been occasions when we have managed to do that.

I shall be advising my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against a timetable motion that is a guillotine. We should not use a guillotine for business of this sort. However, I believe that a programme motion is a proper way for us to undertake our business, and to do so in an orderly fashion. I am extremely disappointed that we have spent an hour and a half discussing the various merits of these different procedures, and during that time have not heard from the Leader of the House. I hope that we shall hear from her now.

5.46 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): In line with the many injunctions that I have received, I do not propose to detain the House for long. It was because I thought, and still think, that the substance of what we are here to debate was what was really important, that I did not take the time of the House to explain the business of the House motion. It is unfortunate, to put it no higher, that the use of the word "guillotine" has become so commonplace that it is used for any motion of any sort that seeks in any way to curtail debate.

I am aware that the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who I am sorry is not in his place, takes and expresses the view that any curtailment of the length of speech that an hon. Member wishes to make is a guillotine and something which he regards as an abuse of our procedures. We all know that we would never complete any business if that were the approach adopted by the House as a whole.

I shall repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) last Thursday. We are not dealing with a guillotine. Before us is a business of the House motion that is designed to ensure—*[Interruption.]* It is a normal sort of motion that appears on the Order Paper every day of the week. It is designed to ensure that the House can come to a view on the orders that are before it at a sensible time.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: No, not for a moment.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton quoted some of the examples that I gave about time. To be frank, I am astonished that the House thinks that an ordinary full parliamentary day is wholly inadequate to discuss the business that is before us, all the more so given the precedents that I gave the hon. Lady from this Parliament and the previous reports from the Modernisation Committee. In addition, I am sure that she will recall an occasion when the previous Administration made changes to the Welsh Grand Committee. Those changes were of such weight that they were considered an alternative to devolution.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: Not for the moment, please.

That was the importance and the weight that the previous Administration put on those changes, and they were debated for only half a day. In allowing a full parliamentary day for the processes of the debate, the Government were not acting in any way that was out of the ordinary.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I ask the right hon. Lady to reflect on what Opposition Members have been saying. The debate is not about programming. We are asking for a proper debate on the principle of the Modernisation Committee's reports, such as the right hon. Lady is providing for on Thursday when the Liaison Committee's report can be debated in principle, so we can later address in detail the specific orders.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) has said, even the members of the Modernisation Committee have not seen the terms of the orders. They have not had a chance to discuss them in that Committee. Can the right hon. Lady not accept what so many of us are asking for in the interests of the House, and allow us to have the debate in principle and then allow us to debate the orders at a later date?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall return to that point in a moment, but first I want to discuss another matter. Inadvertently, I am sure, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) gave the House what I understand to be incorrect information. It is not the case that the greatest number of guillotines in a Parliament or in one year occurred during this Government—that record continues to be held by a Conservative Government.

Mr. Redwood *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Beckett: It is no good the right hon. Gentleman shaking his head. The facts, I fear, are not on his side. During the Parliament of 1987–92, there were 27 guillotines, and more were used during one of those years than during any year of this Parliament.

Mr. Shepherd: The right hon. Lady is misleading the House.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not think that the right hon. Lady is misleading the House. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) may wish to withdraw that statement.

Mr. Shepherd: The right hon. Lady is mistaken.

Mr. Speaker: To say that the right hon. Lady is mistaken is better.

Mrs. Beckett: I simply inform the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills that that is my information, which I have had checked and cross-checked. He believes that any motion that curtails debate, whether by agreement in a programme motion or by imposition by the Government, is a guillotine. The distinction that I use is recognised by the Clerks of the House and everyone else. If he has other information that he wants to share with us, I would be happy to give way to him.

Mr. Shepherd: The right hon. Lady makes the common mistake of counting the number of guillotines used. Current jargon refers to the number of Bills guillotined, but a Bill may require one, two, three or four guillotines during its passage through the House. I thought that that was clear in the right hon. Lady's mind. I do not seek to contradict her, but she is genuinely wrong to say that the number of Bills guillotined during the 1987–92 Parliament was greater than the number guillotined during this Parliament. This Government hold the record.

Mrs. Beckett: I accept that the hon. Gentleman makes his point in good faith, but on every previous occasion when Conservative Members have alleged that fewer questions are being answered, that recesses are longer or

that more guillotines are being used, their information has never proved more accurate than ours. I leave that thought with him.

Mrs. Browning: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I am anxious not to take up the House's time discussing this matter at length.

Mrs. Browning: I hope that the right hon. Lady will examine annexe C of the report of the Modernisation Committee—her own Committee. The language and methodology used to put the information into the public domain was at her and her Committee's discretion. Annexe C refers to the

Numbers of Bills timetabled since 1945.

The list that I read out earlier clearly shows that during the past three years, 34 Bills have been timetabled.

Mrs. Beckett: This matter will no doubt be aired time and again. I do not accept the hon. Lady's point. If one calculates the figures in exactly the same way, it is clear that there was a heavier use of the guillotine in previous Parliaments.

That brings me to my second point, which was raised by, I believe, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—not, I believe, by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson). My hon. Friend said that hon. Members came here not to discuss the daily timetable but to examine what affects people's lives. She is correct—that is why we are all here. Unfortunately, however, we are discussing the timing rather than the substance of the debate. That is, I fear, a very good parallel. We have spent a long time discussing how long we should discuss what we are all told is an important matter.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I want to make one further point in response to my hon. Friend, who has already made several contributions to this debate. She went on to say that we are concerned with the curtailing of debate. My response to her and to other hon. Members who made the same point is that this discussion is not about whether we curtail debate, unless we adopt the legitimately held attitude of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, who said that any attempt to end a debate involves curtailment. Others would argue that the ordinary process of having a measured debate in a suitable time allows people to focus that debate better and that it is not necessary to cut the time that is available.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The way the House organises its debates, including their time, date and place, directly impinges on the quality of those debates and on their meaning. Even in the Labour party, we normally appreciate the connection between the way in which agendas and debates are organised and the effect that that has on the discussion that ensues.

Mrs. Beckett: We have debated, and will undoubtedly continue to debate, whether there is merit in changing the way in which debates are focused to ensure that they cover all the important and substantive issues. Is that more important than not limiting the length of time that is available, which does not provide a structure to the debate?

Mr. Redwood: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman. I want to bring my remarks to a close. I am anxious to turn to the substance of our debate. I remind Conservative Members, who talk as if these are unprecedented proposals—the words "binding" and "irreversible" have been used on several occasions—that the motion, should we ever reach it, involves Sessional Orders, which would expire if they were not renewed. The order contains an experiment, and no proposals would be binding or irreversible. I refer those Conservative Members who said that our approach is unprecedented to the remarks of another of my distinguished predecessors, Lord Newton of Braintree. He said that

the voluntary timetabling of legislation, has improved the sensible scrutiny of legislation. It has certainly taken us away from the rather absurd situation that existed when I first became a Member of Parliament, in which, almost routinely, the Opposition, of which I was then part, talked endlessly about the early clauses of a Bill, which inevitably drove the Government to impose a guillotine, and the later parts of the Bill got very little discussion.—[*Official Report*, 11 July 1996; Vol. 281, c. 628.]

This debate has moved to and fro not for some hours today but for at least 10 years in the House, and probably for much longer. To some extent, I take issue with the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), whose views I know and respect. There is a world of difference between the issues that we are discussing today and those to which he alluded. This is not the first occasion on which the programming of discussion in the House has been considered—it is probably the 155th occasion. The principles that lie behind the motion raise matters of importance—the Government do not dispute that. That is why we are anxious for those proposals to be discussed. The ideas that underlie our proposals are not new, and the substance and the principle about whether to structure debate or to leave it unstructured are not new; what is new is the detail of the proposals.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry. If the hon. Gentleman seeks to intervene later in our debate, I shall certainly give way to him. I have concluded the remarks that I wanted to make, and I am anxious to move on to the substance of our debate.

Mr. Keith Bradley (Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question put, That the Question be now put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Hawkins: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wish to protest at the timing of your acceptance of the closure motion moved by the Government Deputy Chief Whip.

[Mr. Hawkins]

I and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) were present throughout the debate and we were the only two Members to rise regularly as soon as an hon. Member had finished speaking. We had shown our interest by some brief interventions and we had hoped to contribute. I submit that it would have been more appropriate not to accept the closure motion until after our speeches had been made.

Mr. Speaker: Any hon. Member can move, That the Question be now put. Whether to accept the motion is a matter for the discretion of the Chair, and there can be no discussion about that.

The House having divided: Ayes 251, Noes 164.

Division No. 321] **[5.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Sir Archie Hamilton.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly:—

The House divided: Ayes 251, Noes 168.

Division No. 322] **[6.11 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*

Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'rns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*

Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Sir Archie Hamilton.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That at today's sitting the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Programming of Bills and Deferred Divisions not later than Ten o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and those Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business.

Programming of Bills

[Relevant documents: The Second Report from the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, Session 1999–2000, HC 589, on the Programming of Legislation and the Timing of Votes. First Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, Session 1997-98, HC 190, on the Legislative Process. Report from the Select Committee on Sittings of the House, Session 1991-92, HC20.]

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House to move the motion, I shall read out a statement. It may assist the House if I indicate how the debate on the motions relating to the programming of Bills and deferred Divisions will now proceed. There will be a joint debate on the two motions and on the amendments which I have selected. If proceedings are not concluded before 10 pm, I shall call Members formally to move the selected amendments (d) and (g) to the first motion, before the House decides on that motion.

I shall then call the Leader of the House formally to move the second motion and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) formally to move his amendment (d) to it, before the House decides on the motion itself. I hope that that will assist the House.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wonder whether you could guide me. We have just had a Division on a closure motion to curtail debate on motion No. 1, but on the Order Paper—the Government's own Order Paper—it clearly states that debate on that motion may continue until any hour; that is marked on the top right-hand corner. What is the relevance of the markings that suggest that debate can continue until a certain time if they can be overridden so easily by a closure motion?

Mr. Speaker: That would have arisen only if the 10 o'clock motion had been agreed to. "Until any hour" applies only if the 10 o'clock motion is agreed to. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Having read the Order Paper earlier, I was confused. Under "Main Business", we have the business of the House motion, which we have just discussed. Then the Order Paper says:

> At 10.00 pm
>
> Business of the House

and then there is a motion tabled in the name of the Prime Minister saying

> That, at this day's sitting, the Motion on Business of the House relating to Programming of Bills . . . may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.

That suggests that the Government are prepared at least to consider extending the debate beyond 10 o'clock tonight. Am I right?

Mr. Speaker: The 10 o'clock motion that the hon. Gentleman sees on the Order Paper is no longer necessary.

[Mr. Speaker]

We will stop at 10 o'clock. That is why I have made the statement. I will call for the amendments that I have selected to be put before the House at 10 o'clock.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you clarify one point about which we were not entirely sure? I take it that you have selected no amendment to motion No. 3. Is that correct?

Mr. Speaker: Amendment (d) has been selected. Is that clear?

Sir Patrick Cormack *indicated assent.*

6.26 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That in the next Session of Parliament Orders A to I below shall have effect:

A. Programme Motions

(1) If, before Second Reading of a Bill, notice of a motion providing for—

(a) committal of the Bill, and

(b) an allocation of time to proceedings in Committee on the Bill,

is given by a Minister of the Crown, the motion may be made immediately after Second Reading and Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills) shall not apply to the Bill.

(2) Such a motion is to be called a programme motion.

(3) An order made by the House as the result of a programme motion is to be called a programme order.

(4) A motion to vary or supplement a programme order is also to be called a programme motion.

(5) The question on a programme motion to vary or supplement a programme order shall be put forthwith unless paragraph (7) applies.

(6) Otherwise, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on a programme motion shall be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of the proceedings.

(7) This paragraph applies to a programme motion to—

(a) reduce the amount of time allocated under a programme order for any proceedings on the Bill (whether or not it also increases the amount of time allocated for other proceedings on the Bill);

(b) bring forward the date on which the bill is to be reported to the House in accordance with a programme order; or

(c) add to the proceedings to which a programme order applies.

(8) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) applies to proceedings on a programme motion.

(9) Standing Order No. 83 (Allocation of time) does not apply to a programme motion.

(10) If a programme order applies to a Bill, neither Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) nor Standing Order No. 120 (Business Sub-Committee) applies to the Bill.

B. Programming Committees

(1) This order applies if a Bill is subject to a programme order which makes provision for proceedings in Committee of the whole House or on consideration and third reading.

(2) There is to be a Committee for the Bill consisting of—

(a) the Chairman of Ways and Means (who is to be chairman of the Committee); and

(b) not more than eight other Members, nominated by the Speaker.

(3) The Committee is to be called the Programming Committee.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Committee shall—

(a) consider the allocation of periods of time to such of the proceedings in Committee of the whole House (or on consideration and third reading) as it thinks appropriate to designate; and

(b) report any resolution which it makes to the House.

(6) On a motion being made in the House in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(7) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the Bill.

(8) Proceedings on a motion made under paragraph (6) may be entered upon and decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(9) Resolutions of the Programming Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the Speaker or Chairman to select the amendments, new clauses and new schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which designated proceedings on the Bill are to be taken.

C. Programming Sub-Committees

(1) If a Bill is subject to a programme order which commits it to a Standing Committee, the order stands referred to the Committee and shall be considered by a sub-committee of the Committee.

(2) The sub-committee is to be called the Programming Sub-Committee.

(3) The Programming Sub-Committee shall consist of—

(a) the Chairman or one of the Chairmen of the Committee (who is to be chairman of the sub-committee); and

(b) seven members of the Committee, nominated by the Speaker.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Sub-Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Sub-Committee shall report to the committee any resolution which it makes about—

(a) the number of sittings to be allotted to the consideration of the Bill in the Committee;

(b) the allocation of the proceedings to each sitting;

(c) the time at which any proceedings, if not previously concluded, are to be brought to a conclusion.

(6) On a motion being made in the Committee in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(7) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the Bill.

(8) Resolutions of the Programming Sub-Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the chairman to select the amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings are to be taken.

D. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee or in Committee of the whole House

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings in standing committee or in committee of the whole House to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Chairman shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others—

(a) any question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the chairman for separate Division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Chairman shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the Bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

(5) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those provisions.

(6) On conclusion of the proceedings in a Committee, the Chairman shall report the Bill (or such of the Bill's provisions as were committed to it) to the House without putting any question.

E. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration or third reading

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration and Third Reading to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

(a) any question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Speaker for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Speaker shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the Bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

F. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any further amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has—

(a) agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments, or

(b) disposed of an amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

G. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on any further message from the Lords to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the question already proposed from the chair.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords message.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords proposals.

H. Programme orders: Reasons Committee

(1) This order applies in relation to any Committee to be appointed to draw up Reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its chairman.

(3) The Committee shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(4) Proceedings in the Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than half an hour after their commencement.

(5) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (4), the Chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided; and

(b) then put forthwith successively questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(6) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further question being put.

I. Programme orders: supplementary provisions

(1) The provisions of this order apply to proceedings in the House or in Committee of the whole House on a Bill which is subject to a programme order.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) applies to the proceedings for any period after ten o'clock (or on Thursday, seven o'clock) allocated to them in accordance with the programme order.

(3) The proceedings may not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the Sittings of the House.

(4) If, on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day, a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) would, apart from this order, stand over to seven o'clock—

(a) that motion stands over until the conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to conclusion at or before that time; and

(b) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion after that time is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(5) If a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day is one to which a motion for the Adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day, the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion on that day is postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(6) No dilatory motion may be made in relation to the proceedings except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) If at any sitting the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under a programme order, no notice is required of a motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of the programme order.

Mr. Speaker: I understand that, with this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment (d) to the above motion, in paragraph (6) of order A, leave out 'three-quarters of an hour' and insert 'three hours'.

Amendment (g) to the above motion, after paragraph (10) of order A, insert—

'(11) On a day on which a programme motion is to be moved, the Speaker shall put the Question on a second reading of the bill to which that Motion applies not later than 9.30 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and 6.30 p.m. on Thursdays'.

Motion relating to deferred Divisions:

That in the next Session of Parliament the following Order shall have effect:

(1) Except as provided in paragraph (2), Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions) shall not apply if, after the time for the interruption of business, the opinion of the Speaker as to the decision on a question is challenged in respect of any question.

(2) Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions) shall apply (and this order shall not apply) to questions—

(a) on motions or amendments in the course of proceedings on bills or allocating time to or programming such proceedings;

(b) on motions which may be made without notice;

(c) on motions to be disposed of immediately following the disposal of amendments proposed thereto, and on such amendments;

(d) on motions made under—

(i) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business);

(ii) paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 51 (Ways and Means motions);

(iii) sub-paragraph (1)(a) of Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and Ways and Means resolutions in connection with bills);

(iv) paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates); and

(v) paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.); and

(e) on motions made under paragraph 3 below or to which an order made under that paragraph applies.

(3) After the moment of interruption and the conclusion of proceedings under any other Standing Order which fall to be taken immediately after it, a minister of the Crown may make a motion to the effect that this order shall not apply to questions on any specified motions; such motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, and the question thereon shall be put forthwith.

(4) If the opinion of the Speaker is challenged under paragraph (1) of this order, he shall defer the division until half-past Three o'clock on the next Wednesday on which the House shall sit.

(5) On any Wednesday to which a division has been deferred under paragraph (4) above—

(a) Members may record their votes on the question under arrangements made by the Speaker;

(b) votes may be recorded for one and a half hours after half-past Three o'clock, no account being taken of any period during which the House or committee proceeds to a division; and

(c) the Speaker, or the Chairman, shall announce the result of the deferred division as soon as may be after the expiry of the period mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) above.

Amendment (d) to the above motion, in paragraph (5), leave out from beginning of sub-paragraph (a) to end of sub-paragraph (c) and insert—

'(a) a list of the deferred divisions to be taken on that day shall be printed in that day's Order Paper;

(b) deferred divisions shall be taken at the commencement of public business; and

(c) Standing Orders No. 38 (Procedure on divisions), No. 39 (Voting) and No. 41 (Quorum) shall apply to deferred divisions.'

Mrs. Beckett: I rise, as Chair of the Select Committee, to place before the House the report of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. A previous report of the Committee is also relevant, as is some of the report of the Jopling Committee from 1992.

First, I stress the fact that the purpose of the proposals is to improve the workings of the House of Commons, to make it more efficient and effective. There are two main proposals in the report. The first is that the House should agree a proper programme for debating all legislation that is brought before it. The second is that some of the votes that may now fall after 10 pm should be able to be deferred, so that they can be taken during the ordinary parliamentary day.

The proposals on programming offer the House the opportunity now to take a decision on issues that we have been considering in one form or another for more than 10 years. In two reports in the 1980s, the Procedure

Committee recommended programming in Standing Committee. The 1992 report of the Jopling Committee noted:

> The evidence given to us on timetabling of bills was almost without exception in favour of its general use.

That is in paragraph 67. It went on to say:

> The arguments in favour of the proper scrutiny of all parts of a bill are compelling; and timetables applied from an early stage after second reading are probably the best way to avoid the capricious effects of a guillotine being imposed at a later stage.

None of those proposals was fully pursued, though there have been encouraging experiments such as the voluntary timetabling of Committee discussions on, for example, the Greater London Authority Bill. In 1991, in evidence to the Jopling Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), then shadow Leader of the House, put forward on behalf of the then shadow Cabinet proposals that included programming discussion on all Bills.

Those ideas were further advanced in the earlier recommendations of the Modernisation Committee, in paragraph 89 of its first report of the 1997–98 Session, for

> arrangements for programming legislation which are more formal than the usual channels but more flexible than the guillotine.

That proposal was for programmed discussion on all major Bills, but it envisaged—the report was on an all-party basis—that that would be by consent, which it clearly anticipated would be generally forthcoming.

The House will know that such arrangements began to be used. However, it then became clear that consent to the continued use of such procedure was unlikely to be obtained. Indeed, it also became clear that consent for a proportionately less demanding scrutiny for more minor Bills might no longer be available. That is the process that I have described as "working to rule". I give the House one simple example of what I mean.

No Government would have expected, or would have needed, to guillotine a measure such as the Sea Fisheries (Shellfish) (Amendment) Bill, which simply remedied what I believe were unintended errors by the previous Administration—but, as a result of the process of working to rule, the Government did need to guillotine even that minor legislation.

It has become clear to many Members that we need the capacity to manage the House's time in regard to any such business. That realisation led a majority on the Modernisation Committee to the proposal for a mechanism for universal programming—a mechanism that is in the Sessional Orders. As Sessional Orders, they allow the House to experiment with this method of managing our business.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the Leader of the House suggesting that the Government have some right, divine or otherwise, to present any number of Bills in any given Session and then to subject them to this timetabling procedure? The example that she just gave may or may not be relevant, but it occurs to me that two things could happen: either the Government could present a large number of Bills, or they could introduce many Bills during a Session and then use the right hon. Lady's logic to ram them through in a virtuously timetabled way.

Mrs. Beckett: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman means "virtually"—but I will not detain the House on that point.

It is, of course, the case now that the Government can present as much or as little legislation as they choose, although it is up to the House to decide whether or not to accept it. It is also the case that the Government can, and from time to time do, impose a guillotine on any proposed legislation.

The advantage of a guillotine to Government is that it gives certainty about when discussion of a Bill will end. The disadvantage, for the whole House, is that it is a timetable imposed by Government for the convenience—if you like—of Government, and consequently need not take account of the range of items included in a Bill, or indeed of issues on which the Opposition, as opposed to the Government, might wish to concentrate.

I have looked at some of the evidence given to the Jopling Committee. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has done the same, for he is assiduous in his research. If so, he will know that many members of his party—including the then Minister for women, Mrs. Angela Rumbold—argued for programming of this kind. That was not least, Mr. Deputy Speaker—*[Interruption.]*—I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me be the first to welcome you to the Chair.

As I was saying, that was not least because Mrs. Rumbold felt that the House should behave in what she called a more grown-up way.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: On that point, I will gracefully give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the right hon. Lady.

Further to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), why does the right hon. Lady not plainfacedly acknowledge that she is proposing less debate on more Bills of greater length? How does she justify presenting such a proposal at a time, and during a Session, when no fewer than 2,537 pages of legislation have been dealt with? That represents an increase of 947 on the number of pages dealt with during the last Session. It simply does not make sense.

Mrs. Beckett: First, I am not proposing less debate. There may be amendments on the Order Paper that suggest some curtailment, but we are not proposing less time for debate. Secondly, nothing in these measures suggests that there will be more Bills—or, indeed, that Bills will be of greater length. Indeed, as I hope to show the hon. Gentleman, I believe that the proposals will have the opposite effect.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I echo the right hon. Lady's words of welcome to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The right hon. Lady is again missing the point, which is unlike her. The fact is that many of us would be very willing to discuss programming, so long as the Government were willing to discuss rationing—rationing, that is, of the number of Bills that they present. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), however, has made an unanswerable point. If we are submerged in reams of legislation, programming equates to guillotining.

Mrs. Beckett: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recall, we discussed rather more legislation 10 or 15 years ago than we discuss nowadays. The trend is down rather than up.

[Mrs. Beckett]

The orders allow Bills to be programmed directly after Second Reading, on a motion tabled—as is normal—by the Government.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Is it intended that constitutional Bills should be excluded from programming and guillotining? That has always been a tradition in the House.

Mrs. Beckett: I believe that we have made no specific provision for constitutional Bills. The hon. Gentleman will know, however, that all the provision that has been made includes a procedure to weigh the importance of the issues involved, and to decide how much time is needed. Precisely such considerations would need to be taken into account if a constitutional Bill were discussed on the Floor of the House.

The detailed provisions needed for programming are set out in the orders. Each motion on a Bill will be able, within the framework set by the orders, to specify clearly what time will be allowed for business. The essence of what is proposed will then be put to the House, which will have a much clearer picture than is provided by the long and complex motions currently used to specify proceedings with regard to any guillotine. The programme motions will be debatable for 45 minutes, as such debate will now be focused on the detail of proposals for each Bill, rather than on the principle of timetabling at all.

The Committee expects these procedures to enable the Opposition to identify parts of legislation that are of particular concern to them, and to concentrate debate where they wish. The Opposition have, as always, made much of the power to delay, but it has always been the case that that can, if necessary, be overridden by the guillotine. There has been no mechanism for ensuring, and no pressure to ensure, that members of all parties make considered decisions on how legislation should be dealt with, which Bills are most important, and which provisions in those Bills require most scrutiny. The Modernisation Committee's Report gives us the framework to do just that.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I, too, welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Does the right hon. Lady accept that we would take what she says in good faith rather more if she understood the mood of the House on this important issue? If she is to let the Opposition debate issues that really matter to them, why can we not have the two-stage discussion for which many Members on both sides of the House have asked—one debate on the principles, and one on the detail?

Presumably the right hon. Lady will recommend that we break up for the Christmas recess at least two or three days before Christmas Eve. Could we not have a one-day debate just before that—on a free vote, so that Members who were not interested would not have to attend—enabling us to settle the issues, and enabling Members to express their own views?

Mrs. Beckett: There is a free vote today, on this side of the House.

We are well aware that there are those who would wish to separate the decision that we make on the orders from the discussion that we are having today. Let me repeat what I have already said: we have been discussing the issues, and the principles that underlie them, for many years, so I do not think that the notion that these proposals are new to the House bears scrutiny.

What today's report offers the Opposition is worth far more than the power to delay or simply to block debate. It is the power to choose to focus debate on the parts of legislation that the Opposition believe deserve most scrutiny, and to expose the weakness of the Government's arguments—if they can.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): What my right hon. Friend emphasises is the very thing that worries me about this programming. She is saying, quite simply, that those on the Opposition Front Bench will have a chance to agree whatever programming motion they want—that they will have a chance to decide the order in which Bills are debated. The whole point of the debate about programming, however, is that it is Back Benchers who will be unable to decide either the order or the importance of the matters that they are debating.

Mrs. Beckett: I accept my hon. Friend's point completely. She will be pleased to know that that matter was aired, discussed and thoroughly considered by the Modernisation Committee when we discussed the proposals, as there was concern that such a problem could legitimately arise. Obviously, we all try to make provisions to cover all those matters, but any Opposition who are aware of concerns that Government Back Benchers want to be aired, but make sure that they are not aired, are a very stupid Opposition indeed. I go no further than that, but it is evident that there is an interest.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am terribly sorry, I must be very dim tonight—but is my right hon. Friend saying that if I want to raise a certain matter as a Member of Parliament, and the Opposition are in control of the programming, they will automatically assume that what I wish to raise as a Government Member is sufficiently important to be given precedence? If that is the case, I must tell my right hon. Friend that that has not been my experience over the years.

Mrs. Beckett: It is possible to programme discussion and debate so that different points of views can be aired and heard as often as is normally possible in the House. Of course, my hon. Friend is right that it is not open to any of us to guess what is in the mind of another when that person is called to speak. On the other hand, there are sometimes indications, which are used in the House.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I wish to move on to another issue.

So far we have talked about the issue of the timetable for Second Readings. However, I want to make sure that the House takes on board the fact that, just as the overall timetable for a Bill will be debatable on Second Reading, it is proposed that when detailed provisions to timetable discussion in Standing Committee are suggested, the House—if the Bill is taken on the Floor of the House—

or the Committee will be able to debate those proposals for up to half an hour. As you will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that is fuller scrutiny than has been available under the conventional guillotine procedure, in which, due to a precedent set by the previous Government, discussion of the time for debate comes out of the debate of substance. Again, any detailed timetable, should one be required, would focus debate on issues identified as important by Opposition parties and Back Benchers.

These mechanisms give the House the capacity to be flexible, or as prescriptive and detailed, as necessary. For example, we may find in practice that we need only end dates, especially for discussion of more minor Bills. It may be thought that more structure is needed to ensure that all issues are covered in debates on Bills of more substance.

I shall touch on the point made by the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) a moment ago. I wish to say clearly to the House what I have already said to the Select Committee and my colleagues in Government: our proposals bring greater rigour and predictability into our management of our business, as well as far greater transparency. I have no doubt whatsoever—indeed, I have warned the Select Committee and my colleagues about this—that if brought into effect, the proposals will place substantial pressure on Government—any Government—to ensure that there is adequate scrutiny, better preparation of Bills, and, almost certainly, less legislation. That will produce benefits as well as problems.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On that particular point, several Members have always advanced the major argument that programming should ensure that all parts of a Bill, and all major matters in it, can be debated in Committee. That greatly benefits legislation, but I can find nothing in the order that sets out that principle. I believe that principle should be set out. Indeed, one could easily have put it in paragraph (5)(a) of order C, which deals with the programming of sub-Committees, to ensure that all parts of a Bill and major matters in it are considered. I am disturbed that the Government did not include that in the order, as I had believed that that was their intention.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that matter, and hope that to some extent I can reassure him. As always, it is a matter of balance, and of what it is right to include in Sessional Orders, as opposed to motions and what can be covered in other ways. Obviously, the matter depends to some extent on whether one wishes to have a detailed programme motion to cover all aspects of discussion of a Bill, or simply all aspects of it until it reaches Committee. Certainly, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, it was very much the Modernisation Committee's intention, and is the thrust of our report, that the proposed procedure has the advantage that all parts of legislation could, and would, be properly considered and given their weight and due.

The question is simply whether one puts that in the Sessional Orders. It may well be that it can be put in a programme motion, especially if at first the House wishes to have detailed programme motions for all the legislation that comes before it. That matter can be aired.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman will give me a moment, I may be able to answer the point that he is about to raise.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) will know that the report includes a proposal for informal discussion after the Queen's Speech across the House, with representatives of all parties present, to inform the decisions that the Government need to take. Obviously the Government will have a view, as every Government have always done, on the major pieces of legislation in a programme, and on which Bills are expected to be the most controversial or need the most time. That discussion is always held in government under any Government. The informal proposals in the Select Committee report suggest that that discussion can be informed by views across the House, and that other Members of Parliament can contribute and say which matters they think are the most controversial, most weighty or time-consuming. Again, that could be reflected in programme motions.

I should also like to stress that we considered the question whether that should be a more formal structured process. The recommendation to the Committee was that it should not deliberately tie people's hands, as sometimes in the early stages of legislation, a matter is taken to be not particularly weighty or controversial, but events may change things, or when the Bill is published, people's views may change. Therefore, it was felt that there should be room for manoeuvre for those who suggested that a certain Bill was a more minor one, so that they could come back, change their minds and inform discussion about the drafting of the programme motion.

Mr. Grieve *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve); I apologise for making him wait.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who was not sufficiently psychic to read my mind.

How can we take the proposal seriously, when in this Session, the Government were prepared to impose a guillotine on the undoubtedly contentious Police (Northern Ireland) Bill after only 12 hours' discussion because they wanted to ensure that the tight time frame for the Bill was adhered to? Effectively, they gave us only three weeks to discuss that Bill. There is nothing in the proposals to prevent a repetition of such a performance, as I am sure the right hon. Lady will be able to confirm.

Mrs. Beckett: I readily confirm it and, indeed, do not seek to conceal that from the House. However, the hon. Gentleman has not chosen a good or typical example. After all, we are talking about a Bill the timing of which was driven by the peace process in Northern Ireland as much as by anything else. The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill is a piece of legislation that, under any Government, would come into the category of proposals likely to be introduced as something of an emergency, and likely to be dealt with in that way—*[Interruption.]*

Opposition Members may not like that, but most people outside this place would recognise that there is something particularly special and important about the Police

[Mrs. Beckett]

(Northern Ireland) Bill. They may even recognise that the timing of that legislation might have something to do with the peace process and events in Northern Ireland. If Opposition Members—or some of them, at any rate—do not think that that is how most people would approach the matter, they are even more out of touch with public opinion than I thought. However, I do not wish to get involved in the substance of particular legislative proposals.

I simply highlight the fact that the process that is described in the Committee's report, and specifying the framework for decisions in the Sessional Orders, will allow the House more structured debates. It will also allow—indeed, facilitate—examination of all parts of legislation. Everything that I have heard and read of the contributions of most of my predecessors in the past 15 or 20 years, and of many other long-serving and distinguished hon. Members, leads me to believe passionately that the orders will substantially improve our processes of debate.

I also fear that the orders will have a strongly inhibiting effect on the ability of any Government to implement their legislative programme. I say this with deep respect to those who are engaged in these processes, but what is now hidden, discussed through the usual channels or—as the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) would undoubtedly assert—imposed on Back Benchers by agreement among Front Benchers, will now all be open. It will all be before the House. People will have the opportunity to contribute and to make known their own points of view when the programme motion is discussed. The report also contains recommendations that on Report and in Committee, proceedings should not continue past 10 pm.

All of that will have an impact on how long it takes any Government to pass their legislation. Labour Members are prepared to accept that consequence, because we believe that it will substantially improve the way in which the House works.

Mr. Tyrie: I wonder if the right hon. Lady could help to clarify one point. The intention is to have programming of the Standing Committees' consideration of all Bills, except for those few Bills on which there is sufficient agreement to make programming unnecessary. We know from experience, however, that Bills are very often altered beyond recognition by amendments tabled in Committee by the Executive. What provision will there be to enable the programming to be revisited, and what guarantees can the Opposition have that that provision will be satisfactory?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right—there has been a history of that under both the current Government and the previous one. Although we could argue about who started the practice, I will not do that now. However, there is provision for altering the programme motion, should such events occur and Bills be substantially changed. There would need to be such provision. There is provision for supplementary motions, either in Standing Committee—if such a motion becomes necessary during debate there—or, subsequently, perhaps on Report, in the House.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): The right hon. Lady has been very generous in giving way, and I appreciate it. My point is similar to that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). Will she explain whether, under paragraph (4) of order A, a motion to vary the programme order would include a carry-over motion? If so, and if all Bills are to be programmed—and, therefore, possibly carried over—we need not have a state opening at all.

Mrs. Beckett: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is no intention that the issues that we are discussing should apply to carry-over. He will know that separately, the Modernisation Committee recommended that we should experiment with carrying over some legislation—which I think that we have done only once, with the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. However, the order that we are debating does not affect the proposals for the use of carry-over at all.

I turn now to the issue of voting on stand-alone business taken after 10 pm. The whole House will know that such issues can vary sharply in importance, from relatively routine business decisions on which a vote is taken forthwith, to a statutory instrument in which a few hon. Members—but only a few—take a great interest, to an issue in a statutory instrument that arouses substantial concern on both sides of the House. The Committee had no wish to curtail debate on such issues when they are of substance, and has made no such proposal. However, all hon. Members are aware that the process of voting itself has been used to detain hon. Members late at night, even when no debate was possible, or when only a handful of hon. Members were engaged.

I know that many colleagues, on both sides of the House, feel that the sheer unpredictability of being so detained, without even being sure that there will be a vote at all, is one of the worst aspects of our procedures—*[Interruption.]* I am aware that not everyone shares that view, but it is a view that is legitimately held.

We are all perfectly well aware that 999 times out of 1000, those matters are so handled not as a matter of principle, but as a matter of tactics. On 5 October 2000, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), with commendable but perhaps embarrassing candour, said to the *Daily Express*:

> We have played merry hell here in a number of ways, one of which is taking votes late at night.

There is no hon. Member who supports the proposals who does not take his or her work as a parliamentarian seriously. There is none who is not willing to put in long hours on matters of weight, substance and importance. There are, however, many who feel that we as a Parliament are not behaving seriously if we do not direct our efforts to proper scrutiny of the substance of proposals before us, rather than simply to taking up time, keeping people into the small hours unnecessarily, or deliberately setting out to make life uncomfortable for the sake of it.

Mr. Forth: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: It would be appropriate to give way to the right hon. Gentleman on that point.

Mr. Forth: I am most grateful to the Leader. Does she concede that there is an equal danger—I put it no higher than that—that if one of the outcomes of the proposals, including the deferred division proposal, were that

hon. Members attended even less often than many of them do now, the House might be brought into even greater disrepute?

Mrs. Beckett: I think that the right hon. Gentleman would not wish the public to get the impression that the House is ill attended. He will know as well as I do that hon. Members are here in large numbers every day and for very long hours; one has only to go into the car park to see that that is the case—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, the Chamber is not always as full as the car park. I invite Opposition Members, or at least some of them, to search their consciences and see whether they can imagine a reason why that might be the case.

All hon. Members do take their work seriously, and I know of no hon. Member who seriously objects to being here for the long hours, which we all work, to discuss issues of substance. However, I know of many who have strong objections when they feel that time is being wasted.

The proposal before us is that if a Division is called on business being taken after 10 pm, those votes should be deferred to the following Wednesday afternoon. The detailed arrangements for deferred Divisions will be under the authority of the Speaker, both to ensure their impartiality and to give flexibility. In essence, however, hon. Members will vote on ballot slips listing the decisions that have been deferred. I should stress that the proposal acknowledges that not all decisions could or should be so deferred.

The order therefore exempts, for example, decisions in the course of debate on a Bill. Consequently, however, and as I highlighted a moment ago, the report recommends that, in programming consideration of Bills, the aim should be to end consideration at about 10 pm. Nevertheless, the Committee recognised that, whereas the process of consideration would end at 10 pm, there may be consequential Divisions, perhaps when a Bill is being considered in Committee or on Report.

I fully recognise that many hon. Members will quite legitimately have concerns about deferred votes separating the vote from the debate. However, we have such separation now. Particularly when considering Bills in Committee or on Report, we vote when we reach the relevant point on the Order Paper, which is not infrequently entirely separate from the debate.

I have known hon. Members, even very experienced hon. Members, to fail to call a Division by which they had hoped to embarrass the current Government, purely because they had forgotten to do so at the appropriate time. So separate were those Divisions from the debate that those hon. Members lost their opportunity. It will be within the recent memory of hon. Members on both sides of the House that, when there was an important matter of division and discussion in the House, Labour Members took the opportunity to make it plain to hon. Members exactly how and when they should call Divisions, should they wish to do so, so that the opinion of the House could be tested. We already do separate decision from debate.

Mr. Grieve: The right hon. Lady seems to be making the most compelling case against her proposals. She is rightly pointing out that the divorcing of the voting process from the discussion process is unsatisfactory, and yet she intends to build on that in the proposals.

Mrs. Beckett: No. I did not say that it was unsatisfactory. I said merely that it was by no means unprecedented. We do it all the time.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am grateful, as always, to the right hon. Lady for giving way, but she is making a wholly spurious analogy. There is all the difference in the world between the minor deferments to which she is referring and the proposal that votes should be put down on bits of paper the following Wednesday. If that is what she is after, we may as well all pack up and go home.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not accept that it is an invalid point. First, we are talking about individual, stand-alone issues on one particular subject, not those that interact with other discussions. Secondly, as the hon. Gentleman will know, it is not infrequently the case that Divisions occur on matters that the House does not debate at all, purely in order to cause inconvenience. So I do not agree that there is something wholly unacceptable about the proposal.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk) *rose—*

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow) *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I have to give way to a former Leader of the House. I shall then make progress, because we have a curtailed debate.

Mr. MacGregor: Quite apart from all the other objections to which my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) has drawn attention in his minority report, does not the right hon. Lady agree that the system will be unworkable? The idea of voting as we do in private Member's Bill ballots is not a serious analogy. That is a ballot for presenting a Bill. The proposals refer to votes that should take place in the Chamber. Does she really think that if there are a number of votes on a Wednesday and there are also votes in the House, the whole system can work?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, indeed. As is now the case on certain occasions, if there were Divisions in the House, the amount of time available would have to be extended in order to allow Members the certainty of having an opportunity to express their views. The Modernisation Committee gave considerable thought to these issues, although I readily concede that it will create problems for some hon. Members—I trust that I am not one of them. The Whips on both sides will have a different and possibly slightly more difficult task. Obviously, that is a matter for them, but it is not a reason for saying that the proposal would not work.

Mr. Gill: I too welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It cannot possibly be right to vote on an issue up to a week after the debate. In the intervening time the Whips will work on hon. Members of their respective parties, the press will express their views on the rights

[Mr. Gill]

and wrongs of the decision that we are about to make, and our constituents may also have something to say. That smacks of double jeopardy.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley) *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I shall give way for the last time, to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Pike: Is it not important to remember that on two important occasions—the Budget and the Queen's Speech—we always vote at the end of five days' debate? We do not vote on each specific issue on the day that it is debated.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but I do not propose to dwell on it.

The proposal to programme more legislation is not new. Nor is it one put forward only by Labour Members or uniquely by the Government as a means of oppressing the Opposition. It is put forward frequently by many who comment on our affairs, including recently the Norton report, and a report from the Hansard Society.

For myself, I have long opposed—and I do not think that I have ever practised—the tactics of simply wasting time. Although my years in the House have inured me personally to the hours that we keep, I have long been conscious that they often produce bewilderment rather than admiration among the public, and that they never contribute to our effectiveness as a legislature. I fear that people only think that they are more eloquent at 2 o'clock in the morning.

It is often said that the chief weapon of the Opposition is time, and that is held to mean only delay, but I believe that the chief weapon of the Opposition—and Labour has had more years of experience of it—is the constructive use of time. Their strength or their weakness is the strength or weakness of their argument, not how long it takes to put it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) made the point that members of the Select Committee were very aware that in recommending that how time is used be primarily in the hands of the Opposition and of Back Benchers, they were creating a new and, they believed, a more potent weapon. However, what they were certainly doing, and what the House will do if it carries the motions tonight, is to place our proceedings on a clearer, firmer and more effective basis. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said quite correctly that we have not discussed in detail, although we have touched on them, the parliamentary calendar, the parliamentary year and the parliamentary day. All those issues are more than worthy of fresh consideration and debate, but the key to them all is the decision that we take tonight.

7.5 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I, too, welcome you to the chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am a new member of the Modernisation Committee and I begin by repeating that any proposal it makes should seek to strengthen the House and its Members in order to enable them to hold the Government of the day to account, yet the proposals on the Order Paper tonight would not strengthen Parliament—they would weaken it. They would give the Government more power to get their business through more quickly. I shall oppose both motions tonight because they fail that crucial test.

By definition, the word "modernisation" implies change for the good. It is used in a parliamentary context to raise the perceptions of those with conservative views who would change nothing at all and those who seek to break the mould. I do not hold that view, but I believe that the litmus test that I have described is important. I am not opposed to change, but I believe that it should be in the interests of the democratic process rather than to prioritise what is convenient and expedient for individual hon. Members.

The debate led by the Modernisation Committee has been strongly influenced by the intake of hon. Members in 1997, many of whom did not expect to be elected and were unprepared for the terms and conditions of the job that they were elected to fulfil. The hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) explained clearly that this is a job with terms and conditions and that individual hon. Members are responsible to those who elect us.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): First, I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have been here for 13 years and I have never found the terms and conditions of the House acceptable. I am a normal human being and I believe that I can do my job in the House effectively during more reasonable hours. Does the hon. Lady believe that the proposals would lead to fewer hours? They would not; they would organise the hours in a different way.

Mrs. Browning: If the proposal before the House tonight had been that business should be conducted in more reasonable hours, it would have been reasonable to expect the Modernisation Committee to have at least considered the options of conducting more business during daylight hours rather than bringing before the House one proposal that clearly does not have cross-party agreement.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Would the hon. Lady also support moves to start the day before 2.30 pm on the days when we currently do that?

Mrs. Browning: I would consider it and that is why I am astonished that it was not considered by the Modernisation Committee. The Government have been judge, they have been jury, they have been cunning old fury and they have not given the House reasonable options. They have put a proposal on the table and asked us to take it or leave it.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Is the hon. Lady not aware that the main reason that the Modernisation Committee has not made those proposals is that they were consistently, regularly and routinely blocked by the Conservative Members on that Committee? That is why the House does not have those proposals before it.

Mrs. Browning: It is nice to hear that part of the Government coalition rowing in. This is not a party

political matter, but one for Parliament and individual Members. Our need for full debate and proper consideration of proposals made it incumbent on the Modernisation Committee to put forward more than one proposal, a point clearly made in the minority report produced by Conservative Members. The proposals before us did not carry the full support of the Committee, and it would have been helpful if, instead of offering us a curtailed business motion, the Government had given us a greater chance to discuss other options for improving the conduct of our business.

Given the views of many new Members who entered the House in 1997, it is unsurprising that the Committee's emphasis has been on the hours of work, late nights, facilities for Members and their families, and other such extramural issues as the right to breast feed in Committees. Those issues have doubtless influenced debate, but have coincided with a Government desire, for quite different reasons, to reduce opportunities for parliamentary debate, scrutiny and questions.

New Labour Members are encouraged to spend time in their constituencies, even while the House is sitting. The Prime Minister favours the House with his presence only once a week, apart from the rare statement. Cabinet Ministers prefer photocalls to statements that can be questioned and debated on the Floor of the House. The move to change the way in which the House conducts Government business for the convenience of Members could not be better timed as far as the Government are concerned.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Congratulations on your appointment, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Does the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) accept that open-ended debate is often not an effective way of holding the Government to account? Does she accept that the Opposition are being given greater power than before to decide the timing of contentious debates so that they might be available to the media and open to public scrutiny?

Mrs. Browning: I do not agree. I shall come later to substantive parts of the motion, but first I shall discuss why the proposals before us and their timing suit the Government so well. Their agenda is to sideline the House and to prevent Members and the Opposition as a whole from challenging the Government. In March 1998, the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in a speech in Germany, declared:

> It may be that the era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end.

The right hon. Gentleman and some colleagues prefer direct representation to representation through democratically elected Members, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said. For new Labour, all-embracing direct contact with lobby groups, focus groups and other organisations is preferable to being accountable to those who were elected through the ballot box to represent the people in this Chamber.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Not at all.

Mrs. Browning: Given that sedentary intervention, I hope that the House may be favoured with a visit by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who might explain why what he said should have been put on the public record by a member of the Cabinet.

In a recent publication by the Hansard Society, Greg Power wrote:

> The decision to focus on the constituency is an entirely logical response to a job where the principal requirement of the New Labour back bench MP is to vote with the party. The problem however, is that the constituency role has risen as an alternative and not a complementary activity to that in Parliament.

It will not have gone without notice that even tonight's earlier debates were administered by the Labour party Whips while Conservative Members were allowed a free vote, with Tellers provided from outside the Front-Bench team.

Mr. Bercow: Is the meagre fare proposed by the Modernisation Committee any surprise, given that that Committee is chaired by a member of the Cabinet and contains no fewer than three parliamentary private secretaries to Ministers, who are, of course, members of the Government payroll vote? The fingerprints of the Government Whips Office are all over the Committee.

Mrs. Browning: I thank my hon. Friend for that and shall offer some suggestions later on how we might modernise in a way that pays respect to the democratic process by changing how the business of the House is conducted so that Parliament rather than the Executive gains strength. If laws and methods of scrutiny and debate are changed to meet the social needs of Members of Parliament, we will undermine the role of Members and neuter the activities of the official Opposition.

Mr. Winnick: Whether I am new or old Labour is a matter of interest to very few people, but does the hon. Lady accept that I always place parliamentary duties alongside constituency duties? When the House is sitting, I hope that I will always be in the House or in the Chamber. Does she also accept that during my years in the House I have always noted strident opposition to change? In 1966, by just one vote, the House was not televised, and it took years before it was. Thursday morning sittings were opposed by many Members but are now regarded as quite normal. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, no."] That response merely strengthens my view that some people simply do not want to adapt the House of Commons to modern circumstances. It is essential that we should do so, because the House will die—or, at best, decline significantly—if we do not.

Mrs. Browning: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is an assiduous contributor to the House's proceedings. I do not take issue with much of what he said, but would ask him to put the motions before us to the litmus test. We are not talking only about modernisation, although I agree that persuading people of change is always difficult. We are asking whether the proposals would strengthen the people who sit behind the Front Bench on both sides of the House. I do not believe that they would. Modernisation is an all-embracing generic term, and we

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should test whether the Modernisation Committee's proposals improve our democratic process or weaken Back-Bench Members.

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I have been generous in giving way to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), so shall give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Mr. Redwood: I am very grateful. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Labour party were serious about making this place more relevant and interesting to the electors who sent us here and who pay our salaries, it would have allowed the House to sit during the fuel protest so that the Government could have stated their case and we could have cross-examined them? In addition, would they not reinstate Prime Minister's questions to at least twice a week? It provides the biggest box-office draw outside the House and inside it, but is the one thing that the Government want to cancel.

Mrs. Browning: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. On our return to government, very shortly, we shall restore Prime Minister's questions to twice a week.

The first proposal before us is on the timetabling of all Government Bills. As the Leader of the House pointed out, by the end of the debate on the Queen's Speech, the official Opposition would have to guess how much time would be necessary for each Bill's consideration, but entirely without sight of a draft Bill.

Efficient drafting of legislation has not been one of this Administration's hallmarks. Earlier this year, the Government's flagship Utilities Bill was well into Committee when the Government finally acknowledged that it was flawed and abandoned half of it. Conversely, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which remains in another place, has had 125 pages of amendments added to it. The Commons has not yet had a chance to consider those, and it is unlikely that we will be able to do so very fully.

If the Modernisation Committee had been serious about improving the workings of the House, it would have addressed the cause rather than the symptoms of why the House had been kept late to deal with a backlog of legislation. We clearly have such a backlog in spite of the fact that devolution was supposed to lighten the legislative load. The Committee is instead proposing that the Opposition should be bound, at an early stage, to the Government's agenda. That sounds cuddly and friendly, but it could clearly undermine an Opposition. If the Government have an agenda in a Queen's Speech, with a list of Bills that they believe are their priority and are right for the country, they should defend their view. They should not ask the Opposition to second-guess before we have had an opportunity to see how badly drafted some of that legislation is.

Mrs. Beckett: There is nothing to compel the hon. Lady or any Opposition Member to take part in the discussions if they have no wish to do so and nothing to say. There is no suggestion of binding the Opposition in some way. The idea is to give them an opportunity to express a view, to consider the programme as it is set out and to say, "You may have thought these issues are not controversial, but our initial reaction is that these are the Bills on which the House should spend time." The purpose of making the process informal was so as not to bind anyone. If Opposition Members do not want the opportunity to contribute to the discussions, that is fine.

Mrs. Browning: Does the right hon. Lady accept that, as the legislation for a Session is listed as on a menu, and given our experience of the appalling drafting of many of the Government's flagship Bills in this Parliament, it is virtually impossible for the Opposition to negotiate a timetable motion for various stages of certain Bills?

Mrs. Beckett *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Browning: I hope that she will assure me that, to make the proposal more practical and to fulfil the outcome that she described, measures are in place to improve the drafting of Government legislation.

Mrs. Beckett: Such measures are in place. If they are successful, legislation will be entirely different from how it used to be under the Conservative party.

There is no suggestion that the Opposition would be bound in some way. The whole idea is to give not merely the official Opposition but representatives in the House the opportunity to express a view based on what they know in the early stages. That is one reason for making the process informal. As a Bill emerges, people sometimes realise that they have more concerns about it. Conversely, something that people thought might take a great deal of time might not turn out to be so weighty and would, therefore, require less. There is no suggestion that anyone should be bound in any way. The opportunity is merely being offered to the Opposition to contribute to how the weight of the parliamentary year should be distributed. I am never one for having meetings if they are not necessary. If the hon. Lady does not want to make her view known, that will be fine by me.

Mrs. Browning: We understand now why the Liberal Democrats were so keen on this proposal. If they are going to take an interest in Standing Committees, I hope that their attendance in those Committees will improve; it has been lamentable.

The minority report produced by Conservative Modernisation Committee members described the way in which Divisions are to be deferred as "a mass vote-in". The right hon. Lady described the procedure. Members will vote weekly on a Wednesday between 3.30 pm and 5 pm. I have huge concerns about that. I am amazed that she cannot understand the concerns of the House. The system would break so many principles—the right of a Member of Parliament to debate a matter and then vote on it, and also the way in which that vote is cast.

At the moment, when a Division is called, the cry goes out, "Clear the Lobbies." There is a good reason for that—it allows all "strangers" to be excluded from the route to the Lobby. Under the proposal, a ballot paper printed on the Order Paper a week after the original debate will be

prepared, possibly outside this Chamber—indeed, even outside the House—and submitted by the Member to the Clerk in the Lobby. One can almost hear the whir of the printers in Millbank tower as they prepare the Wednesday votes for those Members whose only interest in the week's votes is to ensure that they do their master's bidding. As for those brave souls who might have indicated dissent, the Whips will have had a week to change their minds.

I was also concerned to read on the Order Paper and to hear the right hon. Lady repeat—

Mrs. Fitzsimons: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: In a minute. The Leader of the House described the procedure that will be used; it will involve the Speaker, which is totally inappropriate. It is wrong to involve the Speaker, under the guise that the Chair is neutral, in a matter that could be so contentious across the Floor of the House. The Modernisation Committee should have identified a way in which the procedure was decided by the hon. Members who cast the votes. It should not involve the Speaker.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Browning: Indeed, I will, but first I promised to give way to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Mrs. Fitzsimons).

Mrs. Fitzsimons: The Speaker already has powers over the selection of amendments, which can be crucial to the outcome of votes—that has been a key to Opposition lobbying for a long time—and over free votes, such as those on abortion. Therefore, the Speaker is already considerably involved in the order of debate and so forth. Does the hon. Lady accept that?

Mrs. Browning: There is a difference between the order of debates and selection of amendments and breaking the principle that votes should be cast immediately after a debate. Those votes could now be decided outside the House, or be subject to third-party influence. The Speaker should not be required to put his name to that method. It is not only flawed, but wrong.

Mrs. Beckett: I hope that I can ease some of the hon. Lady's anxieties. It is for the House to decide whether to carry the motion. The House has to decide to carry out the procedure. It is suggested that the Speaker should exercise a general supervisory role, as he does now, through the Clerks. The reason is simply to allow a degree of flexibility.

The proposal is for a period of an hour and a half—to be interrupted by Divisions if necessary. After some experience of the system, hon. Members may speedily decide that they need a little extra or a little less time. The hon. Lady identified the problem of having sufficiently easy access to the Lobby. Those issues may be aired. We ought not to decide all the detail tonight, nor should the procedure be set in tablets of stone. The obvious people to supervise the process are the Speaker and the Clerks, as they supervise all our procedures and votes now. The principle will not be in the hands of the Speaker; that is what the House will decide tonight.

Mrs. Browning: It would be nice to know how the Committee arrived at the decision that votes on a Wednesday would be the optimum method. Clearly, it is minded to deny hon. Members a vote on substantive matters after 10 o'clock at night from the Queen's Speech onwards.

Mr. Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have just been treated by the Leader of the House to an unbelievable description of what happens in practice? Does my hon. Friend also agree that if we are to do something about the situation that has developed in the past 100 years and to restore the role of the House as it used to be—a proper debating Chamber where Back Benchers have a proper role—it is essential that there is a Speaker's Conference and that the role of the Whips is included? If it is not, everything that the Leader of the House has said will turn out to be simply a handful of dust.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is of concern that the debate on this important issue will be curtailed. Matters that were not thought through by the Modernisation Committee are being brought up by Members who feel passionately about the changes and are affected by them, yet despite the importance of the matter, they will have to vote on those changes after an extremely short debate.

Mr. Fallon: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is somewhat incongruous that, under the proposals, someone entering the House on a Tuesday afternoon, after a victorious by-election, will be able to vote—on the following day—on a matter that may have been debated on the previous Wednesday night, before he or she was even elected?

Mrs. Browning: That is why I suggested a litmus test for the Modernisation Committee's proposals: whether they enhance the democratic process. The excellent example given by my hon. Friend shows what a mockery the proposal is.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will give way once more, but I want to make some progress as I am aware that many hon. Members want to contribute before the 10 o'clock deadline.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will my hon. Friend make it clear to the Leader of the House that to delay votes until Wednesdays puts phenomenal power into the hands of the Whips? As someone who rebelled on many occasions during the previous Parliament, I have experienced that power, but many Labour Members do not experience it—nor have they done so in the past. The power to register one's vote almost immediately—having worked out the issues during a debate—takes away hugely from the

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power of the Whips to spend time bullying and exerting massive pressure on individual Members. That power works against them, but they do not care.

Mrs. Browning: Indeed. That is why I drew attention to the fact that a time lag of up to a week would subject Members to external pressure that could not be exerted if votes immediately followed debates—pressure from the Whips and possibly from the media and special interest lobby groups. That would break a fundamental rule that we have always upheld: the right of individual Members to cast their vote according to their own judgment. As a result of the proposal, Members would be subject to extraneous pressures.

The proposals would diminish attendance and interest in the Chamber. Their main purpose is to make it easier for the Government to push through not only primary but secondary legislation. The Leader of the House referred to the important votes, but for many of us, the volume of secondary legislation passed by the House is equally important. We hear from people outside this place about the burdens on business and the weight of bureaucracy and red tape, most of which comes from secondary legislation. However, such matters are to be downgraded in the deliberations of the House—at a time when we need to scrutinise secondary legislation even more carefully in this place, rather than introducing a system that makes it more advantageous for Members to be elsewhere and that permits debates to be held much later in the scrutiny process.

The voting system recommended by the Modernisation Committee breaks with most parliamentary conventions. When we vote, we do so on behalf of our constituents. Of course, those of us elected on a party ticket generally vote with our party—with the Government of the day if our party is in power. However, many Members, of all parties, exercise the right to disobey their party Whips—we have heard some examples this evening. I voted against the wishes of my party on two occasions. I did so for principled reasons on matters of importance to me and my constituents. Important issues will be debated after 10 o'clock at night. It is essential that Members have the right to cast their vote immediately after such debates.

Sir Patrick Cormack: As someone who not infrequently voted against the Conservative Government on matters such as free sight tests and free dental inspections—matters that appeal to Labour Members—I point out to my hon. Friend that it would not have been easy to wait a week to vote on a Wednesday. If there is to be deferred voting, we should hold it at 9 am the following morning, when Members have had a chance to read *Hansard*. They should then vote properly in the Lobbies. That is the most that we should do.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend tempts me to try to tweak the Modernisation Committee's ill thought through proposals in order to improve them a little. I oppose the proposals on a point of principle. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend will want to be involved in the new policies that a Conservative Government will introduce. They would enable Members to put their responsibility for democratic representation first. My hon. Friend is far too young to remember the Crossman experiments in the 1960s—

Mr. Winnick: I remember them.

Mrs. Browning: As the hon. Gentleman has first-hand experience, perhaps he agrees with the report on that experiment: in almost everyone's view, holding debates in the morning and voting later in the day was an abysmal failure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out, the change was made purely to accommodate the Government.

Mr. Winnick: The experiments did not succeed, because the Conservatives thought that it was wrong for us to sit in the morning and for votes to be taken later. Surely, we should advance from that. As I have proposed on other occasions, the times of our Thursday sitting should be repeated on other days—certainly on Wednesdays.

Mrs. Browning: I shall not be drawn on that. If I had wanted to tweak the proposals, I should have tabled amendments to the motions. I did not do so because I object to the motions on principle. Although I was not a Member of the House during the Crossman years, I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I remind him that the Crossman diaries show clearly that the motivation for that change was not the interest of Back Benchers but that of the then Government.

The views of the House and its individual Members are important. If the proceedings of this place are to reflect our responsibility as the democratically elected representatives of the people, neither of the motions will strengthen that responsibility. It is for that reason that I shall vote against both motions; I urge my hon. Friends to do the same.

7.37 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): Madam Deputy Speaker, I join in the congratulations on your promotion to the Chair—it fits you well.

The way in which Conservative Members approach the subject of our debate highlights their problems in dealing with such matters. They make a fundamental mistake to assume that the Opposition's only weapon is time. When I was elected to this place in 1979, I believed in that theory, but it is deeply flawed; it has not been true for at least 50 years and probably longer.

Part of me says that I should let the Opposition find out about their mistake in the same way as I did—trying to use that weapon to effect changes in Government policy during 18 years in opposition. During 10 years as a member of an Opposition Front-Bench team, I managed to have only one amendment accepted—by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—and it was not especially significant. I was not the only Member to experience that—we could not effect change by that method alone.

However, something more serious was going on. People outside this place—not least in the media—began to notice that the weapon of time merely amounted to Members of Parliament talking for talking's sake. That did the House immense damage. That is why so few

people now take notice of our proceedings. However, if we follow through the process on which we are currently embarked—and there are many more reforms yet to come—the power and authority of Back Benchers will be increased.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), for whom I have a great deal of respect, feels genuine anger about the lack of power for Back Benchers. I share that frustration, but as I have said to him before, he is missing the point if he thinks that we can restore that power by rowing backwards. We cannot. The great age of the House in the 19th and early 20th century occurred because the circumstances and the way in which we governed worked for that period. However, we cannot just bring that forward. We cannot live in our history; we learn from our history.

The reason why the House became the cutting edge of democracy around the world in the 19th century was precisely that it was the most modern parliament in the world. We introduced new technology. We gave greater power to Back Benchers. I want to make a few remarks about why I believe the proposals will help us. In doing so, I say to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills that his anger is misdirected. I know that he feels it deeply, but I plead with him not to get angry but to get organised.

We must radically change a number of things in the House not only to keep up with the constitutional changes that the Government are rightly introducing but to make ourselves more relevant to the people of this country. Several Opposition Members have said that the Government are forcing the proposals through and getting their own way, and that the House does not want them. The House is governed by the majority and the majority is on the Labour Benches. The House wants more modernisation, not less.

Mr. Tyrie: I hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that some Opposition Members are not against all programming in principle and see that there might be some merit in some of the proposals, but the problem is that the proposals before the House are all take and no give by the Executive. Nothing in them would enhance the ability of Back Benchers to scrutinise the Executive, and there are many ways in which our powers will be reduced. The hon. Gentleman says that we should not get angry but get organised. Can the hon. Gentleman suggest any way in which including the proposals in the Standing Orders will give any Back Benchers, including Labour Members, a chance to influence the Executive more?

Mr. Soley: That is precisely what I intended to do in a few moments. I was going to say that I hope that the hon. Gentleman will intervene again if I do not satisfy him—but perhaps I should not do so because that was a long intervention. I want to make some other brief points before I answer the hon. Gentleman's question.

One or two hon. Members have said that the proposals implement family friendly policies. They do not. If people think that finishing at 10 or 11 o'clock at night is family friendly for hon. Members who do not see their families during the week because they live back in the constituency, all that I can say is that they must have very funny families. The proposals are not about being family friendly. They may lead to a more family friendly approach, but they are about not legislating at 3 o'clock in the morning, which is not sensible and not understood by anyone outside the House. They are about better scrutiny of legislation, which was the point of the intervention by the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie).

Mrs. Browning: I must read to the hon. Gentleman the quote from the hon. Member for Rochdale (Mrs. Fitzsimons), who is in her place. She said in her article for the BBC:

> Yes, the proposals will make the House of Commons more family-friendly—I'm fed up with falling asleep on the phone to my husband—it's become a family joke. And yes, Westminster will become more women-friendly if these proposals are adopted, and it's probably true that the large number of women who've come into the Commons this session have driven through reform.

The priority is clearly a family friendly policy, not scrutiny.

Mr. Soley: I have no problem with that because it is obviously better for families if people are not here all night or in the early hours of the morning, but it does not follow that it is the ideal family friendly structure to finish at 11 o'clock at night and not see one's family during the week. If the Government were introducing the proposals for family friendly reasons, they would start from a differing position.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps the Opposition need to consider the need for family friendly policies? If the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) looks behind her, she will see not a single woman on the Opposition Benches. Can she not understand the need for change?

Mr. Soley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I return to the key issue of how the proposals can help to produce better legislation. For a start, we will no longer vote late into the early hours in order to kid people that we are giving better scrutiny to Bills. We know what the truth is. In the early hours when we come to vote, there is hardly anyone in the Chamber any way. That is not better scrutiny.

Then we come to the more interesting and hopeful part, which is what Opposition Members ought to focus on. If we can programme legislation, we can do one of the other things for which the Modernisation Committee and other Committees have fought for years.—we can take evidence on Bills. We all know that one of the reasons why Governments are reluctant to allow evidence-taking sessions is that they do not want to lose control of the timing of proceedings on the Bill. Government Back-Bench Members who at present sit in Committees trying to catch up with their work—that happened under the Conservative Government and it happens now—will have an opportunity to scrutinise more effectively, to question and to cross-examine.

The proposals will result in less legislation. Governments will have to face up to the fact that it will be more difficult, not easier, to get Bills through. They will make it more difficult for them to ram through lots of amendments at the last minute. It is more likely that amendments will come out of the evidence-taking sessions from hon. Members on both sides. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?] Opposition Members doubt that, but when the late

[Mr. Soley]

Nicholas Ridley was a Minister, I was faced as Opposition Front-Bench spokesman with 1,200 amendments to a Bill—I cannot remember which one—tabled in the last few days of proceedings on it. I did what we all do. I took advice from all the pressure groups and lobby groups, partly because Members of Parliament are not resourced enough to do the research themselves. We get into the trap in which legislation is driven through either because increased numbers of Bills are introduced or because last-minute Government amendments are tabled and we cannot give them effective scrutiny—the very thing about which the Conservative party is complaining.

If we want good scrutiny, we have to do several things. First, we have to make sure that Committees take evidence and scrutinise, rather than play for time. Secondly, we have to ensure that the Opposition parties and Back Benchers achieve greater control over the time of day when Bills are debated so that debates take place under the observation of the media rather than in the early hours. All Governments kick away debates into the early hours when legislation is embarrassing. Thirdly, we must ensure that when amendments are tabled as a result of better scrutiny, the Government are able to take them.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful speech, but is not one of the problems the fact that it will still be open to the Government to do exactly what they have been doing in the past 12 months and what they did, for example, after the Omagh bombing? They have forced through on guillotine motions legislation that causes disquiet and concern to hon. Members without providing adequate time, entirely on their whim. It is a one-way system in which we are giving power to the Executive and getting nothing back.

Mr. Soley: The hon. Gentleman is wrong and time will prove him wrong. We are setting up a series of structures. I readily admit that more modernisation is necessary to make the system work well, but the proposals will improve it.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: I shall make another point first. It may help to answer the hon. Gentleman's question.

About two years ago, I came to the conclusion that the argument about time in this Chamber started from the wrong position. It was almost impossible to argue about when the House of Commons should start and stop sitting unless first we made the conscious decision that we had too much happening on the Floor of the House. That is why I produced a paper calling for what was then described as a parallel Chamber. It is now Westminster Hall. I wanted to get much of the stuff that unnecessarily takes up time on the Floor of the House into a Chamber in which Back Benchers would have a greater voice and in which we could have more debates on Select Committee reports. Back Benchers now have greater opportunities and we can also increasingly carry out the work of this Chamber in the hours in which the media can examine our work. By focusing our work in that way, we can achieve the better scrutiny that we all genuinely want.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: I shall give way for the last time, because interventions are taking up too much time.

Mr. Bercow: Further to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, when there are substantial numbers of Government amendments to a Bill, the decision as to whether to alter the timetable for the consideration of that Bill will not be automatic but discretionary, and, similarly, that the extent of any such alteration will be entirely subject to ministerial fiat?

Mr. Soley: The hon. Gentleman appears to fail to appreciate my view that the direction that our modernisation efforts are taking will impose a discipline on both Labour and Tory Governments that they have not experienced before. First, modernisation will produce less legislation because Governments will know that they will have a finite time for it. There will be clear times at which legislation will enter and exit the pipeline. Secondly, they will concentrate on getting the legislation right rather than on dreaming up umpteen amendments at the last minute and banging them on to the Floor of the House. That has happened under Governments of both colours, and it is a very bad practice.

We have to build on these proposals. I would like the House to support the motions as part of a process and not as an answer in themselves. They form one step among many. We will then need to go for post-legislative scrutiny so that, after a Bill has become an Act, we can examine how it has worked. The Conservative Members who have told us that those who are now in opposition will be in government tomorrow and vice versa are right, but have they already forgotten the lessons of the poll tax and the Child Support Agency?

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham): And rail privatisation.

Mr. Soley: Yes, and rail privatisation.

Would the Conservative Government have got into such a mess if they had had better scrutiny during the legislative process and Acts had been subject to post-legislative scrutiny? I do not think that they would.

I take a similar view to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills on giving power to Back Benchers, even though we have a totally different approach on how to do that. We must consider the way in which Select Committees work, and I regret the fact that I shall not be present for Thursday's debate. We must also consider providing more resources to Members, so that they can do their job better, and we must examine the management of the House of Commons, which does not have a committee to address the needs of Back Benchers. That is why I would like there to be a radical reform of the House of Commons Commission. All those proposals could return the House to the position that it had when being a Back-Bench Member really mattered. Back Benchers attracted the attention of people outside and were listened to.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) does in the early hours of the morning many of the things that I did in the early 1980s. I did exactly the same, but that did not help me. We did not win, but kept losing. However, the most frustrating aspect was not losing but the fact that one's best arguments were totally lost on the general public and the wider world. They are not interested in tactics that merely bring the House into disrepute. That does the damage, and that is why we should take another step towards putting it right and putting the House in the forefront where it used to be 100 years ago when it was the leading legislature in the world. People used this place as an example, but they will not do that with the model that we followed in the late 20th century and that we are following now.

7.54 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am sure that you will be delighted that, for once, the House is taking seriously the business of its own business and that we are not considering this issue rather flippantly late at night.

There are Members on both sides of the House who genuinely come to this issue with an open mind. Without exception, all the members of the Modernisation Committee have addressed the problems to the best of their ability and by using a great deal of experience and expertise. The Committee particularly misses the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who brought to it a level-headed approach and always tried to ensure that we moved with consensus across the Committee.

I take up the point made by the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson)—why are we here? The hon. Member for Ealing, South and North Acton—it is something like that—

Mr. Bercow: Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush.

Mr. Tyler: Yes, the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley)—I should have remembered that it had something to do with sheep—raised the issue of what the world out there thinks of the way in which we arrange our business, and it is important that we do not become so introspective that we do not recognise that there is a real problem with the way in which people outside perceive us. It is perfectly true that Americans love watching Prime Minister's Question Time, but does anyone on either side of the House think that the Government's activities are scrutinised effectively by the House of Commons in that half hour? Of course not—it is theatre. Similarly, most Question Times may provide information, but, usually, they produce more heat than light.

However, Westminster Hall, the Select Committees, the Standing Committees and a Committee of the whole House provide us with a real opportunity to put a Minister on the spot. It is extremely important that we recognise from the start that we are not in a golden age in which everything is wonderful. I start from the premise that we may not be totally broke, but we are somewhere near it and that it needs fixing. Hon. Members on both sides somehow think that we have achieved perfection in scrutinising the work of the Government—be that their Executive actions or their legislation. I do not believe that, and I certainly do not believe that the electorate who put us here believe it.

We have already heard the quotation from a former Leader of the House, Lord Newton, and I also draw attention to the interesting pamphlet produced by the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), in which he advances the case for agreed programme motions. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not here now, but his wisdom is to be encouraged.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Tyler: No, because I want to make progress and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants to speak. We have very little time as the result of his colleagues activities earlier this evening.

I take as my text a quotation from the minority report put before the Modernisation Committee by the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire. He said:

> We believe that the terms of trade between Parliament and Executive need to be tilted back towards Parliament.

I agree, and I think that the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush and Members on both sides would do so, too. I was here in 1974 and I remember what Parliament was like then. Under successive Governments, attempts have been made by those on the Front Benches—and sometimes in collusion, it has to be said—to prevent the House of Commons from acting as effectively as it should. That is why I welcome the Government's agreement to the Liberal Democrats' suggestion that there should be an informal ad hoc sessional business committee. That would provide Back Benchers and both Opposition parties with real opportunities to tilt the terms of trade back towards the House.

For example, we could say that it would be more appropriate for such and such a Bill to go to the Lords first, because it is not so controversial and we want to get our hands on another Bill. At present, such decisions are made within the confines of a small group of people who sit on the Treasury Bench. The House of Commons is entitled to take a view on such issues. We are also entitled to express a view on which Bills might be better understood by being subject to scrutiny before the full Standing Committee process. That would be helpful.

The interminable debates in the House about how to avoid interminable debates must reach a conclusion. Anyone who has read the Crossman report and the Jopling reforms will know that there were endless discussions about trying to concentrate our efforts on the issues that people wanted to discuss. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) moved a motion in the Jopling committee and it is referred to in the documents before us today. He suggested that the speeches of Front Benchers should be subject to the same restrictions as those that are often imposed on the speeches of Back Benchers. I say amen to that, and other Members have expressed a similar view. Curiously, Front-Bench Members are not very enthusiastic about that attempt to ensure succinctness.

I am keen on the close examination of legislation to which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) referred. It is a pity that, having fired her Exocet, she has left her place, because she made an

[Mr. Tyler]

important point. Anyone who really thinks that the Floor of the House of Commons at 3 o'clock in the morning is the right place to ensure close examination of legislation—and I have been here then, doing just that—has another think coming. I am sure that she would agree.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful speech, to the nods of Labour Members, but there is nothing in the programming proposals to prevent the scrutiny of legislation late at night when the Government decide to railroad it through the House, which they have often done by introducing last-minute guillotine motions on the grounds of some spurious emergency or need. How do the proposals help us to deal with that?

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman will have seen my colleagues and me vote against the guillotine motion, as we always do. That is common practice because we believe that such motions are always a sign of the Government's failure. Incidentally, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was a Member of Parliament at the time, but we did the same thing when Conservative Governments pushed through guillotine motions, as they did all too often, sometimes unnecessarily.

That is why we are trying to move on and get away from guillotine motions, so that they are the exception rather than the rule. We are trying to ensure that we can usually have a sensible, businesslike discussion. Any other assembly—let alone any other business community—in the world thinks that it is better to sit down and try to work out the best way to handle business. Extreme measures must be taken when that is not possible, but let us at least make the attempt. That is why I said that the one-and-a-half hours spent on the previous debate would have been much better spent getting on with the substance of the discussion. A serious attempt to obtain agreement to a programme motion for this evening's business would have been preferable to the guillotine, and the Government are at fault there.

In the previous Speaker's letter to the Modernisation Committee—one of my complaints about modernity is that text seems to get smaller as I get older—she reminded it that its first report set out three important issues for programming. First:

> The Government of the day must be assured of getting its legislation through in reasonable time (provided it obtains the approval of the House).

Secondly:

> The Opposition in particular and Members in general must have a full opportunity to discuss and seek to change provisions to which they attach importance.

Thirdly:

> All parts of a Bill must be properly considered.

We all know that none of that happens under a guillotine. I wanted to remind the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich that we had a programme when we discussed the Transport Bill which enabled us to have a proper discussion of the important concerns, anxieties and apprehensions of some Labour Back Benchers. If we had had a guillotine and the Conservative party had had its way and gone hell for leather at that Bill, those concerns would never have been expressed or voted on. There would have been no Divisions on the issues on which Labour rebels wanted to divide.

That is the advantage of a programme motion. It enables hon. Members on both sides of the House to ensure that their voices are heard. Frankly, we on the Opposition Benches would not be doing our duty and would not be effective if we did not ensure that Labour Members behind the Treasury Front Bench had the opportunity to be heard, not only by voicing their concerns, but by voting.

The former Speaker's letter also said that

> the artificial prolongation of proceedings, by whatever means, does the House no credit in the eyes of those whom we represent and is rarely a productive use of the House's time.

Amen to that. If Opposition Members think that that is not true, they have been living in cloud cuckoo land—or perhaps they have just arrived there.

It is extremely important that we make progress this evening, not because this is the end of the process, but because we can experiment in the next few months to see whether we can make some real improvements in the way in which we operate, and change the balance of trade back towards the House to enable hon. Members who are not members of the Government Front Bench to have an effective voice and a more effective vote at a more effective time.

The first amendment to be called, which is in the name of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), demonstrates no understanding of the difference between the whole House taking a businesslike approach to our business and reaching agreement, and the use of the damaging, blunt instrument that is a guillotine motion. That is why I advise all Members to reject the amendment.

I have a great deal of sympathy with the amendment in the names of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and a number of my colleagues, but we are just about to undertake one experiment, and I wonder whether this is the right moment to begin another. I should prefer to return to that proposal when we know whether the first experiment has been successful.

On deferred Divisions, it is extremely important that all parties should tell the Government, fair and square, that we hope that they will avoid tackling major issues after 10 o'clock. They should impose on themselves the self-discipline that the House is accepting for itself. I do not have a problem with the discussion of motions to appoint Members to Committees—not even a motion to appoint the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst to the Commission. Hon. Members can discuss those matters all night, if they want.

However, I have a great deal of sympathy with the points made by Conservative Front-Bench Members, and I would regard it as a problem if the Government, because of their tight legislative timetable, so arranged their business that they had to impose on Members after 10 o'clock. That would be breaking with the spirit of the proposals.

The idea that stand-alone motions should be subjects for debate, and Divisions on them deferred to another time is nothing new—it happens all the time. However,

it would be wrong if matters of legislative importance continued to be debated after 10 o'clock and a Division was then deferred.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The hon. Gentleman may well be aware that in this Session more than 3,800 Government amendments have been tabled in the Lords. Will the incompetent legislative drafting revealed by such amendments be improved by these reforms?

Mr. Tyler: Yes, I think that it will, as long as there is agreement in the House about the total time that is necessary to deal with amendments. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree, the problem under successive Governments has been that we have not had sufficient time for all the issues that Members want to address.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I want to make progress because other Members want to speak.

It is extremely important that we recognise that, in future, the slot after 10 o'clock should be for matters that are not of supreme legislative importance; otherwise, Members on both sides of the House will think that they have been sold a pup.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Tyler: No, I want to make progress.

We already have deferred Divisions. Indeed, when there is a Committee of the whole House, it is perfectly possible that votes will take place even a day or two after that discussion.

I love the idea, which has suddenly emerged this evening, that Members, Conservative Members in particular, listen to every word of a debate and make up their mind about how to vote according to the merits of the discussion. I do not know how many Conservative Members were here yesterday when my colleagues and I led two important debates, on pensions and on privatisation, but it was noticeable that some Conservative Members arrived in the Lobby not knowing whether to vote or, if they intended to vote, not knowing which way to vote, and had to be given careful guidance by the Whips.

I accept that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is not one of those Members. He always thinks for himself and votes according to his conscience and judgment.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Tyler: That point is absolutely without doubt, and I will not take any interventions on it. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst can speak for himself in a moment.

In a perfect world, of course, all Members would attend every debate, listen and make up their own mind. I recall one member of the Modernisation Committee—I shall not identify him—wondering, at an earlier stage in the Committee's proceedings, why we could not vote at the beginning of debates. He said that he always knew which way he would vote, so why should he bother listening to the arguments? I completely reject that attitude—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Name names.

Mr. Tyler: I will not, and the hon. Gentleman might be embarrassed if I did.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I have said that I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman may get a chance to speak if I speed up.

It is a grand illusion that everybody somehow reaches their conclusion on how to vote on the precise dot of 10 o'clock, and that if they were asked to do so later, they might somehow be deflected by other judgments. That is nonsense. Amendment (d), tabled by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, on which we shall also vote, is a wrecking amendment. All he wants is to make Wednesday a total nonsense.

It is on evolution that we have been most successful—not with great radical changes but by moving, checking, going back, monitoring, experimenting, making progress. Some hon. Members do not think that we are moving fast enough—I probably share that view—but if we take the majority of our colleagues with us, we are more likely to make sustainable improvement than have to chop and change. That is true for the sittings in Westminster Hall and several other reforms in the Parliament.

I accept precisely the view of the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush that we can make progress across the House by experimenting and being prepared to consider matters again. Our great opportunity in the next few months is to do precisely that—I accept that the run-up to the election is a sensitive time—but with a clear end point. If the new Parliament feels that our trial and error has not gone far enough, as the hon. Member for Cambridge suggests, or too far, as others suggest, we can look again.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) is not in her place, but I very much welcome the fact that she appeared to be much more open minded on some of the issues about which hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned. I hope that we see that approach reflected on the Modernisation Committee.

However, I very much regret that, on this issue, in this debate, and on the issue in the Modernisation Committee, the Conservatives broke with our previous practice to try to make progress together. On such issues, the House always achieves a great deal more by experimentation with a degree of co-operation and consensus. Nevertheless, we should be making progress tonight, and I hope that the House will vote to do so.

8.12 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): The proposals are a big step forward in the modernisation of the House's procedures. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, as she makes her way out of the Chamber, on producing an innovative solution to some of the

[Mrs. Anne Campbell]

problems to which we have drawn her attention. The proposals will make the House more effective and more efficient. Yes, we need proper time to scrutinise legislation—that leads to better Bills and better law—but that does not mean that we need open-ended time or rambling speeches in which the same points are made over and again. Let us try to make ourselves much more like a modern business, which would not waste its time as we do.

After a good summer break and a fairly light parliamentary timetable so far, most Members of Parliament—at least those on the Government Benches—are beginning to feel like normal human beings. However, I remind hon. Members of earlier in the Session, when we had votes after midnight on a number of occasions. The problem was not so much the lateness of the hour but the uncertainty of how long we would be kept here and whether we would be required to vote. The proposals would remove such uncertainty and allow right hon. and hon. Members to get home at a reasonable time and have a proper night's sleep. I believe that that is important because there is much work for a Member of Parliament both inside and outside the House. We cannot work effectively if we are tired and exhausted.

It has been argued that the proposals will reduce the powers of the Opposition. They will reduce the power of a handful of Tory Back Benchers to hold the House to ransom. A moment ago, in a sedentary exchange, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) admitted to my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) that some of the proceedings that he conducted were to irritate us; he has been open about that. Under the proposals, it will no longer be possible to table amendments, which, though in order, add little to the debate—their sole purpose being to keep Government Members in the House in case of a vote.

Mr. Swayne: Was the hon. Lady present for any of the proceedings of the Scotland Bill, which was programmed as it went through the House? If she was, did she observe that the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was constantly frustrated by the programme motion, which, in effect, silenced him on points that he legitimately wished to raise? Has it not occurred to her that the programming will be a stitch-up between the Front-Bench teams to the exclusion of Back Benchers' legitimate points of view?

Mrs. Campbell: I should be very surprised if my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) were silenced by any procedure. He is well capable of making the comments that he wants to make, and making them very forcefully and effectively.

The handful of Tory Back Benchers to whom I referred are the sort of Opposition Members who believe in bludgeoning their opponents with tiredness and exhaustion. That is not about opposition; it is not opposition as people outside the House perceive it. They want to hear the arguments and the debate. They do not want to hear Members of Parliament who are tired and out of touch because they are here until the small hours of the morning.

The Opposition are being offered greater powers in exchange. The Modernisation Committee proposals suggest that an informal committee meets after the Queen's Speech to decide the length of time to consider each Bill, and there will be a programming sub-committee to decide when and for how long contentious parts of Bills will be debated. That is right. It will give people outside the House a better chance to hear the arguments.

Mr. Grieve: In the present Parliament, it has been possible for the Government and the Opposition to arrive at informal arrangements on programming legislation that was taking time, but does the hon. Lady agree that the usual effect of that—we witnessed it when considering the Scotland Bill in Committee—has been to leave reams of amendments and clauses unscrutinised? How will the proposed system be any better in practice? Will she explain that?

Mrs. Campbell: Programming is obviously more effective than the way in which we proceeded previously. If the hon. Gentleman goes into the matter in more depth, he will find that the Tory Whips could not deliver what was agreed between the Government and the Tory Opposition.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Mrs. Campbell: No, I am not giving way again. I have given way twice and I know that many others want to speak.

It is true that the House is held in less respect than in the past. Opposition Members should reflect on that fact and ask themselves why. It is because debate is considered increasingly irrelevant to people's lives. It is because politicians are not seen to be normal people with normal lives. We do not go home in the evening; we do not watch the same television programmes as other people; we lose touch with our families, our children, our grandchildren. We impose that stress on ourselves and on the large number of people who work in this place and serve us so well. If we are so different from other people, how can we properly represent them?

I approve of almost everything in the proposals. No one outside this place would consider them radical. On the contrary, they would consider them just sensible moves by which we can discuss business at times when people are awake. However, I have concerns, and one in particular. That is why I have tabled a very modest amendment, which has been supported by many of my hon. Friends and found support on the Liberal Democrat Benches, too.

The purpose of my amendment is to remove an anomaly in the Modernisation Committee proposals. It is proposed that debate on a programme motion takes place after Second Reading. That means that we could finish debate at 10 o'clock, take votes, debate the programme motion for three quarters of an hour and then take votes on that, keeping right hon. and hon. Members here until 11.30 pm or later. I do not find that acceptable. I propose a very modest amendment that would provide adequate time for debate on Second Reading and on a programme motion, and still we could get home at a reasonable time in order to live like reasonable people.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Lady explain how her amendment would leave the amount of time for the Second Reading intact?

Mrs. Campbell: Of course, the amendment would reduce the amount of time for Second Reading from about

six hours to five and a half hours. If the hon. Gentleman sees that as a problem, I suggest that he tries to get Opposition Members to be a little more succinct and to express their arguments in a less rambling way than some of them sometimes do.

I believe that we would have adequate time for Second Reading debates under my amendment, which I hope will be supported by a majority of the House.

8.20 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I have difficulty with all the proposals, not least because the analysis that gave rise to them is terribly flawed. I start with the proposition that seems to underpin many of the proposals—that the House does not have enough time to deal with the matters with which it wants to deal through scrutiny and by holding the Government to account. That puzzles me.

If one examines the pattern on which the House now works, it is clear that the House does not sit on most Fridays. Friday used to be a parliamentary working day. We are told that we are desperately short of time, yet the House of Commons chooses not to sit on most Fridays.

There are occasions when the Government artificially prolong a debate—often a Second Reading debate—that could be concluded quite early, allowing us to move on to other business fairly readily, except for the convenience of hon. Members. As we have heard from several Members on the Government Benches, they get upset if they cannot be told exactly what will happen and when. They may be forced to stay in the House or even in the Chamber, because they do not know when the votes may occur. The truth is that we could get a lot more business done in the time if we did not work simply for the convenience of hon. Members, and if the Government Whips did not have to prolong the business artificially so that delicate Labour Members could know what was happening and could return to the House.

Joan Ruddock: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he not think that it is for the convenience of our constituents, and extremely important to them, that we are available on a Friday to deal with matters in the constituency and to conduct surgeries? I believe that the right hon. Gentleman does not conduct surgeries. We all do, and we consider it extremely important to make ourselves available in a democratic way in order that people can raise issues of great importance with us.

Mr. Forth: When I did waste my time and that of my constituents doing surgeries on Saturdays, that allowed me to be in the House on Fridays, which I was on all or most occasions when the House used to sit on Fridays.

The hon. Lady's comments give lie to an important consideration which has underpinned much of the debate. For reasons that I think I can begin to understand, Members on the Government Benches see their work in the House as being of little or no relevance, but see their work in the constituency, as the hon. Lady puts it, as being of overriding importance. I dispute that.

My view is that the principal and most important work of a Member of Parliament is here, at Westminster, in and around the House of Commons, primarily holding the Government to account, scrutinising legislation and questioning the Executive. That is what I believe should be the most important part of the work of a Member of Parliament, so I entirely reject the hon. Lady's assumption that any excuse to be away from here somehow legitimises her work and that of her colleagues.

We can see that theme running right through the proposals, which seem to be designed—particularly the deferred Divisions proposals—to make sure that hon. Members are not here for most of the time and appear only briefly and when it is convenient for them to do so. To my mind, any proposal that starts from the assumption that it is for the convenience of hon. Members misses the whole point of the House of Commons and the relationship between the Executive and the House. That, I believe, is one of the reasons why there is a difficulty in achieving consensus, about which we heard a moment ago.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. Friend agree with my previous point, that the difference between the convenience of hon. Members and their social lives, and the convenience of those who have a genuine complaint about what the Government are doing—this affects Government Back Benchers more than other hon. Members—is that when important debates are held after 10 pm in future, the Whips will spend the next few days making certain that there are plenty of reasons why the hon. Members concerned should not and will not be around to make their vote count in due course? That is what will inevitably happen—it is how Governments work.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I shall return to that point, as it highlights the worrying aspects of some of the proposals.

I challenge the assumption that has underpinned much of the debate so far—that the Government are entitled to get their business. I dispute that. Part of what I try to do as an individual Member of Parliament is to prevent the Government from getting their business at all, or getting it easily. A Government who can get all their business and more easily and without much challenge are in danger of overriding the safeguards that we always thought existed in this House and the other place.

Mr. Winnick: The right hon. Gentleman may recall that after Second Reading, there could be a 45-minute debate on the money resolution. He may also remember that the late Bob Cryer almost monopolised those debates. That was abolished in the previous Parliament. There was a vote on 2 November 1995, and I see that among those who voted to abolish the Back Bencher's right was the right hon. Gentleman. He may argue that he had no alternative because he was a Minister, but many Ministers did not vote on that occasion.

Mr. Forth: Of course I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I had to make a decision whether to stay as a member of the Government whom I had the honour to serve or whether to resign in order to express my view on such matters. I made the decision that I should continue to be part of the Government, and I voted accordingly. I had many discussions with colleagues about it and I was never happy with the proposals, but that was the decision that I made. Looking back, I might rather regret it, but I am where I am now, and I feel absolutely free to make the points that I am making as a Member of the House and of the Opposition.

[Mr. Forth]

I want to retain as much of a right as I can, as an individual Member of Parliament, to harry the Government, to irritate them, to make their life difficult, to delay them and thereby to try to prevent the damage that they inflict through excessive and bad legislation.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Is not the point exactly the reverse of what the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) argues? I remember that when the late Bob Cryer was in his place, the Government of the day used to get deeply exasperated with him, but he was effective because he forced them to come back time and again. Yes, it was wrong to do that, but does that mean that closing down more Back Benchers' rights is the route to take?

Mr. Forth: That is the problem. Those of us who have had the privilege of being in the House for some time must inevitably draw on the experience that we have had, both in government and in opposition. Part of the difficulty is that very many of the hon. Members who are excited about the proposals and support them have experienced only what it is like to be in government. Alternatively, they spend so little time in the House of Commons that they have lost interest in its proceedings. Many of the hon. Members who are behind the proposals fit one or other category.

Mr. Stunell *rose—*

Mr. Forth: I exonerate the hon. Gentleman from the second categorisation.

Mr. Stunell: It is always good to hear a sinner brought to repentance, as the right hon. Gentleman seems to have been. Some of us think that there might be other areas where repentance was overdue.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that some of us came to the House because we thought that the entire process of government in this country needed to be changed and improved? We are not discussing a trade union measure to improve our terms and conditions of service. We are trying to make this place effective, and the right hon. Gentleman might sometimes direct his efforts towards achieving that, instead of wrecking our business.

Mr. Forth: I will be the sole judge of what I think is effective and of what I should do. I will stick by my judgment, and I will not be lectured or hectored by the hon. Gentleman or anyone else.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forth: Knowing the hon. Gentleman, I am sure that I will not be lectured or hectored. I am sure that he will give me advice.

Mr. Casale: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Earlier in his speech, he said that he judged it to be a waste of his time to meet his constituents in his constituency surgery. Does the same apply to answering their correspondence?

Mr. Forth: I think that I can say fairly that if one of my constituents writes to me, he or she will receive an answer the same day. I have always rather prided myself that that works. Perhaps it is something to which we should all aspire.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as seems clear from the rather ambiguous speeches of the hon. Members for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) and for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), if the timetable for a Bill is determined in advance, and if the issue of whether to alter that timetable is entirely a matter for ministerial discretion, there is no inbuilt incentive for the Government to minimise the number of amendments that they table to facilitate the interests of the House?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend has typically put his finger on one of the flaws of the argument that has been advanced so far, which is the extent to which the Government will now control the time that the House will give to each Bill. The Leader of the House said honestly and openly to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), the shadow Leader of the House, that although discussions might take place, if the Opposition did not want to take part that would not matter very much because the Government would say to the House, "This is the time that we, the Government, believe that the House will spend on our legislative programme."

What my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has said must follow. Why should the Government take any trouble to ensure that their legislation is any better than it has hitherto been? That really does not matter because the length of debate will be determined and Back-Bench Members will be squeezed out. Goodness knows what will happen to the inevitable flood of amendments that we have seen from the Government over three years, which they have had to introduce to almost every Bill to make it not very good but—

Mr. Bercow: Less awful.

Mr. Forth: Indeed.

These measures appear to fail on every count. They appear to reduce—

Mr. David Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman seems to justify the classic style that he uses of delay, harry, irritate and obfuscate on the basis that, somehow, that will bring about a welcome change in the direction of the Government of the day, or an amendment. Given his lengthy experience in the House and the various constituencies that he has represented, will he give us examples of that approach being successful in the objectives that he claims for it?

Mr. Forth: Yes, I think that we are seeing an example of that now. The tiny role that I have played so far this Session in delaying some of the Government's progress in this place is being reflected, at least in part, in another place. I would take enormous pride if some elements of the Government's programme were not to survive to the end of the Session. I would claim that I might have played a tiny part in that process in some of the things that I have been able to do over the past few months, when many Members here present were not in the House and were not participating in its business.

I do not want to make excessive claims. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to make a small claim. If more Opposition and Labour Members were to

attempt to delay, irritate and obfuscate occasionally, they might find the results rather pleasing and, in a way, unexpected.

Joan Ruddock: Is it not true that the right hon. Gentleman gained his reputation, or perhaps his notoriety, by defeating about half a dozen popular private Members' Bills, which had wide support in the House and in the country?

Mr. Forth: I hope that I have contributed to defeating many rather disgusting private Members' Bills. Many of them were driven by equally disgusting interest groups outside the House. I would stand by that on any occasion.

I am not here to aid the process of legislation, which I regard as being almost inevitably inimical to the public interest. I wish to try to obstruct as much legislation as possible. Examples of good legislation are so few and far between and examples of bad legislation so legion that I consider it almost self-evident that it is the duty of a Member to try to prevent legislation rather than to encourage it.

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): Will the right hon. Gentleman give examples of the good legislation?

Mr. Forth: I would find that so difficult that I would not want to waste either my time or that of anyone else.

The act of programming will be inimical to quality of legislation and to the role of Back-Bench Members. It will alter adversely the balance between the Executive and the legislature.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I want to deal with programming and the role of Back-Bench Members. Both sides of the House—the Leader of the House and even my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning)—have talked about the agreement that can be reached through the usual channels on programming. Would my right hon. Friend care to speculate with me on the opportunity that genuine Back-Bench Members will have to influence the programming of legislation?

Mr. Forth: The mere mention of agreement between the Front Benches causes me great fear and trepidation. I hope that there will be few such agreements. If those agreements were to be made, I suspect that that would diminish yet further the role of Back-Bench Members, who after all are in the majority. There are far more Back-Benchers in the House than there are Members on the Government payroll or Front-Bench Members. It strikes me that anything that is arrived at by cosy consensus through the usual channels will be undesirable for Back Benchers.

It seems from much of what has been said that deferred Divisions are so patently absurd that they are barely worth discussing. It is worrying, however, that Members seem to be serious in their desire to have Divisions deferred. Some may accuse me occasionally of being slightly cynical about these matters, but it strikes me that the proposals contain at least the possibility that, were the Government to wish artificially to prolong debates so that votes could not take place before 10 o'clock, we could quite easily find that Members would no longer be required to be in the House on a Monday or a Tuesday. Members could drift into the House, take part in some rather peculiar voting process and then leave.

In other words, we would be reducing the House, perhaps so that Labour Members could spend more time in their constituencies—I know not what. Members could turn up once a week and vote, probably on the basis of a list given to them by the Whips. They would not have been present for the debates and they would be unaware of the content of the issues. After voting, they could leave.

In the meantime, if there were doubts about the way in which Members would vote, they would be under pressure from the Whips or others, who would tell them how to vote as the voting day approached. I fear greatly for what the results of that might be. Perhaps the Government are not as clever, cynical or subtle as I have suggested and would not organise such a system. Perhaps unwittingly I have given them a tip. If we begin to consider the implications of the formal and systematic detaching of Divisions from debates, we shall take the House into difficult territory.

I believe that all the proposals are bad and that they should be opposed. I hope that the House does not approve them. However, having looked at the disposal of votes in the previous two Divisions, I fear that this is very much a Government versus the rest of the House matter. That is the most worrying feature of all. We see the massed ranks of Government Members coming into the House to vote these measures through, when the only beneficiary can be the Government. That is surely the final condemnation of the proposals.

8.28 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity of saying a few words in this important debate and to take up some of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). I shall take a different line from his.

I am mindful of the right hon. Gentleman's statement that many Labour Members have not experienced opposition. I spent 14 years in opposition, and since then three and a half years as a Government Member. As for the right hon. Gentleman's other stricture, I would say that I am a fairly diligent Member. My attendance is fairly good and my voting record is as good as most Labour or Opposition Members'.

I support the Government's proposals because they are important steps forward in modernising the House and ensuring better scrutiny of legislation. We are not emphasising enough that the issues are not only about hours or a family-friendly working situation, although those are important factors. We are seeking to ensure that the House does its job better than it has done so far. The proposals before us could help to ensure that outcome.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) wants to debate other modernisation issues, as do I. He knows that I want us to consider the tabling of written questions during recesses, and there should be a five-year rolling programme under which legislation could be introduced at a steady pace throughout each year. Instead of a Queen's Speech every November or December, as is the case this year, there should be a time limit—perhaps of a year—within which legislation should complete its passage. There is a lot that we could do.

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

Unlike the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I would like every Friday sitting to be scrapped. There is uncertainty over when constituency Fridays will fall, which does not help Members who live away from London to plan their diaries and make arrangements. I am already booking Fridays to February next year—not for advice bureaux, which I hold every Saturday, but because people want me to fulfil constituency commitments such as meeting councillors, visiting companies and considering the problems of local schools.

Provincial Members would be helped if they could get out of Friday sittings altogether. At present, they are torn between being at the House for a vote on an important issue and fulfilling a constituency commitment. Private Members' legislation would be given a better crack of the whip if we dealt with it on Wednesday mornings and if facilities in the Chamber released by the Westminster Hall experiment were made available.

I am a strong supporter of the programming proposal, and regret what happened during the Modernisation Committee debate on it. We bent over backwards to reach a consensus, considered different drafts week after week and tried to reach agreement with Conservative Members and with the Liberals, who were more accommodating. We tried to meet Opposition Members' concerns and make a deal on what we proposed. It was not intended that the Modernisation Committee report should be favourable only to the Government. We wanted it to be favourable to the Opposition to ensure that the House scrutinised legislation better and that a fairer deal was provided. I worked hard to that end. I accept that the Opposition of today could be the Government of tomorrow. I said that in Romania to President Iliescu, who denounced me for it, but a few years later he was in opposition. I accept that changes are inevitable, although I hope that my hon. Friends and I will sit on this side of the House for a long time to come.

Programming would help the Government to plan their legislative timetable, but it would also ensure better scrutiny. Like me, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was a member of the Committee that considered the Transport Act 1985, and he used to groan when I, my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek) or one or two others rose to speak. During one sitting, even though I had only five words noted on my slip of paper, I was told that I had to speak for four hours. I managed four hours and 10 minutes. That night, we told the Government that we could progress to clause 7, however long that might take. We got to clause 7 at 2 o'clock the following afternoon and abandoned the sitting. That was nonsensical.

As the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is now, I too have been a time waster. Members can make sensible contributions briefly and the programming proposal is about having meaningful debates. That night in Committee, I could have made my speech in 10 minutes, but we knew how much progress we would allow the Government to make. As he will remember, the 1985 Act contained a pensions clause relating to the National Bus Company, but we never managed to debate that burning issue because proceedings were guillotined. Once that had happened, the debate was under the Government's control and, even though Conservative Members had remained silent for weeks, they suddenly began to make speeches to prevent Labour Members from contributing on what we considered to be important provisions.

The proposals represent a major step forward, and it was a tragedy that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), for whom I have great respect, produced a minority report out of the blue on the last day of proceedings in the Modernisation Committee. He made a contrary proposal, which we had to debate despite having worked for weeks to reach agreement, and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and Labour members of the Committee leaned over backwards to try to reach a consensus. The timetabling proposal is sensible and will achieve much better debates.

There should also be time limits on speeches made in Committee, because it is nonsensical that Members can make long, boring and repetitive contributions that stray from the point. They return to order only when told to do so by the Chair.

Ms Oona King: Does my hon. Friend agree that a Member who cannot make a cogent case in 10 or fewer minutes should not be in Parliament?

Mr. Pike: That is not necessarily always the case. However, on most issues most of us can make our case very clearly in 10 minutes. The timetabling proposal represents a sensible way forward and we should support it.

The voting proposal also represents a sensible move. Let us be absolutely realistic: it is nonsensical that six Opposition Members can force 250 or 350 Government Members to remain in the House. I accept that Labour Members have used such tactics, and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst knows that I was involved with them a few years ago, but that does not make that right nor does it mean that we do not want to make progress in the 21st century. Does anyone believe that a vote involving six Opposition and 350 Government Members is not an insult to democracy?

Mr. Gerald Howarth *rose—*

Mr. Pike: I shall not give way because I want to limit my speech to 10 minutes.

Electronic voting would improve the situation and I would welcome it. Furthermore, separating a debate from a vote is established practice. For example, that happens during the Queen's Speech debate, in Committee when groups of amendments are dealt with, and after the Budget, when a mass of votes takes place after a debate lasting several days. Let us not pretend that the majority of Members attend the Chamber to follow a debate—they might be at Standing or Select Committee sittings or dealing with their mail—and those who believe that the Whips will be able to apply more pressure are kidding themselves. Such a fear is irrelevant and unfounded, and Members who are not scrutinised as they walk across the Chamber to the Division Lobby and can vote on the Wednesday of the week following a debate will be better able to rebel and take their own line. The proposals are sensible and should be accepted. Let us move forward.

8.47 pm

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): I very much enjoyed my two years on the Modernisation Committee. Our discussions were largely constructive and good humoured, and we were agreeably chaired by the Leader of the House. To say that I led for the Opposition would be to overstate the case, as my hon. Friends on the Committee were impossible to lead, but I am grateful to them for their support in my minority report.

I say to the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) that the Conservatives on that Committee during the past three and a half years accepted quite a lot in the interests of unanimity and making progress, and we accepted recommendations that did not always find favour with our right hon. and hon. Friends. I regret that on this occasion, for the first time in the Committee's life, we were not able to produce an agreed report.

The report is wrong for three reasons. First, set in the context of the broader debate about the powers of the House versus the powers of the Executive, the report takes a decisive step in the wrong direction by giving more powers to the Executive. Secondly, in seeking to tackle late-night sittings—no one will be happier than I to see them go—the report ignores the real problem behind the congestion in the legislative programme. Thirdly, the proposal to defer votes is more likely to enhance cynicism than confidence in the political process.

Two debates are taking place this afternoon—one about modernisation and one about strengthening. I regard them as two circles which overlap in part. Where they overlap, all-party agreement can be obtained on measures which modernise and strengthen. Some of the recommendations already implemented fall into that shaded area—voluntary programming of Bills rather than guillotines, shorter speeches so that more hon. Members are called, and the carry-over of Bills from one Session to the next by agreement. All that was done by agreement, as has been the tradition when changing the rules.

Then there is a slightly separate agenda for strengthening, which is outside the modernisation circle. The report of the Liaison Committee, "Tilting the Balance", much of the Norton commission report which we debated before the recess, the work of the Hansard Society on accountability to be published next spring—those are all essentially about strengthening, rather than modernising.

Then there is the modernisation agenda, which is not primarily about strengthening, but simply bringing us up to date, much of which I agree with—the ability to buy fax paper and batteries as well as whisky and cigarettes in the Palace of Westminster, and finding a computer on my desk as well as a telephone. That is all part of the modernisation debate.

What we have today however is a proposal that, in the name of modernisation, actually weakens Parliament. The Opposition do not have many weapons, and the report invites us to put some of them beyond use, while the Government sit on their substantial arsenal.

The first proposal contains no recognition that the Government have a role to play in enabling more user-friendly hours by drafting their legislation better and by exercising some self-restraint in the legislative programme. Despite all the evidence in pages 31 to 36, the verdict is that the Opposition are guilty, not the Government. The report then extends to all Bills a procedure that has not been properly tested and which has a number of defects. For example, if the Opposition parties agree a programme motion in good faith with the Government to focus debate on certain key issues, it is possible for Members to frustrate that intention by making longer contributions than they would if the Bill was not guillotined, or to focus on earlier groups of amendments so that later ones are not reached. As the report makes clear, that has already happened in the Northern Ireland legislation.

The proposed consultation in the report takes place only after, not before, the Queen's Speech is published. By that time, we may already have another over-programmed Session. The meaningful dialogue that the Government want may simply be impossible because the Opposition cannot validate an unacceptable timetable dictated by an over-ambitious legislative programme.

At the moment, we spend quite a lot of time after 10 o'clock dealing with Report and Third Reading. Where will the time come from if all discussion stops at 10? There are no answers in the report to that. The notion that once we pass these resolutions the Government will produce a series of perfectly drafted Bills is simply for the birds.

What made it impossible for me and my colleagues to go along with this section of the report was simply that the Government brought nothing to the negotiating table, as I made clear during our lengthy discussions. There is to be no discipline on the Government, just on the rest of us. For that reason, the section is unbalanced, inequitable and indefensible.

On the second proposal, I simply say that it takes the spontaneity out of the Chamber and will be widely seen as a cynical move, divorcing decision from discussion and promoting an even more mechanistic approach to decision making. On a practical note, I am happy to say that it will be a nightmare for the Government Whips to monitor. They will have to hang around the Lobbies like tipsters at a point-to-point, offering Members a marked card so that they can correctly place their bets.

In retrospect, it may have been inevitable that something like this should come out of the Modernisation Committee as currently configured. The Chairman of the Modernisation Committee is the Leader of the House, whose task as a member of the Cabinet is to deliver the Queen's Speech—she is its midwife. She winds up the debate on the Loyal Address and, every Thursday, she announces the business, which is inevitably dominated by the political imperative of getting the Bills through.

Is it right to entrust to a Committee under the chairmanship of the Leader of the House the responsibility for changing our rules? Has not the House traditionally done that? Does not the concept of a Select Committee chaired by a Cabinet Minister sit uneasily with the rationale of establishing Select Committees: to strengthen the House's ability to hold the Government to account?

The proposals are flawed and unbalanced and they derive from a flawed process. In the next Parliament, whoever wins, the House must change that process so that it can engage the Government on more equal terms.

8.55 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham): I rise to support the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House presented and the amendment

[Ms Harriet Harman]

that my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) tabled. I agree with the points that my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) made. I shall argue the case for those changes—and more—not only to make the House of Commons more effective but to make Parliament more family friendly.

Parliament has always changed its hours; they are not set in tablets of stone. It is time to change again. When I became a Member of Parliament in 1982, there were 635 Members. I was one of only 22 women; one of the 3 per cent. of women in Parliament at that time. Some hon. Members have argued that, long ago, there was a golden age when the House was much better. However, I contend that the House was much worse 20 years ago. My argument is not based on convenience, although that is an issue. It is a democratic argument.

When I became a Member of Parliament, the House was unrepresentative of women in this country. Ninety-seven per cent. of Members were men. That meant row after row of grey suits, and men talking to and sometimes shouting at other men. Women outside the House felt that Parliament had nothing to do with their lives, and they were right. I am proud that there are now more than 100 women Members, and that questions are asked about issues such as child care and balancing work and home. Such questions would have been impossible 20 years ago, but they are now mainstream. In scrutinising legislation, women raise points that were never made in a House that was almost all male.

Most women who become Members of Parliament have family responsibilities. They are mothers of young children and they are daughters of elderly parents. Being women, they often shoulder the lion's share of their family responsibilities. The fact that it is difficult for them to debate round the clock does not make them bad representatives. Far from it. It makes them essential to represent and demand change for all the women in this country whose lives are also a juggling act.

I am unimpressed by the argument, "You knew what the rules of the House were when you came here." My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) said that we are trying to change the terms and conditions on which we entered the House. To that, I say "Good." Many of us entered Parliament not to keep things as they are but to change them, to respect our traditions and our heritage but not to let them ossify.

Some who argue against change say that we should choose between Parliament and a family. That argument is objectionable. What sort of people would be Members of Parliament if a condition of entry was either not having a family or having one but not caring about it? What credibility would Parliament have on family issues if hon. Members dumped their concerns for their families at the door of the House? People do not want their representatives to be martyrs; as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge said, they want them to be human, like them.

There is no shame in arguing that Parliament should be family friendly. If we have mothers in the mother of Parliaments, Parliament must change to take that into account.

Some argue that we are simply trying to make life easy for ourselves and that we want to cut the hours. I do not want to cut the hours. I want to move them much further forward. We should start earlier as well as finish earlier—we should start at nine and finish at five—but I agree that London can be an expensive and sometimes a lonely place for people who are away from their home and families when they are in their constituencies. It is right that some of the facilities, such as the Library, meeting rooms and refreshment areas, could be kept open in the evening.

Some Members have argued that late hours equal effective opposition and that time is an effective weapon in the hands of an Opposition. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley, I have many years of experience in opposition. Most of my parliamentary life has been in opposition, as is the case with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush. Unlike my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who introduced the proposals, I have found myself doing my fair share of going through the night. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush: time is not an effective weapon. It is a macho game; it changes nothing.

Mr. Casale: We have discussed the matter on a number of occasions. My hon. Friend will know that I once thought that late-night sittings were a way to grind down the Executive. I now realise that I was wrong. They grind us down as legislators and prevent us from effectively discharging our parliamentary and constituency duties, especially if we have family responsibilities. Most important, they grind down the esteem of this place in the minds and eyes of the people who sent us here in the first place.

Ms Harman: I agree with all my hon. Friend's points, but the final point he makes is absolutely right. I give an example. When I was in the shadow health team and the current Foreign Secretary was shadow Secretary of State for Health—I was his deputy—we took the House through the night, opposing the opting out of NHS hospitals into NHS trusts. It was entirely pointless. Not one single hospital remained non-opted out as a result. However, when I was shadow Chief Secretary, the Opposition won the vote to stop value added tax on gas and electricity going from 8 to 17.5 per cent. We did that not by staying up all night, but by comprehensively winning the argument in the House and in the country. It is that on which successful opposition depends.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Perhaps I can give the hon. Lady a more up-to-date example. When she was Secretary of State for Social Security and there was a huge row on the Labour Benches about cuts to lone parent benefit, by deferring the vote for three or four days, would the rebellion have been greater or smaller?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman is trying to imply that timing of votes or delay make a difference to the outcome and that that, of itself, is a weapon. I do not believe that anything that has happened since we have been in government has been changed by the tactics of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) or anyone else.

Some people have argued that we want to weaken the Opposition. That is absolutely not my case. It is important that we have strong, effective and credible opposition.

We all know that over-powerful Governments make mistakes—we need look only at rail privatisation and the poll tax. We need to find ways of making parliamentary scrutiny of legislation more effective.

That is one of the reasons why, when I was Secretary of State for Social Security and we embarked on the complex issue of pension sharing on divorce, we experimented by establishing pre-legislative scrutiny under the leadership of the Select Committee on Social Security—an all-party Committee, chaired by a member of the Opposition party. There are things that we can do to improve scrutiny. Staying up all night and using time as a weapon is not one of them.

Some have said that those of us who argue for family-friendly hours do not recognise that the situation is different for Members whose constituencies are outside London. I have always argued that we should start no earlier than we do now on Mondays, so that Members outside London have time to travel to Westminster. I have also always argued that we should start earlier and finish earlier on Thursdays, so that Members have a chance not only to do the work described by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley on Fridays, but to attend evening engagements in their constituencies on Thursdays. It is not acceptable for Members to have to be here all week, and then spend all their weekend on constituency business. That makes them exiles from their families. Again, I have always argued that it is wrong for the House to rise at the end of July and not return until mid-October, thereby ensuring that Scottish Members are in London when their children are on holiday and in Scotland when their children are back at school.

Much of what has been said today reflects a desire to return to some bygone golden era of an effective Parliament. Of course we should strive to enhance the authority, legitimacy and credibility of Parliament—otherwise Governments will always give in to the temptation to go over Parliament's head—but we shall not achieve that by moaning about others.

The Opposition are, I think, going through a transitional period. If there is a problem, it is not the fault of the "Today" programme, or even the fault of Ministers. Looking around for others to blame for a perceived loss of our own power is just a way of avoiding the challenge to us to change ourselves—and we have the power to make that change. It is for us to build a new credibility and authority for Parliament, enabling it to scrutinise legislation effectively and hold the Government to account. I believe we can best do that by moving forward—not looking back or clinging to the past, but creating a modern, efficient, daytime Chamber, and abandoning the old night-time ways of the gentlemen's club.

9.7 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I will be brief, because I know that others wish to speak.

These measures have been sold to us today on the grounds that they are new, that they are modern, and that they are all about modernising and reforming Parliament. I think that they are nothing of the kind. These measures are not being introduced for the convenience of Parliament, they will not make Parliament more accountable, and they are certainly not for the convenience of the Opposition.

The fact of the matter is that these measures will act for the convenience of the Government and Ministers, so that they can get their legislation through. They will act for the convenience of Ministers who will not have to spend as much time "tied up"—as their private offices would put it—in the House of Commons. I suspect that, above all, they are being introduced—as the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has just demonstrated—for the convenience of Government Members who, having spent every available hour trying to get elected to Westminster, evidently do not like the hours that operate at Westminster during the months when Parliament is actually sitting. The right hon. Lady did not quite make that point.

A number of conversions seem to have taken place. The most dramatic confession was the one that we heard a few moments ago, but let me remind the House that it was all very different when Labour was in opposition. The first Bill that I introduced—I was Minister of Transport at the time—was the one that became the Transport Act 1980. It was a manifesto measure, which denationalised the National Freight Corporation and reformed and abolished many traffic commissioner rules. Although it was, as I say, a manifesto measure, the then Opposition kept us in Committee for 110 hours, and there were 123 Divisions. At no stage did we introduce a guillotine.

The extraordinary backwoodsmen of the Opposition who took us through the night were Albert Booth, who was the chief spokesman, and his chief lieutenants, the present Deputy Prime Minister and the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the former Health Secretary and an unsuccessful candidate for the post of London Mayor. They opposed the measure, wanted to subject it to line-by-line scrutiny and knew that by taking us on night and day they might find a chink in it. I do not object to that, as that is the purpose of opposition. If the then Opposition did not find the chink or defect, they could delay the Government's legislative programme, which is entirely legitimate.

The House must recognise that it is legitimate for the Opposition to do that. Ministers now talk about smoothing the progress of legislation, but we are not civil servants, and that is not our function. We are certainly not trying to run a business, although the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) tried to suggest that we were. We are Members of Parliament, and one of the jobs of Opposition Members is to oppose—which appears to come as a shock to certain Government Members, who seem to believe that a big majority gives them absolute power. That position was well understood by the Government when they were in opposition, in which role some of them were very good, including the late Bob Cryer, who was an excellent exponent of that art.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is right to say that delaying the Government's legislative programme is a legitimate weapon of opposition. It is not the only weapon, but it is an important one. The Leader of the House says that Members of Parliament should decide what they want to focus on in debates in the House of Commons. However, the argument goes the other way, and Governments need

[Sir Norman Fowler]

to focus on deciding which legislation they will introduce, which legislation they can get through the House and which legislation they can pass through Parliament.

Mr. Soley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall not, as I have very little time.

Above all, the Government should not try to overload the system. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) and anyone who has had any experience of government will know that at one end of Westminster are civil servants who have draft Bills in the bottom drawers of their desks and are waiting for a gullible Minister to come along and introduce those Bills. We all know that that happens, whether the Government are Labour or Conservative. At the other end of Westminster are politicians who are trying to introduce legislation that will be highly controversial with the public, but perhaps not so controversial with their party, or a faction of it.

It is a thoroughly good thing that the Opposition make the controllers of the legislative machine pause and introduce Bills that are necessary and a matter of priority. I therefore defend the Opposition's role in delaying legislation. We should be concerned, not about Parliament's hours or voting procedures, but about its status and position. I do not accept the Government's arguments on that, because above all, we should be concerned that Parliament is being marginalised by the Executive, and the Government are riding roughshod over the legitimate fears of the House. When I was shadow Home Secretary, I took part in debate after debate on the closed list voting system for the European elections. There was hardly a friend of the closed list on either side of the House, and hardly anyone, apart from the Home Secretary, spoke in favour of it. However, the legislation went through with massive majorities.

We should be concerned about such matters, and should be fundamentally anxious that so much political debate now takes place not in Parliament, but in the studios of John Humphrys and the brothers Dimbleby. If we had any sense, we would be debating such issues.

Although I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush—he made a good re-election speech, and I wish him well in his task—the voting method that we are introducing is best characterised as a comic opera, and it is being introduced simply to prevent—perish the thought—Members of Parliament from staying up past 10 o'clock at night.

We are also going to separate the debate from the Division. I think that that would be wrong. It is absurd to attempt to draw an analogy between that and the ballot for private Members' Bills.

Worse, we are going to introduce a system that fails even by its own standards. The system will produce not better, but worse legislation. It will also not reduce, but increase the volume of badly drafted legislation, for it will make it easier for the Government to pass their legislative programme by reducing scrutiny and making the Opposition's job more difficult. The only ones who will really rejoice are the Ministers who have to pass the legislation and the civil servants who have to prepare it.

As drafted and presented to the House, the proposals represent one more victory for the Executive over Parliament. The first speech that I made in the 1997 Parliament, before going into the shadow Cabinet, was on a guillotine motion. I said then that the Government were giving the impression by their actions that they were thinking:

> We are the masters now.—[*Official Report*, 3 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 203.]

In the past three years, that impression has hardened and hardened. They are a Government who not only hate being held to account, but clearly resent the whole process. "Who are these MPs?" they seem to ask. "We have our majority. We will rule. Take it or leave it." The Leader of the House came very close to saying that in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning).

Ministers seem to believe that arrogant government is strong government. It is not. If there is one silver lining to this debate, it is that that quality of arrogance will finally bring down this Government.

9.17 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I am somewhat disappointed that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) should have made such a speech, as I remember him saying at one time that he sought to spend more time with his family.

I support the proposals, and I certainly support the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell). I can also tell the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) that the Leader of the House certainly speaks for me. This is not a matter of the Government imposing something on their own Back Benchers or on anyone else, but a case of a Leader of this place listening to Back Benchers. That is what we have in modernisation, and that is what I have campaigned for in the 13 years for which I have been a Member. Although I wholeheartedly support the proposals, they are really very modest indeed.

Much has been made today of the issue of scrutiny. However, as many of my hon. Friends have pointed out very clearly, based both on our own general observations and on our observations of Conservative Members, spending time debating is in no way equivalent to being effective in scrutiny. Many people try to speak in debates—this debate will be no different from all other debates in that respect—but, because of the length of some of the speeches, are unable to do so. That diminishes scrutiny. The arrogance of a few Opposition Members, from whom we have heard today, holds the House hostage and prevents the most effective deliberation. The whole House has to deal with their arrogance. The issue is not one of scrutiny.

Mr. Redwood: Does the hon. Lady realise that there are many Opposition Members who, when they were Ministers, thought that time was a very useful weapon for the Opposition and that, at times, it was very well used? The reason why it works is that if one delays the Government and makes them think again and argue their case, they cannot rush through so much bodged legislation. It is important that the then Opposition did it to us, and it is equally important that we should do it to them.

Joan Ruddock: The right hon. Gentleman is clearly wasting his time, and has not been listening to the debate.

The examples given by Labour Members about the Government in which he served—such as rail privatisation and the poll tax—demonstrate that his point about the Opposition needing time is complete nonsense. Nothing is changed by using what he and others have described as their most potent weapon. The real scrutiny that should—and does, by and large—take place in the House happens in Standing Committees, during Question Time, when there are statements in the House, and, indeed, in Select Committees. We should look at how we can enhance the role of those procedures and the opportunities that they present. How many times have I attended Question Time and been unable to get in? How many times have I listened to a statement and been unable to get in? Those are the real frustrations of Back Benchers. We want the opportunity to express our views. We certainly do not want to sit here into the early hours of the morning listening to long speeches, primarily by Conservative Members.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joan Ruddock: No. This is a Back Benchers' debate. Proper scrutiny depends not on the length of speeches, but on their intellectual rigour. That intellectual rigour is often lacking, because of very wordy contributions and time-wasting tactics that are frequently employed by the Opposition.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who spoke immediately before my maiden speech just over a year ago, which I well remember. One reason that my constituency sent me here is that they wished me to be their man at Westminster, not Westminster's man in Eddisbury. According to my constituents, the value of debate is that it draws on the expertise of many who may not have a formal role in discussing the legislation concerned. That might take longer, so the debate continues into the night. My constituents also expect our debates to be illuminating and educative as well as combative. I hope that the hon. Lady takes that into account.

Joan Ruddock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I wonder just how edifying his constituents found the debates that have taken place after midnight. I wonder how many of them actually read those debates or listen to them. Indeed, I wonder whether they have heard his speeches in the early hours of the morning. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman takes a poll of his constituents and finds out how many of them follow our deliberations in the House. Perhaps he should consult them before forming a view. I have consulted my constituents, and I know that they do not follow the procedures of the House. They do not identify with the people here and the nonsense that they feel is talked.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) said that the principles of democracy would be buried tonight.

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I am sure that a lot of people out there could not give a monkey's about what we do late at night. I have a great deal of sympathy for family friendly policies, but I do not want to jeopardise the traditions of parliamentary scrutiny. I should like changes that will improve scrutiny, and be more family friendly. My hon. Friend has to decide what comes first if there is a conflict. Does she believe that any of tonight's proposals are conflicting? Some of us do.

Joan Ruddock: Let me answer that question directly. I do not have the slightest doubt that programming legislation must come first. If we programme legislation, we can make many of the changes that he and I seek, but without programming we cannot make sense of our procedures. People cannot follow our procedures because they are so cumbersome and impossible to understand. Indeed, few people will have understood tonight's debate.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Joan Ruddock: No. I must make progress as others are waiting to speak.

What is the principle of democracy that the hon. Member for Sevenoaks suggested would be buried tonight? I suggest that the only principle at stake here is the principle that one, two or three people can hold the House to ransom. That is the reality of what happens here.

Since April, there have been 78 sittings days. On a quarter of those days, the House sat after midnight. During July, our finishing times included 12.10 am, 1.27 am, 3.4 am, 1.44 am, 3.26 am, and 3.50 am. What do people outside the House think about those who sit up until those hours talking and talking to themselves when no one is listening? That is not scrutiny. It is simple arrogance on the part of those who can hold us here. *Hansard* records that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) rose to his feet more than 400 times during that period. There is an unsurprising correlation between his getting to his feet and the hour until which the House was detained.

Many of us want to go much further than the proposals before us tonight. Our experience is that the House does not carry out the most effective possible scrutiny at present. Our constituents do not enjoy following the House because they cannot understand what is going on. Having more time means more time for time wasting. There is much scope for improvement, and our experience is that there is no satisfactory way in which to contribute.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) complained about long holidays. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) asked why we did not vote in the mornings. Many of us would support a different parliamentary year. Many of us would support returning much sooner. Many of us would support a different daily schedule, with an earlier start. Most of us would support the strictest time limits on speeches, from Front and Back Benches alike.

We do not want fewer hours. All of us are hard workers who came here prepared to do our best for our constituents. We want more efficiency and more effectiveness. Programming legislation will offer that. We shall know much more clearly what we are doing and when. It will provide greater focus, enabling us to move modernisation forward.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Strict time limits on speeches?

Joan Ruddock: I have been interrupted many times and have taken 10 minutes. I propose to stop now.

[Joan Ruddock]

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield talked of the status of Parliament. We can improve that status if we accept the motions and proceed further with modernisation to bring Parliament into the 21st century.

9.28 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I agree with some of the final words spoken by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), who quoted the excellent speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) on the status of Parliament. I have become profoundly sad as I have listened to speeches from those on the Labour Benches. Labour Members are the dupes of the Executive. They have been conned into believing that what is being proposed will enhance their status and the effectiveness of the House of Commons, but it will have quite the opposite effect.

I am not one of those who enjoys late nights. I do not believe that our hours are immutable. We have changed the hours of Parliament many times over the centuries. I am not in favour of long speeches about very little, but I profoundly believe that this place has a prime duty to hold the Executive to account, no matter from which party that Executive come.

I was once described as a thorn in the side of the Thatcher Administration.

Mr. Redwood: You were, indeed.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My right hon. Friend confirms that I was indeed. In being so, I believed that I was fulfilling my prime role as a Back Bencher. On occasions, I could not have done so without resorting to the weapon of time.

When the measure to abolish the Greater London council was being put through by the Thatcher Government, I opposed it because I did not believe that London should be deprived of a strategic authority. I said that we would be landed with something worse in due course and, by Jove, I have been proved right. At that time, I said that we should not take powers to ourselves that we would not wish others to have. Labour Members should ponder on that. They are taking powers to themselves through these measures that they will find extremely uncomfortable when they sit on the Opposition Benches—if a Conservative Government were misguided enough to renew this sort of Sessional Orders.

Programming is one thing and I am not against it. *[Interruption.]* I am not against it in all circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) makes some good points in his admirable pamphlet on the matter and I can associate myself with much of what he says. In an intervention, I said that if there is to be programming, there also has to be rationing of legislation. The more legislation we have, the less helpful programming is to anyone other than the Executive.

The Modernisation Committee, chaired by a totally honourable Chairman—the Leader of the House—has become the creature of the Government. It has abandoned the principle of consensus in its report. All the other issues that it has put before the House have been based on consensus. I was one of the first members of the Committee and I was involved in some of those proposals—I was happy to be so. When I sat on the Conservative Front Bench and supported, first, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and then my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), I was happy to support a number of the Committee's proposals. The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, knows that to be true.

However, it was a parliamentary tragedy when the principle of consensus was abandoned to get this proposal before the House before the end of this Session. The sort of programming that we are being offered tonight will give power to one group of people—the Executive.

I have been in the House for 30 years. In that time, the balance has moved inexorably away from Parliament—the legislature—towards the Executive. In the past three years, that process has been accelerated and has diminished the House, making it less effective. More than anything else, that has been responsible for reducing the esteem in which the House is held by constituents of the hon. Member for Deptford, and constituents of mine and of many other hon. Members.

The proposal is inimical to true parliamentary sovereignty, in which I believe. It will concentrate power over legislation entirely in the hands of the Executive. The frank exchanges that took place this afternoon between my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and the Leader of the House demonstrated that. The right hon. Lady said in effect, "We'll discuss matters with the Opposition if they want to talk about it. If not, we'll do it just the same." That was a revealing exchange.

I do not want to make a long speech—I believe in short speeches—but I must say a few words about the ridiculous order on deferred voting. If the Modernisation Committee had proposed that we could vote in the proper way at 9 am the next morning on certain matters debated late at night, I would have considered that a sensible way forward.

This football coupon-type voting on a Wednesday is inimical to our freedom as Back Benchers. The intervening period allows enormous opportunity for the Whips, on both sides of the House, to influence the vote. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Deptford may laugh. She has not been here all that long—she may think she has, but she has not. It is an arrogant laugh. She believes that the proposal she is supporting will somehow make Parliament more family friendly, and, in the process, make it more effective. It will do neither. Whether the hon. Lady likes it or not, she has become a pawn in the hands of the Leader of the House. She has succumbed to the blandishments of the Government and is writing off her powers as a Back Bencher in the process.

Joan Ruddock *rose—*

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate) *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack: Both hon. Ladies are writing off those powers.

Ms Jackson: The hon. Gentleman has argued for a change—a shortened legislative programme—but he is

not alone among his Opposition colleagues in arguing that an Opposition's only weapon is time and that, whatever the length of the legislative programme, the first requirement of an Opposition is to use that weapon of time to attempt to delay Government legislation. What has clearly emerged from the arguments made by Conservative Members this evening is that they are actually concerned not with power—either in government or in opposition—but with their inability to exercise their power as an Opposition with any responsibility at all.

All this smoke and mirrors on voting is absurd. Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that he has never seen other Members dashing breathless for a Division, asking the Whips which Lobby they should be—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I thought that the hon. Lady had already made a speech.

Ms Jackson: It was a long time ago, Mr. Speaker.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I was about to ask the hon. Lady if she would give way, Mr. Speaker. I must respond to the point that she made, but I shall probably not have time to give way to the hon. Member for Deptford.

Joan Ruddock: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: No, I am trying to respond to the inordinately long intervention made by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson). It showed that the hon. Lady has completely misunderstood what has been said in the debate. Neither I nor any of my hon. Friends have argued that time is the only weapon, nor that time is the most important factor under discussion. It is a weapon that can and should be used legitimately—albeit sparingly—both by Opposition and Government Back Benchers. I make no apology for the fact that I have used it in government and in opposition.

My fundamental criticism of the measures is that they erode the general powers of the legislature vis-a-vis the Executive. Like other Members, I have often quoted Dunning's 1780 motion:

> The influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.

The power of the Executive has increased inordinately, especially during the past three years; it is increasing and it ought to be diminished.

The effect of the measures will be to increase the stranglehold of the Executive at the expense of the rest of the Members of the House. It is for that reason that I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to vote against the motions.

9.37 pm

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): This debate offers me my first opportunity to welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker.

I speak in favour of the programming of Bills and in favour of the motions introduced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I was especially interested in the points made by the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), in a fairly waspish speech. She even went so far as to imply that the Conservatives had nothing to do with the scuppering of previous changes introduced by the Labour Government in 1966. She referred to the Crossman diaries.

During the 35 years in which the Conservatives held power since the second world war, they made only two constitutional changes of any significance. They introduced the modern form of Select Committees, on which they should be congratulated, and they signed the Maastricht treaty. Apart from that, they have opposed almost every proposal for change. Such opposition is exactly what we have heard tonight from every Conservative Member in the Chamber. They oppose a fairly modest scheme.

My own views reflect some of the points made by my colleagues, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock). That will come as no surprise to hon. Members, but we have to start somewhere.

The Conservatives have opposed everything. It seems from the speeches we have heard tonight that Conservative Members have not adjusted to opposition.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Doran: I do not think that I should, because the Front-Bench spokesmen wish to speak. I shall have to ditch most of what I intended to say.

I want to say something about the changes that I have seen in this place since I became a Member in 1987. There has been a variety of substantial changes. We have seen the first woman Speaker; she was also the first working-class Speaker. You, Mr. Speaker, are the first Catholic Speaker since the reformation, and the first not to use the wig. We do not spy "strangers" any more, and we have got rid of the blessed hat, which is great progress. However, none of those changes is of real substance because the major problem is one of credibility. One of the main contributory factors in our lack of credibility is the ridiculous way in which we work.

I have heard Labour and Opposition Members talk about how they behaved in opposition. When I first entered the House in 1987, I was no different from any of my colleagues in opposition. I believed that the best way to oppose the then Government was to waste time by speaking. I was a member of many Committees, and I could bore for Britain. I did not quite reach the dizzy heights of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) with four hours and 10 minutes, but I operated in exactly the same way. I accepted it as the norm until I became a member of the energy Opposition Front-Bench team.

On the Bill to privatise the electricity industry, I saw constructive opposition for the first time. We decided to prepare our timetable and work to it. We ran the Government ragged. We made sure that they could not keep up with the amendments that we had tabled. We made sure that every important issue that we wanted to have debated was debated.

We have seen nothing from this Conservative Opposition. Everything is done with the sledgehammer of talking us through the night. *[Interruption.]* I am being urged to complete my speech. Before I finish, I want to include a personal anecdote about the impact of our hours. They have had a serious effect on the way we all function. They have a serious effect on many lives.

[Mr. Doran]

I asked the Library today to dig out the figures for the number of Members of the House who have died. Since 1989, 48 Members have died. We have had to cope recently with the death of Donald Dewar. A lot of that death toll is to do with the stress and pressures arising from the occupation that we have all chosen to follow. There are many other names; I will not go through the list. There have been five deaths a year. Only three were not the result of natural causes. That is a serious statement to which we should all have regard.

The sittings of the House may not start until 2.30 pm, but the rest of the world starts work at least five and a half hours earlier. If I am to meet the people whom I need to meet to do my job properly, I have to conform to their working hours. Then I have to be here in the House on most business days until 10.15 pm or later and sometimes through the night, as we have heard from previous speakers.

The culture that we have allowed to develop in the House is unforgiving. We have an ethos which is not very different from the mediaeval joust. For some of us, a joust would be just as brutal and devastating in its consequences. It is time that we changed our working practices to meet the needs of the 21st century and the much increased demands on Members of the House. Victorian rules met Victorian needs. In the 21st century, we need to introduce rules and hours that reflect the demands made of Members today.

Mr. Pearson: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In the programming of Bills motion, paragraph (2)(b) of order B and paragraph (3)(b) of order C give you the power to appoint up to eight members of the Programming Committee and seven members of the Programming Sub-Committees. Will you appoint members according to the current balance of political parties, or will you ensure that no party has an overall majority and the Chairman of Ways and Means has a casting vote?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait until the House agrees the orders.

9.44 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Contrary to the opinion of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), the Minister and I decided to confine our remarks to 10 minutes each, but the programming of this debate seems to have gone astray, which is perhaps inauspicious for future agreements.

This has been a fascinating debate, but a depressing one. It is clear why the Modernisation Committee was not able to reach agreement. There is a massive philosophical difference between the approach taken by Conservative Members and that taken by Labour Members.

My right hon. Friends the Members for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) all made powerful speeches about respecting the traditions of the House and about the ability of the Opposition to oppose. The impression conveyed by the speeches of Labour Members was that they were matters to which they accorded very little account. Indeed, many of them gave the impression that they were converts, had had a road to Damascus experience and had changed their habits now that they suddenly were Government and not Opposition Back Benchers.

The issue is important, because we are discussing the destruction of convention. *[Interruption.]* I hear the word "Good", but the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) made the point that the House established its reputation in the 19th century as an independent Chamber because of its ability to debate. Ultimately, that was because of the then Governments' willingness to allow debates to take place. There was little difference between then and now in that Members of Parliament made perorations late at night. Many Members then were similar to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and saw themselves as performing a role, and they were respected by the Government for that. Members took the view that, if they did not carry out that role, proper parliamentary government was not possible and that if parliamentary government was not respected, the decisions taken in the House would not be respected by those outside who were adversely affected by them.

I have listened to Labour Members and they seem to suggest that if one simply has a vote and a majority, one can do whatever one likes. The consequences of that have been well reflected in the past few weeks when people driving lorries have parked them and protested outside Parliament because this place has ceased to command respect as it is not where difficult issues can be discussed. That is not more important but it is as important as our ability to scrutinise legislation properly. The measure tends against our ability to scrutinise properly and it is clearly against our ability to be regarded as a place where difficult issues can be aired and people with different points of view can be respected.

I shall try to be brief to give the Minister time to respond, but I come now to the issue of timetabling. Conservative Members are perfectly prepared to consider the possibility of trying to arrange for timetabling. Indeed, the minority report that was produced in the Modernisation Committee recommended that we should try to arrange timetabling as much as possible. However, what is the point of the House surrendering something that Back-Bench Members can use to have an impact in holding the Government to account when the Government have not made a single concession towards giving up power to allow timetabling to take place?

We can have timetabling but, under these measures, if the Government decide that they want to alter a timetabling motion and want to behave in the way they did on the passage of the legislation—bad legislation, badly passed—after the Omagh bombing, they can do whatever they like. The Government have made no concessions either to a Speaker's Conference or to any other mechanism that would give the House an independent voice on how timetabling could take place.

We remain completely at the Government's mercy, and, having listened to the contributions from many Labour Members, it is clear that we will not find among them the independent voices that alone will prevent the Government from abusing their powers in that respect. That is the central reason why the House should reject the motion on timetabling. It is not as though there is no need for sensible timetabling or for a review of the hours that the House might sit—although there is no mention of that in the report.

The hon. Member for Deptford said that she wanted Back Benchers to have more opportunities to participate in questions to Ministers, but nothing in the report will provide that. When will time be made available if the Government do not volunteer to review the timetable? When, in late-night business, which I shall address in more detail in a moment, will there be opportunities to hold the Government to account?

The timetable motion is a device by which Members surrender power to the Government. It gives the Government an extra ratchet that will allow them to say in future that the convention that Members are given time to discuss business went out long ago. Far from our benefiting from such motions, we will find that the Government will use their existing powers to take more time for discussion away from us whenever they want to.

On deferred votes, I think that we are moving into the land of fantasy. Late at night we consider, for the most part, secondary legislation. As a member of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, I know that if ever anything is poorly considered in the House, it is secondary legislation. Late at night is the one time that we have for proper debate of such legislation, which sometimes deals with highly contentious issues. I am thinking of a number of Northern Ireland orders, on which there may have been consensus between Government Members and the official Opposition, but Members from Northern Ireland held very different views.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Where are they?

Mr. Grieve: Well, precisely. Attendance will be much more difficult for Northern Ireland Members, some of whom have other duties in the Northern Ireland Assembly, if they have to come to this House for debates and then return on another day to vote.

My hon. Friends have made the valid point that separating the process of decision making from the voting process, especially for debates of only one and a half hours, will degrade the status of the House. It will remove the chance that one's vote could be influenced when matters are fresh in one's mind, and it will prevent the Chamber from being a focus for any informed or sensible debate in which people can be influenced by what is said.

One thing that I have learned since I came to the House is that if one bothers to spend six hours on the Benches listening to a debate, one learns an enormous amount, usually from one's opponents. The central and most critical point about the parliamentary process is that it makes what is otherwise unpalatable acceptable by the process of debate. That is being attacked by the motions, not because modernising and improving our procedures is not good, but because we are approaching the issues from completely the wrong angle.

9.53 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): This is, of course, a House matter, and colleagues will decide individually how we should proceed. During this important debate it has become clear that there is no unanimity of view; indeed, my hon. Friends have made it clear that they will vote differently. I welcome that—it is healthy.

In 1902, Balfour remarked that he had never been able to understand

> why of all His Majesty's subjects a Member of Parliament should be the one who never knows when he is to dine or when he is to sleep.

Important issues are raised in debates: Members discuss whether they should press schedule 1 and whether, during the debate, they have considered the matter enough; they ask whether the candlestick makers and the bell makers have been consulted. I see that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is listening, and those are the tactics that he employs on occasion. I do not blame him for that—it is called throwing grit into the machine. The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) will recognise that phrase because it comes from his pamphlet. There is a great deal of activity in such debates, but no achievement. All that activity and all the time expended does not prevent the Government from dealing with our business; we can impose a guillotine to do that. As has been pointed out, Governments of all colours do just that. All that time-wasting does is to reduce us to the state of the Member who, in 1902 was reported as being

> so unoccupied that he was knitting a pair of stockings in the smoking-room.—[*Official Report*, 20 February 1902; Vol. 103, c. 663.]

Our proposals in response to the Modernisation Committee report are designed to ensure that Members will know when they are to sleep, but that that should not be at the expense of proper examination of legislation or proper debate of motions.

The proposals are not new. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made clear at the outset, they have a long parliamentary history. In 1985, the Procedure Committee recommended that Bills be programmed in Standing Committee, and even at later stages. Jopling confirmed that position in 1992. At the beginning of this Parliament, the Modernisation Committee recommended programming, and most recently, both the Hansard Society and the Norton commission have suggested it.

Programming provides something for everyone: the Government know when they will get their business through, should the House agree it; the Opposition have the power to determine the terms of debate and to choose what will be dealt with in prime time; and all of us get some certainty about our working hours. Being able to plan leads to better use of our time and greater efficiency of our work.

The amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst are designed totally to undermine the Modernisation Committee's proposals. The Government's motions allow a reasonable period for debate on the proposed timetable: three quarters of an hour for the main programme motion and half an hour for motions on the details proposed by the programming committee or sub-committee. It is true that the allocation is not as generous as that, in theory, for a guillotine, but unlike the guillotine, debate on the programme motion will not eat into time for debating the substantive business. Amendment (d) would reverse such a process: three hours would be spent debating the programme motion, and many of us would spend our time in the Smoking Room knitting our socks.

Strangely, given her very different views, amendment (g), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and a significant group

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

of colleagues, would also reduce the amount of time for debate. Half an hour would be lost from Second Reading. I take the view that debates on Second Reading have a high profile. All too often, colleagues who wish to speak on Second Reading are denied the opportunity through lack of time. Several of my hon. Friends have explained forcefully why they support the amendment. Indeed, the Modernisation Committee considered the issue very carefully. It has merit, but I think that the Committee reached the right conclusion in protecting the traditional length of debates on Second Reading.

I should say directly to my hon. Friends that the proposed Sessional Orders on which we are to vote shortly are indeed Sessional Orders. There will be an opportunity to review how they are used, and we shall see how hon. Members on both sides of the House use them. For my part, I hope to see a consensus and a positive use of our time. Just as the House is tonight reviewing its procedures, there will be the opportunity to do so again in 12 months' time.

I turn briefly to the issue of much controversy: deferred Divisions. It would be possible to hold deferred Divisions in the normal way on a Wednesday, as set out in amendment (d). Yes, the traditional way has its adherents, but it is important to remember the commitment that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made when she said that we have made it clear that the stand-alone issues to go to sittings on Wednesdays will be relatively uncontentious. I know that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) focused on that point.

If the House decides to implement the reforms, we shall have much more orderly processing of business. It will be appreciated that the Government will have to introduce legislation in better order and perhaps in less quantity. Once we are able to predict the amount of legislation, we might be able to look at longer-term issues. We will be able to look, for example, at the timetable for the recess dates and the parliamentary calendar. I cannot promise that all that will flow from the experiment, but I can promise that it will be impossible to do that if we do not proceed with these issues tonight. I therefore hope that my hon. Friends will support the Modernisation Committee's proposals.

Amendment proposed: After section A (10), at end insert—

'(11) On a day on which a programme motion is to be moved, the Speaker shall put the Question on a second reading of the bill to which that Motion applies not later then 9.30 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and 6.30 p.m. on Thursdays'.—*[Mrs. Anne Campbell.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 174, Noes 253.

Division No. 323] **[10 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Edwards, Huw
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Maxton, John
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rendel, David
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire

White, Brian
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons and Mr. Frank Doran.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Ms Ann
Collins, Tim
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Drew, David
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Golding, Mrs Llin
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Grocott, Bruce
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Laxton, Bob
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McAvoy, Thomas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Moss, Malcolm
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robathan, Andrew
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Roy, Frank
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soames, Nicholas
Spellar, John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 296, Noes 137.

Division No. 324] **[10.14 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe

Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That in the next Session of Parliament Orders A to I below shall have effect:

A. Programme Motions

(1) If, before Second Reading of a Bill, notice of a motion providing for—

(a) committal of the Bill, and

(b) an allocation of time to proceedings in Committee on the Bill,

is given by a Minister of the Crown, the motion may be made immediately after Second Reading and Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills) shall not apply to the Bill.

(2) Such a motion is to be called a programme motion.

(3) An order made by the House as the result of a programme motion is to be called a programme order.

(4) A motion to vary or supplement a programme order is also to be called a programme motion.

(5) The question on a programme motion to vary or supplement a programme order shall be put forthwith unless paragraph (7) applies.

(6) Otherwise, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on a programme motion shall be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of the proceedings.

(7) This paragraph applies to a programme motion to—

(a) reduce the amount of time allocated under a programme order for any proceedings on the Bill (whether or not it also increases the amount of time allocated for other proceedings on the Bill);

(b) bring forward the date on which the Bill is to be reported to the House in accordance with a programme order; or

(c) add to the proceedings to which a programme order applies.

(8) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted Business) applies to proceedings on a programme motion.

(9) Standing Order No. 83 (Allocation of Time) does not apply to a programme motion.

(10) If a programme order applies to a Bill, neither Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) nor Standing Order No. 120 (Business Sub-Committee) applies to the Bill.

B. Programming Committees

(1) This order applies if a Bill is subject to a programme order which makes provision for proceedings in Committee of the whole House or on consideration and Third Reading.

(2) There is to be a Committee for the Bill consisting of—

(a) the Chairman of Ways and Means (who is to be Chairman of the Committee); and

(b) not more than eight other Members, nominated by the Speaker.

(3) The Committee is to be called the Programming Committee.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Committee shall—

(a) consider the allocation of periods of time to such of the proceedings in Committee of the whole House (or on consideration and Third Reading) as it thinks appropriate to designate; and

(b) report any resolution which it makes to the House.

(6) On a motion being made in the House in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(7) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the Bill.

(8) Proceedings on a motion made under paragraph (6) may be entered upon and decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(9) Resolutions of the Programming Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the Speaker or Chairman to select the amendments, new clauses and new schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which designated proceedings on the Bill are to be taken.

C. Programming Sub-Committees

(1) If a Bill is subject to a programme order which commits it to a Standing Committee, the order stands referred to the Committee and shall be considered by a sub-committee of the Committee.

(2) The sub-committee is to be called the Programming Sub-Committee.

(3) The Programming Sub-Committee shall consist of—

(a) the Chairman or one of the Chairmen of the Committee (who is to be chairman of the sub-committee); and

(b) seven members of the Committee, nominated by the Speaker.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Sub-Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Sub-Committee shall report to the committee any resolution which it makes about—

(a) the number of sittings to be allotted to the consideration of the Bill in the Committee;

(b) the allocation of the proceedings to each sitting;

(c) the time at which any proceedings, if not previously concluded, are to be brought to a conclusion.

(6) On a motion being made in the Committee in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(7) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the Bill.

(8) Resolutions of the Programming Sub-Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the Chairman to select the amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings are to be taken.

D. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee or in Committee of the whole House

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings in Standing Committee or in Committee of the whole House to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Chairman shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others—

(a) any question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chairman for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Chairman shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the Bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

(5) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those provisions.

(6) On conclusion of the proceedings in a Committee, the Chairman shall report the Bill (or such of the Bill's provisions as were committed to it) to the House without putting any question.

E. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration or third reading

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration and Third Reading to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

(a) any question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Speaker for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Speaker shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the Bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

F. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any further amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has—

(a) agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments, or

(b) disposed of an amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

G. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on any further message from the Lords to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(3) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the question already proposed from the Chair.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords message.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords proposals.

H. Programme orders: Reasons Committee

(1) This order applies in relation to any Committee to be appointed to draw up Reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

(3) The Committee shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(4) Proceedings in the Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than half an hour after their commencement.

(5) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (4), the Chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided; and

(b) then put forthwith successively questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(6) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further question being put.

I. Programme orders: supplementary provisions

(1) The provisions of this order apply to proceedings in the House or in Committee of the whole House on a Bill which is subject to a programme order.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted Business) applies to the proceedings for any period after ten o'clock (or on Thursday, seven o'clock) allocated to them in accordance with the programme order.

(3) The proceedings may not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(4) If, on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day, a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency Debates) would, apart from this order, stand over to seven o'clock—

(a) that motion stands over until the conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to conclusion at or before that time; and

(b) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion after that time is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(5) If a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day is one to which a motion for the Adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day, the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion on that day is postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(6) No dilatory motion may be made in relation to the proceedings except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) If at any sitting the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under a programme order, no notice is required of a motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of the programme order.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 271, Noes 152.

Division No. 325] **[10.27 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*

Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McWilliam, John
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian

Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That in the next Session of Parliament the following Order shall have effect:

(1) Except as provided in paragraph (2), Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions) shall not apply if, after the time for the interruption of business, the opinion of the Speaker as to the decision on a question is challenged in respect of any question.

(2) Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on Divisions) shall apply (and this order shall not apply) to questions—

(a) on motions or amendments in the course of proceedings on bills or allocating time to or programming such proceedings;

(b) on motions which may be made without notice;

(c) on motions to be disposed of immediately following the disposal of amendments proposed thereto, and on such amendments;

(d) on motions made under—

(i) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted Business);

(ii) paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 51 (Ways and Means motions);

(iii) sub-paragraph (1)(a) of Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and Ways and Means resolutions in connection with Bills);

(iv) paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of Estimates); and

(v) paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.); and

(e) on motions made under paragraph 3 below or to which an order made under that paragraph applies.

(3) After the moment of interruption and the conclusion of proceedings under any other Standing Order which fall to be taken immediately after it, a Minister of the Crown may make a motion to the effect that this order shall not apply to questions on any specified motions; such motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, and the question thereon shall be put forthwith.

(4) If the opinion of the Speaker is challenged under paragraph (1) of this order, he shall defer the division until half-past Three o'clock on the next Wednesday on which the House shall sit.

(5) On any Wednesday to which a division has been deferred under paragraph (4) above—

(a) Members may record their votes on the question under arrangements made by the Speaker;

(b) votes may be recorded for one and a half hours after half-past Three o'clock, no account being taken of any period during which the House or committee proceeds to a division; and

(c) the Speaker, or the Chairman, shall announce the result of the deferred division as soon as may be after the expiry of the period mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) above.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mr. Charles Wardle and Mr. David Curry be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr. Simon Burns and Mr. David Faber be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

PETITION

Pension Increase

10.38 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased to present this petition to the House on behalf of more than 820 residents in Carshalton and Wallington. They consider the 75p increase to have been an insult. The petition states:

The petition of Carshalton and Wallington residents

Declares that pensioners deserve a substantial increase in the basic state pension.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security to increase the basic state pension.

And the petitioners remain, etc . . .

To lie upon the Table.

Flooding (Portsmouth)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

10.39 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): May I say how nice it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? I warmly welcome you to your new position.

Before I start this debate—which is essentially about events in central Southsea, on 15 September, when a considerable part of my constituency was flooded—I should like to say a big thank you to the police, the ambulance service, the Coastguard service, inshore rescue, Southern Electric staff and all those who gave such a good service on that day. I particularly thank Hampshire fire service. The help of its 20-odd units saved not only many properties in Portsmouth, but many people from experiencing an even greater tragedy than they experienced.

Many local people, despite being in great difficulties themselves, put themselves out to help others. I mention in particular Greg and Jane, the landlord and landlady of the Florence Arms, and Kieran Quade and Gareth Dupre. Both their properties were severely damaged, yet they spent a great deal of time helping others. Basement flats, low-lying bungalows and houses were all flooded, but the big difference between what happened in Portsmouth on 15 September and what is happening now in many parts of the country is that the present flooding is mainly water. In Portsmouth, it was raw sewage mixed with water. Homes, gardens, garages, shops, pubs, public parks and streets were strewn with raw sewage. Condoms, tampons and human waste were everywhere. I saw many houses which had all three in abundance.

The city council and its emergency planning officer, Alistair Hogg, did what they could, but some people suggest that local authorities just do not have the resources to cope with such emergencies and that it takes far too long for them to swing into action.

The real problem on 15 September involved Southern Water and its parent company, ScottishPower. I could mention many individuals, but I shall not list them as I am sure that the Minister wants to tell us how he proposes to prevent similar disasters from happening in future. There are many questions for Southern Water to answer. What it knew, what it did not do, what it should have done and what it has done since are all important issues.

At 6 am on 13 September, the Meteorological Office issued a special forecast. It said that heavy rain would probably deliver something like 45 mm of water over the Portsmouth area or the central Hampshire area on 15 September. Southern Water claims not to have received that severe weather warning. The warning issued on 13 September was repeated again on 14 September, when we were told that there was a 70 per cent. chance of torrential rain causing major problems in the area. Again, Southern Water denies receiving the information. What went wrong? Southern Water claims that the 30-year-old pumping station was drowned by the volume of water that came up from the sewer pipes below.

The timing raises a lot of questions. I was sitting in my office in Albert road in the heart of Portsmouth. Before 1 pm, water was coming out of the main drains in the street. Albert road was flooded not from the volume of rain from above, but from water that was coming up from below and was already lifting the manhole covers. According to Southern Water, that should not have happened until the pumps stopped, which was well after 1.30 pm, but I and many others know that it started well before Southern Water claims that the pumping station stopped working.

Southern Water claims that the pumps were overcome by water and literally drowned. I visited the pumping station at 8 pm on 15 September and there was still at least 4 ft of water over the main pumps. What has Southern Water done for the people of Portsmouth? It has done very little and said simply that it will try to get the pumps back working. The local newspaper, which has done a valiant job trying to keep people updated on the issue, asked the managing director of Southern Water a number of questions. The headline was:

> First he blamed an act of God. Now he says of the next Great Flood . . . We just haven't got a prayer.

It carries a picture of him about to pray for help. It was obvious that Southern Water did not expect to be able to save the city if there were another such incident.

What did Southern Water do? It got pumps in and pumped raw sewage and other waste straight into the sea across our beaches and open spaces in three different locations. It had to do that to protect the city, but it was pumping raw sewage into sensitive areas such as Langstone harbour, an area of special scientific interest and the habitat of wildlife, sealife and birds.

What did Southern Water do for the people? It offered £20,000 to the Lord Major of Portsmouth hardship fund. That £20,000 accounts for one hour of Southern Water's yearly profit, and for 35 minutes of ScottishPower's profit. It would pay the directors of those two organisations for two days. And the company thinks that that is enough. It has resisted all claims, saying that it has done everything expected of it. That is cynical, uncaring, unhelpful, hurtful and not good enough for a company that claims to have people's interests at heart.

The company claimed recently that upgrading the station would cost more than £4 million. Yet people's homes have been torn apart by this tragedy. People have lost the whole ground floor of their homes, or have had their floor boards taken up, wooden floors and carpets removed, walls chopped back to the brick work up to a metre above the water line. Some people will be out of their homes well into the middle of next year. Asked whether it should spend £4 million to protect the pumping station, the company could only say that its

> priority since these events has been to restore it to normal capacity, and that is now being done. Our internal investigations continue with an examination as to whether it is possible or practical to improve the protection against flooding at the pumping station.

The company says "possible" or "practical", but action must be taken to give the people of a city the size of Portsmouth the protection that they deserve.

The floods came from neither the sea nor a river. People's homes were flooded from the main sewerage system running through the heart of the city. Public parks were not flooded because the sea flowed down the road or a river burst its banks. They were flooded because manholes in the streets started to seep human waste into a playground and a park.

Let me turn to agencies that are supposed to help. The Association of British Insurers, contacted on behalf of those who thought that they might have sufficient cover,

wrote to me to say that that is a matter for individual companies. That is not a great deal of help, and some companies have not been greatly helpful. Many people were under-insured or had no insurance.

What about Ofwat? It offered a booklet on levels of service for the water industry and a handout on its guaranteed standard scheme. For flooding from sewers, that offers a maximum of £1,000 per property for each flooding incident or the equivalent of the property's water charges for the year. That is not good enough. No one in Portsmouth has received either £1,000 or repayment of the water charge. The only offer from Southern Water has been the £20,000 for the Lord Mayor's fund.

The Environment Agency visited the station only once during the first three days, according to what it said at a public meeting held shortly afterwards. Since then, we have waited for its report with bated breath, and I hope that the Minister can update it on that response. I, and others keenly interested in the matter, have taken an independent civil engineer to the site, and his preliminary report is in the hands of the Environment Agency, where it is, we hope, assisting in its deliberations. I have also provided background papers about the site and a detailed report from an engineer who used to work there and who ran the plant.

If all that information is put together, it becomes clear that something happened in the pumping station. The capacity of the sewerage system and the station's pumps should have been enough to deal with what happened that day, but that manifestly was not so. The consequences were as I have spelled them out. I do not have the time to go into individual cases.

The Government can help with the hardship fund, a matter that I have raised with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister, but as yet to no avail. They are not prepared to help as yet, but I hope that they will consider doing so. The Government could help over insurance. For some people, premiums have already been raised by 30 per cent. My local paper today carries the headline "Sunk by a postcode" over a story that says that people living in Portsmouth or West Sussex will find it extremely difficult to get mortgages or insurance on their properties. Already, the problems have begun for people not yet over the awful experience of 15 September.

Local authorities need greater help. They need ring-fenced funding to be made available, to help with emergency planning. Sadly, too few local authorities have the organisational skills or equipment necessary to deal with such problems. Their actions come far too late.

What can the Environment Agency do? It can do a lot. It can tackle the problem and take on operators such as Southern Water. The people of Portsmouth look to the agency to protect their interests and to ensure that they get justice for what happened to them.

We need to see the report sooner rather than later. The agency needs to be resourced in such a way that it can deal far sooner with such issues and report exactly what it has found back into the public domain. I urge the Minister to speed up the agency's report.

Ofwat powers must be studied. Agreements with companies such as Southern Water need to be reconsidered. As with the railways, when the Conservatives privatised water they allowed operators to get away with murder as regards their responsibilities to their customers. The token gestures mentioned in the guarantee scheme are simply not good enough and should not be allowed to continue. I urge the Government to consider carefully how those can be revised in favour of the customer.

Work needs to be done. I also ask the Government to insist that Southern Water protects a city such as Portsmouth and ensures that its pumping station is not supported with standby pumps that are below sea level to start with and must always be vulnerable. When I visited the station, the operators told me that there had already been near disasters, when the station had been flooded. At least two people who were present on 15 September have told us about incidents in the station. Many people believe that some of the flooding that finally put the station out of action resulted from temporary construction and modernisation work there.

Given that it is difficult for the Environment Agency and others to get convictions or to prosecute, I would like to think that the Government can insist that pumping stations, such as the one at Eastney, are upgraded to cope with the additional flows that arise from the increased development and global warming, and are properly maintained to ensure that maximum pumping capacity is not compromised.

The stations should be thoroughly evaluated—independently, if necessary—to identify the potential risks and consequences of loss of, or a temporary reduction in, pumping capacity, or loss or interruption of electrical or fuel supply. They should be modified to eliminate all foreseeable routes to a catastrophic total loss of operational capacity, which is what occurred on 15 September. They should also be modified to introduce failsafe measures to ensure that flows either in excess of those predictable, or occurring during emergencies, are safely channelled away from sensitive residential areas. In an area such as Portsmouth, which is completely surrounded by the sea, that must be a practical suggestion.

The stations should incorporate storm prediction and remote rainfall sensors to provide advance warning of problems, or potential flows in excess of capacity, to alert emergency services promptly. Slow response diesel pumps should be brought in sufficiently early to attain full capacity when needed, but they should be put where they are out of harm's way—not below ground, inside a pumping station, where the water could flood them.

Prosecuting water companies can be difficult and slow, and is inevitably ineffective in achieving a solution. The current process can tackle problems only retrospectively. Is further regulation of the industry to be considered? I hope that it is and that the Minister will say that the Government are looking into regulation of the water industry to enforce improvements in ageing installations ahead of further disastrous flooding.

All of that and much more needs to be dealt with. Southern Water has a lot of questions to answer and it has failed miserably to deliver. We are grateful for the campaigning actions of the BBC South team, led by Freddy Rostan, and to Meridian Broadcasting, but more importantly for the campaigning skills of the local newspaper, doing what local newspapers do well. *The News* has pushed, dug and shoved and tried to humiliate Southern Water by putting the moral case on behalf of the people of Portsmouth. So far, we are still not getting the answers, despite the fact that the company has attended public meetings. It is not good enough for the company merely to take the flak for one night when people are so

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

disappointed because their homes, their wedding photographs, their cars and all their property have been ruined.

People expect companies as large as Southern Water and its parent company, ScottishPower, to do more. Furthermore, they expect the Government to insist that such companies do more. Justice must be done. Those events took place on 15 September; it is not good enough that, on 7 November, questions remain unanswered and people continue to live with that tragedy—as they will probably have to do for a further six months or a year.

10.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on the terrible incident that took place in Portsmouth on 15 September. He makes a powerful case. I realise that I may not be able to deal with all the points that he has raised, but I shall study his speech and if there are further matters on which I need to respond, I shall do so. I shall also ensure that his speech is drawn to the attention of those people who need to read it—although I imagine that he may do that himself.

I fully sympathise with those people whose properties were flooded in Portsmouth and, more recently, in other parts of the country. On a previous occasion, I was flooded—although not as seriously as the hon. Gentleman's constituents—and I am aware of how distressing it can be.

Many of the recent flooding incidents were caused by swollen rivers, but as the hon. Gentleman points out, the Portsmouth incident was different; it was due to exceptional rainfall over a low-lying area. The Meterological Office stated that, apparently, the rainfall on that day was a one in a 100 year event. The storm was extreme; it could be a further example of the global warming process to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions referred in his statement to the House last week.

Sewerage undertakings are under a statutory duty to ensure the effectual drainage of their area under section 94 of the Water Industries Act 1991, but that is not an absolute duty to prevent flooding in any circumstances. Portsmouth, like many urban areas, is served by combined sewers that carry both foul water and rainwater; they can usually cope adequately in normal storm conditions. However, in times of exceptionally heavy rainfall, such sewers will sometimes be unable to cope with the significant extra amount of flood water. That can result in their surcharging to such an extent that diluted sewage made up of storm water and foul water overflows into the street. That would be the case whether the flooding was due to swollen rivers or to exceptional rainfall.

Those people who have experienced flooding elsewhere in the country have encountered problems similar to those suffered by the hon. Gentleman's constituents. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced, we are determined to learn the lessons of that experience. However, it must be realised that flood precautions can only protect so far. In extreme conditions, such as we have seen recently, there will be problems.

In relation to the Portsmouth incident, I am assured that the Eastney sewage pumping station was working at full capacity and managed to cope with the rising levels of surface water until its pumps and the motors driving them were eventually inundated. The rainfall started to peak at 10 am, and the first of Southern Water's large diesel storm pumps was brought into operation at 10.25; the other pumps were used subsequently. All the pumps continued to operate until 13.07—that is the time given by the company, although the hon. Gentleman said it was at 13.30—when the diesel engines powering the pumps were themselves overwhelmed by the rising flood water in the pumping station.

Southern Water was able to restart some of the pumps by 15.30 to enable flood water to be pumped to the long sea outfall. In addition, temporary pumps were used. Since the incident, company staff and contractors have been working to bring all the pumps back on line. The Eastney pumping station houses electric and diesel pumps, and I understand that the diesel pumps suffered severe damage in the flood. Southern Water considered whether to buy new ones, but as delivery could have taken several months and might have prolonged the temporary pumping measures at Eastney until well into next year, the company decided that it would be more effective and efficient to repair the existing pumps than to buy new ones.

I understand that these pumps had never been overwhelmed before. As the hon Gentleman is aware, there have been several more extreme rainfall incidents since 15 September, and I am told that the pumping station has coped with them all. The hon. Gentleman has asked in a recent letter why the pumps were situated below ground level, and he referred to that in his speech. The reason is that the sewerage system is below ground and, to a large extent, it relies on gravitational flow. However, those pumps were protected by concrete walls at least 13 m deep in a dry well shaft which, in normal circumstances, would remain immune to flooding. On 15 September, flooding within the pumping station reached unprecedented levels and penetrated ventilation ducts situated a metre below the top of the concrete walls. Southern Water assures me that it will now be investigating whether further measures can be taken to protect the diesel engines driving the pumps.

Even after the pumps were slowly being brought back on line, Southern Water retained temporary emergency pumping plant at the Eastney pumping station as a precaution in the event of further heavy rainfall. That enabled discharges of waste water to be made into Langstone harbour, as a temporary measure which reduced the risk of more flooding of properties in periods of further heavy rainfall since the incident. The Environment Agency was consulted on those temporary discharges and did not object. It did, however, seek assurances from Southern Water that the repair work to the pumps would proceed with full speed and it continued to monitor the environmental impact of the incident. While I accept that pumping this waste water into Langstone harbour was not ideal, it was a temporary measure. I understand that no discharges have been made into the harbour since 11 October.

On the question of compensation, I hope that those affected are able to recover their losses under their normal household insurance policies, although, as the hon. Gentleman says, some of his constituents are

under-insured and some are no doubt not insured. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the Government will discuss with the Association of British Insurers how the insurance industry might respond quickly and effectively to emergencies such as this and deal with problems of insurability of homes and businesses at risk of flooding.

For those not insured or not fully insured, I understand that limited cash help only for those on income support or jobseeker's allowance may be available from the social fund, which is administered through the Benefits Agency. Help is given in the form of a grant or interest free loan. That is obviously likely to apply to only a small number of people who have particularly low incomes.

Help may also be available, as the hon. Gentleman said, from the fund set up by the Lord Mayor following the incident, to which Southern Water has made a donation. I understand that so far grants of only £6,000 have been made out of the fund. The Lord Mayor has recently relaxed some of the qualifying conditions to enable more of the money to be made available. I am assured that its availability has been well publicised in the area and the hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to advise his constituents who are suffering hardship to make a claim.

Mr. Hancock: The one condition that has not been relaxed is that if there was an insurable risk, people cannot claim from the hardship fund. However, if someone is not insured, everything that they have is at risk. That is what needs to be changed.

Mr. Mullin: That is a discussion that the hon. Gentleman needs to have with the Lord Mayor, rather than with the Government.

The hon. Gentleman is already aware that the water industry operates a statutory guaranteed standards scheme, which has been further improved by the Government. As the hon. Gentleman said, under the scheme, householders are now entitled to a refund of a year's sewerage charges every time there is sewage flooding of a customer's property from a public sewer, up to a maximum on each occasion of £1,000.

There are however certain circumstances in which a rebate of sewerage charges is not payable. One of these is where the event results from exceptional weather conditions, and I understand that that is why Southern Water did not feel that it was liable to pay any rebate of sewerage charges in respect of this particular incident. In the first instance, that is a matter for its judgment. Where a dispute arises between an undertaker and a customer as to the right of a customer to a payment or credit under the scheme, the matter may be referred to the Director General of Water Services by either party for determination. That is an avenue open to the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Southern Water has so far received only a handful of claims directly. It believes that the reason for this is that most people affected have been able to claim successfully from their insurance. Although it did not operate the guaranteed standards scheme, it did help with the clean-up operation. I understand that some 260 properties were affected in what is a mainly residential area of Victorian terraced houses. Southern Water's assistance involved pumping water out of properties, disinfecting the affected areas and clearing visible contamination from gardens.

The Government for their part are directing substantial resources to measures aimed at protecting communities in incidents such as these. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced over the weekend, we will be providing £51 million extra for flood defence work over and above that already agreed in the spending review.

We are taking a number of other steps that we believe will help people and local authorities to cope with weather difficulties. They include improvement to the working of the Bellwin system, which exists to help local authorities defray unexpected costs in floods and other emergencies. Assistance from Bellwin will now be automatic for local authorities dealing with the current floods and the rate of Government support will increase from 85 per cent. to 100 per cent. Valid claims will be settled within 15 workings days and claims for advance payment can be made. Research work at the Hadley centre and the United Kingdom climate impacts programme will be enhanced and speeded up to improve our prediction and assessment of the effects of climatic change.

I understand that Portsmouth city council has already notified my Department of the problems that it has experienced during the flooding, but officials have yet to receive a formal application for assistance under the Bellwin scheme. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman urge the council to make such an application as soon as possible.

On the calls for an inquiry, I understand that the Environment Agency is carrying out an independent investigation into the incident to assess whether an offence has been committed by Southern Water under the Water Resources Act 1991. To come to a decision, the agency has asked Southern Water to provide a large amount of information and data. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that this is not a simple operation. It is not until all the relevant evidence has been accumulated that the agency will be in a position to reach a conclusion with respect to potential legal proceedings. The agency has given assurances that it will provide a full report in due course and that it will be publicly available. I have every confidence that the agency will be very thorough and I look forward to its report.

In the longer term, I understand that Southern Water is now well advanced towards delivery of an improvement scheme for the drainage catchments of both Portsmouth and Havant. The scheme will provide secondary biological treatment before discharge via the long sea outfall. As a direct result of the recent incident, the Environment Agency will also, in conjunction with Southern Water, review the design proposals with particular regard to protection of the pumping station.

Therefore, at the present time, I see no reason for any other form of inquiry. With the best will in the world, there is no way in which every incident of this nature can be provided for in advance. In the end, the only way to mitigate the consequences is for people to be adequately insured. As I have already said, we will discuss with the Association of British Insurers how the insurance industry might better respond to such emergencies.

I hope that I have given some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman. I appreciate that several issues must to be resolved and, if he wishes to pursue any further points, I shall be glad to do reply to him in writing.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

PRIVATE BILLS *[LORDS]* (SUSPENSION)

Ordered,

That so much of the Lords Message [6th November] as relates to the Colchester Borough Council Bill *[Lords]* be now considered.

Resolved,

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—[*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Peace Process (International Support)

1. **Gillian Merron** (Lincoln): If he will make a statement on the level of international support for developments in the peace process in Northern Ireland. [135594]

8. **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): If he will make a statement on international support for developments in the peace process in Northern Ireland. [135604]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): We have enjoyed worldwide support for our attempts to secure a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. This has been particularly strong from the European Union, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, South Africa and the United States. I hope that the whole House will join me in thanking President Clinton for his unstinting support over the past eight years, and especially for the part that he has played in bringing about, and sustaining, the Good Friday agreement.

Gillian Merron: While we wait with bated breath for the name of the next President of the United States, does my right hon. Friend share my hope that the next occupant of the White House will show the same dedication and commitment that President Clinton has shown over the past eight years in bringing about a successful peace process?

Mr. Mandelson: I should certainly like to be the first from the Dispatch Box to congratulate the President-Elect—[HON. MEMBERS: "Who is he?"]—whoever he turns out to be. I am sure that the next President will ensure the continuation of America's support for the peace process in Northern Ireland. I should add that, during his electoral campaign, Mr. Bush said that the new Assembly and institutions represented the best hope for peace in Northern Ireland and, during his electoral campaign, Mr. Gore undertook to support, among other things, decommissioning of illegally held paramilitary arms. Both would-be Presidents seem to have a good grasp of all the essentials.

Mr. Stewart: Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge the recent positive announcements by two American firms—Teletech and Caterpillar—to create 1,400 new jobs in Northern Ireland? Does he share my view that, notwithstanding the political difficulties in Northern Ireland, foreign investors have strong underlying confidence in the long-term prospects for peace?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, I strongly echo my hon. Friend's remarks and welcome the investment that has come from those two companies, among others. However, it behoves us all to bear in mind that this strengthening investment performance by Northern Ireland has come as a result of the peace process strengthening and politics working in Northern Ireland. I believe that continued investment in Northern Ireland depends on continued stability and peace. I hope, and I trust, that all parties in Northern Ireland will be mindful of that in the coming weeks.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): While endorsing the Secretary of State's comments on President Clinton and his successor, whoever that might be, can I urge him to make the strongest possible representations to the present and future incumbents of the White House on the failure of the State Department to list the so-called Real IRA as a terrorist organisation? In a week in which we have received a police warning that more Omaghs may be committed by that organisation, can he say to the American Administration that people throughout the British isles cannot understand why the State Department is not classifying that organisation in the way that it should?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. We need constantly to bear down on the Real IRA and other dissident paramilitary groups, by all available means. When I was in the United States in September, I expressed the hope that the United States authorities would add the Real IRA to their list of designated terrorist organisations. I believe that that would frustrate the funding that the group receives from America and, crucially, assist us in carrying out any necessary prosecutions of that organisation in the United States. I am continuing to discuss that issue with my Irish opposite numbers because, clearly, the prospects

of securing that outcome will be much enhanced if the British and Irish Governments act together in making a joint submission.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that there will be international support for the decision by representatives of the Ulster Defence Association to come here—officially—for the first time yesterday, to try and establish political links between themselves and this Parliament? Does he also agree that, if that is a serious step forward in trying to create a peaceful dialogue between loyalist paramilitaries and our Parliament, there is a good chance that we will replicate the good news that we had when the IRA did something very similar a few years ago?

Mr. Mandelson: I think that it is important to encourage dialogue among and between all the parties, especially at a time when reserves of confidence and good will in Northern Ireland are dangerously low. In the coming weeks, I shall discuss with the parties a set of measures to implement all aspects of the Good Friday agreement, so as to bolster confidence on both sides of the community. Those measures must include, among other things, progress on decommissioning and fully functioning political institutions. Both are essential and neither should be frustrated by the hardliners found on both sides. The Government will never give up on the Good Friday agreement and nor should anyone else who has Northern Ireland's best interests at heart.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): In the context not least of international support, will the Secretary of State confirm that he has every sympathy for the Omagh victims? In the absence so far of criminal charges, does he agree that attempts to pursue a civil action against the suspects deserve the fullest support?

Mr. Mandelson: One only has to visit Omagh, as I did again last week, to feel the hurt surrounding the absence of a conviction; it is a hurt that is felt by all the victims' families and by the wider community in Omagh. That is why, as I said in Omagh, I fully understand the motives behind the campaign. We need to continue to exert maximum pressure on those who want to destroy the peace process. I also want to place on record my admiration for the investigation team in Omagh: I know how hard its members have worked and how desperate they are to find that last piece of evidence that they can put in place to secure the conviction of those who carried out that disgusting atrocity.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call the next question, I ask for quiet in the Chamber.

Royal Ulster Constabulary

2. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What discussions he has had since the end of July with the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary about recruitment and retention of personnel for the RUC. [135595]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): There have been numerous and regular meetings with the Chief Constable or his representatives at ministerial and official level on recruitment and retention of RUC personnel and other subjects since July.

Mr. Wilkinson: Does the Minister not believe that the record of the RUC in standing between the law-abiding people of Northern Ireland and the spectres of anarchy and bloody civil war, under the proud name and cap badge of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is one that inspires citizens who are committed to the maintenance of law and order to join the force, and those who have served so well to stay in it; but that, if the force became subject to local partnerships or a policing board that contained released terrorists and apologists for those who maintain dumps of illegal arms, that confidence would be gravely undermined?

Mr. Ingram: Again, I place on record the Government's fulsome tribute to the RUC, which has been recognised in many different ways, not least by Her Majesty awarding the force the George Cross. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a substantial package for RUC widows and disabled officers, which will go some way towards dealing with difficult issues, including the deep pain felt within the organisation for many years.

As for district partnerships, they were included in the Patten report as a means of ensuring that policing would, as far as possible, be based in the local community. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) is probably wholly opposed to that report, but we are confident that its provisions, once they have been given full effect through the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, will be warmly received within the wider community in Northern Ireland.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): May I point out that cap badges have been altered elsewhere with no loss of morale; and that sensible people now accept reform of the police force? Does my right hon. Friend believe that the interim target of 30.5 per cent. Catholic representation in the police force by March 2004 is an attainable objective, given that many Jeremiahs, especially those on the other side of the House, believe that it is not a realistic goal?

Mr. Ingram: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. Everyone who has read the Patten report will know how difficult it is for police services throughout the world to change in terms of representation. The Patten report cites the New York experience. With the provisions that we have set out in the Bill, we have sought to ensure that there is equitable representation. I think that that is an achievable target.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): With reference to the Minister's mention of compensation for RUC widows, I welcome the move that has been made. However, there is great concern among these widows that even what is on offer is far different from what later widows have received thorough the courts. Would it not be better to have an equitable settlement so that there is no distinction between

these widows? Some of them received compensation of only a few hundred pounds after years of suffering before the Government made a decision.

Mr. Ingram: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity of reading John Steele's review, which is a comprehensive analysis of what is undoubtedly a difficult problem. The Government have supported his conclusions. We believe that we are dealing equitably with the issue. We recognise the pain and the hurt that exists for RUC widows who pre-date the 25 November 1982 change in legislation. I am sure that those widows will benefit greatly from the Government's response.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Does the Minister agree that the population want every street in Northern Ireland to be policed? To achieve that community police force, we must recognise that the Patten report is a cornerstone of the Good Friday agreement, as agreed by the political parties in Northern Ireland. Like me, does my right hon. Friend deprecate some political parties that are trying to make a political issue out of policing?

Mr. Ingram: The Patten report was based on the premise of trying to take politics out of policing. It was a detailed analysis of the issue raised by my hon. Friend and of other issues. As we move forward from the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill to the Act, and then to implementation of the various elements of the legislation, it will take time for all the changes to bed down. The driving force is our wish to achieve a police service that is acceptable at all levels of Northern Ireland society. It is a big objective, but I think that it can be reached.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Does the Minister accept that, as a result of the Government's policies, the morale of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is at an all-time low and absenteeism, sickness levels, disillusionment and disenchantment are at an all-time high? What will the right hon. Gentleman do to address these disastrous policies?

Mr. Ingram: Any programme of change brings with it difficult issues with which we must deal. The Chief Constable carried out a fundamental review of the RUC. It has been judged that about 85 per cent. of its contents are set out in the Bill. Had that review been implemented, we would have had to deal with the same difficulties of change. Clearly, change brings forward difficulties. With the Bill, we are trying to take away uncertainty and to move forward into a different type of society in Northern Ireland—that is, a more normal civic society. Changes within the police service are a concomitant part of that.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): It would be excessively obsequious of me to suggest that where my right hon. Friend leads, the nation follows. However, does he agree that many of the proposed changes for policing in Northern Ireland have the potential to provide a blueprint for even better policing in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Ingram: I agree entirely with those sentiments. We are saying that the way in which we have sought to interpret the Patten report takes best practices from international experience of what should constitute an effective, efficient and acceptable police service. I have no doubt that, as we move forward and implement the measures set out in the Bill, internationally people will take positive note of the changes that are taking place in Northern Ireland and draw positive responses from them.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): On the issue of morale, does the Minister agree that one of the most deleterious effects of Patten and, indeed, of the Belfast agreement has been for the RUC to see those whom it risked life and limb to put behind bars let loose on the street? Does he agree that the presence yesterday of Michael Stone, a murderous terrorist, in the precincts of the House has done nothing to give confidence either to the police or to law-abiding citizens in both communities in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. and learned Gentleman is an implacable opponent of the Good Friday agreement. I do not know what change he wishes to see in Northern Ireland that he could encourage others to find acceptable as we try to deal with that matter in a structured way, building from the ground up. On the question of released prisoners, we have made it clear—I will make it clear again—that, if any of them break their licences, they will be back in prison. We say that time and again. The Secretary of State has shown his willingness to act firmly.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Does my right hon. Friend recall that, during the previous Administration, prisoners were released even when the ceasefire had broken down? Does he agree that what we are seeking to do, when men such as Mr. Stone visit the precincts of the House, is to demonstrate that democracy is a better way than violence, and that there are opportunities for people to enter into dialogue and for there to be inclusive solutions to the problems, recognising the differences in traditions and in attitudes, but accepting democratic methods?

Mr. Ingram: Again, I agree with those sentiments. My hon. Friend presents his arguments more eloquently than I could. He makes a valid point. Democratic dialogue is better than destruction through the barrel of a gun. That is what we seek to do as we move towards a more normalised and a more civic society in Northern Ireland. If people are engaged—no matter what their past is—in that democratic dialogue, we should welcome them into the fold of democratic change in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Minister accept that the proposed abolition of the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is causing huge hurt among the families of officers who have been murdered or mutilated in fighting terrorism during the recent troubles, and that that can hardly help him to retain and to recruit new officers?

Mr. Ingram: We have recognised the hurt. We understand the deep angst within the RUC family and the community, too, but what part of the Good Friday agreement does the right hon. Gentleman now support? The Patten Commission—the need to look at the whole question of policing in Northern Ireland—was an important element of the agreement. If he is now saying

that he does not support that aspect, and he does not support the release of prisoners, what does he support in the agreement? Perhaps he could help me to understand the direction that he is now coming from.

Mr. MacKay: If the right hon. Gentleman really accepts the sensitivities of the families, surely he will agree with us that, at this late stage in the Session, the Government should accept our amendments—which might be voted on in another place today—to have a joint name for the police force that incorporates both the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Northern Ireland police force and which, therefore, takes into account the genuine sensitivities in both communities in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Ingram: The right hon. Gentleman is offering a recipe for uncertainty, confusion and continued division. That issue has been debated in the House. I, as the Minister responsible, and the Secretary of State have set out why we believe there should be a very clear approach. It is why we say that the name will be the Police Service for Northern Ireland.

I ask the right hon. Gentleman again to reflect on what parts of the Good Friday agreement he now supports. He has rejected most of the key elements that the Government must bravely take forward. I would have hoped that he could understand the need for bipartisanship on those difficult issues.

Petrol Prices

5. **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about petrol prices in Northern Ireland. [135601]

10. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): What discussions he has held with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about petrol prices in Northern Ireland. [135606]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): As the right hon. Gentleman is well aware, discussions between the Chancellor and Ministers on such matters are, for obvious reasons, confidential. However, if the right hon. Gentleman exercises a little patience, he may hear more on the subject later from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister. Can he tell us whether, during those discussions, any estimate has been made by his Department or by the Treasury of the loss in revenue to the Treasury as a result of cross-border smuggling of fuel for vehicles?

Mr. Howarth: As the right hon. Gentleman probably knows, there was a Select Committee report containing some estimates. There is indeed a problem, which it would be wrong not to acknowledge. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, who is responsible for security, is working hard with the RUC and other agencies to make sure that the smuggling of petrol or other products is dealt with robustly and properly. The right hon. Gentleman has identified a problem which we recognise needs attention, and it is receiving serious attention.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Viggers. He is not here.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): Does the Minister agree that the region that is suffering most from the petrol crisis is Northern Ireland, particularly the border counties, because of the enormous difference in price on each side of the border—85p a litre on our side and 60p a litre on the other? That is an incredible threat to the petrol industry on our side of the border, and also to the shopping centres as a result of the enormous change that has taken place because of that. Will the Government take the necessary steps to resolve the issue as soon as possible?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman, as a distinguished Member of the European Parliament, knows that any scheme to reduce duty rates in Northern Ireland or to introduce a price subsidy scheme would require the co-operation of the Commission. Any such scheme would run into difficulties, as has been the case in other countries. Although there is a problem, which the hon. Gentleman identifies, any solution has equal difficulties attached to it.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Given that the number of vehicles is up and the consumption of all sorts of fuel in Northern Ireland is down, is the Minister prepared to deny the estimate by some people in Northern Ireland that there has been a loss of up to £1 billion to the revenue of the United Kingdom? If he does deny that, why? Will he then produce his own estimates, as the Treasury has clearly been unable to do so?

Mr. Howarth: I acknowledged earlier that there is a problem. For the reasons mentioned by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), the problem has a particular impact on Northern Ireland. Speculating on the amounts involved—a Select Committee figure was mentioned—does not tell us what the solution is. We must work towards a solution that will work and will receive the co-operation of the RUC and all the other agencies, and bring it to bear on the problem. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and the House agree that that is the sensible way forward.

Victim Support Programmes

6. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will make a statement about Government programmes for the support of victims. [135602]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Government provide funding to Victim Support (NI), which offers a range of services to victims of crime, and to the Nexus Institute, which supports victims of sexual abuse. To date, the Government have also allocated more than £6.25 million to a series of initiatives that address the needs of victims of the troubles. Furthermore, my right hon. Friend the

Secretary of State announced yesterday a substantial package of support for RUC widows and injured and disabled officers.

Mr. Hope: Given the years of neglect of the victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland under the previous Administration, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Opposition on their new-found concern for victims, and will he comment on progress on the new core funding scheme introduced by the Government to help families in Northern Ireland rebuild their lives?

Mr. Ingram: That is a blow that the Opposition deserve to have landed on them because there was some sanctimonious posturing in the way in which they dealt with some of the issues. We have had to tackle the deep hurt and grief in that divided community, and we have done so with vigour. I announced earlier the extent of how we are dealing with that. That will not be the end of the problems that we have to solve nor of our commitment to solving them.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [135624] **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 November.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Blizzard: Is not the real problem with fuel prices revealed by looking at the fuel used by fishing boats? There is no duty at all on marine diesel, yet prices have trebled because of the high international price of crude oil. The trawlermen of Lowestoft cannot make a living with such high prices. They understand that the problem is not of the Government's making, but can a way forward be found so that the fishing industry can survive the high prices and the fish for our national dish can still be caught by British fishermen?

The Prime Minister: It is the rise in world oil prices that has caused most difficulty, but the industry is currently experiencing extensive and difficult restructuring. However, I am pleased to be able to tell my hon. Friend that the fisheries departments of England and the devolved Administrations will make some £60 million available during the next few years to help the fishing industry to adapt to the difficult times in which it now exists.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): For great numbers of people today their main concern is the flooding of their homes, which has caused genuine misery and distress. I know that the Prime Minister will want to join me in expressing sympathy to all those affected in recent days and, once again, profound gratitude for the magnificent response of the emergency services.

In examining what more can be done in future by any Government, does the Prime Minister agree that all parties should look again at the verdict of the Select Committee on Agriculture that the current responsibilities for tackling flooding may be too fragmented and that there is a lack of clarity as to which body is ultimately in charge?

The Prime Minister: Of course I join in the thanks to the emergency services, which, as ever, have performed magnificently in extremely difficult circumstances, and of course we will consider the Agriculture Committee's suggestion. I think that the Environment Agency is due to report back on that very issue.

I am afraid that it looks very much as if the problem will not go away during the next few years. The floods have been the worst for 50 years and, in some cases, for 100 years. We must put in the short-term measures necessary—flood defences and so on—and then we must take, on an international level, some of the difficult decisions, perhaps ducked for too long, about some of the issues of climate change.

Mr. Hague: I thank the Prime Minister for that reply. He will know that the independent review team set up after the 1998 floods described

weaknesses in the planning and delivery of flood defence and warning policies—*[Interruption.]*

Hon. Members may not think this is important, but to thousands of people in north Yorkshire who have had to leave their homes it is very important, despite everything else that is happening in the world today.

The independent review team also said that, under successive Administrations, the Environment Agency

did not achieve its own performance targets.

In the light of that, would it not be sensible, across parties, to review the powers and effectiveness of the Environment Agency in dealing with flood planning and warnings?

The Prime Minister: It was precisely as a result of the lessons learned in 1998 that the new emergency warning system was introduced; and that worked well in this instance. We have also spent more money on flood defences than ever before—up by about 50 per cent. during the past 10 years or so. Of course, we shall consider what else we can do, and we are prepared to consider any suggestions.

I am glad, too, that the right hon. Gentleman sees that this is a matter for cross-party co-operation. Everyone wants to ensure that we have the proper flood defences in place. For those people affected at the moment, the situation is desperate, and we must do everything possible to help them. However, we must look not merely at the short-term measures that are necessary to protect Britain against floods, but, at an international level, at what we can do to try to reduce the incidence of such freak climate changes that are happening not just in Britain but throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the road has not been built that can accommodate all the bandwagons on which the Leader of the Opposition has jumped recently? My constituents have approached me to say that the self-appointed leaders of the road fuel lobby do not represent their views on

investment in public services, or the need to improve education, to tackle the environment and improve the quality of the air that they are forced to breathe. If those self-appointed leaders are intent on mocking the memory of the Jarrow hunger marchers, perhaps my right hon. Friend would like to pull them over to the side of the motorway and keep them there until they feel the pangs of hunger in their bellies, and know what it is to struggle. Perhaps they will then go home and respect the need to run the country by law and democracy.

The Prime Minister: Whatever people's grievances about the cost of fuel, I hope that we can agree on two matters. First, those grievances should be pursued lawfully and properly, without trying to disrupt the country's food supplies or bring the motorways or any other aspect of the country to a halt. Secondly, anything that we do to try to address those grievances cannot be at the expense of economic stability, investment in our public services or any other action that we want to take for other people who need our help, notably pensioners.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): To return to flooding, does the Prime Minister believe that an explanation is owed to those whose homes and businesses have been flooded of the fact that, five months ago, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food received a report which stated that there was an urgent case for fresh investment in flood prevention measures? Why has it taken five months and the latest catastrophe before extra funds have been forthcoming?

The Prime Minister: It has not taken five months, because we have been increasing the amount of money for flood defences. The Deputy Prime Minister tells me that, in some respects, we are putting in more money than the report requested. As a result of the announcements that were made a few days ago, the Bellwin scheme will be paid at 100 per cent. That will provide significant help to people. An extra £51 million has also been announced. Before then, not only as a result of the report but because of circumstances that existed a couple of years ago, we increased investment in flood defences.

Mr. Kennedy: The House has already welcomed the additional money, but will the Prime Minister confirm two points? First, will he confirm that the additional sums will be spread over the next four years, and that the headline figure does not apply to the current financial year? Secondly, does he acknowledge, in the light of the advice that the Government received five months ago, that if they had acted earlier and with greater alacrity, some of the worst effects could have been avoided?

The Prime Minister: That is very unfair. It would be unfortunate if the bandwagon tendency had been transferred.

We have put in the extra money. It will be spread over four years, as the Deputy Prime Minister announced, but there is a limit to what we can do in the short term. We have put in additional sums of money in the past few years. Indeed, it is fair to say that even under the previous Government, additional sums were put in after the floods in the late 1980s. We must continue to make that investment. However, even with the best investment and safeguards, there will be an increasing problem unless we also deal with some of the longer-term issues.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Does my right hon. Friend welcome, as I do, the publication of Mr. Justice Colman's report on the reopened inquiry into the sinking of the MV Derbyshire? The report exonerates the master and crew of any blame for the sinking. Will he join me in congratulating the families of the 44 people who died? Those families fought a 20-year campaign to get at the truth of what happened. Will he also join me in congratulating the Deputy Prime Minister, whose determination to reopen the inquiry has been so fully vindicated today?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to offer my congratulations on the campaign and pay tribute to the families of those who lost their lives. As my hon. Friend said, that campaign stretches over 20 years. We studied the matter very carefully on coming to office and, indeed, before that—my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has had a long-standing commitment to this issue. We established the inquiry and we shall now study the results. I am pleased that, after two decades of trying, we are finally getting closer to the truth of what happened. We are now able to study the results of that report and take appropriate action.

Q2. [135625] **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): The Prime Minister has rightly given power to places that people identify with, but when will he complete that unfinished business? Will he make sure that Assemblies in future reflect regions that people identify with, have a clear popular mandate and are fully democratic?

The Prime Minister: We have always said that that has to be driven by local people themselves—they have got to want such Assemblies to be established. In the meantime, of course, we have made considerable progress in decentralising government, in particular with the establishment of the regional development agencies. For example, the South West of England regional development agency, as the hon. Gentleman knows, played a key role in securing objective 1 status for Cornwall, which will be worth more than £300 million over the next seven years. Seven thousand five hundred new job opportunities have been created or safeguarded through the RDA and there have been 37 inward investment projects, which have attracted a capital investment of more than £100 million. Those are considerable achievements on which to build for the future.

Q3. [135626] **Angela Smith** (Basildon): In the context of the national debate on public services, I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the actions of Essex county council. Is he aware that, just like the Tory Opposition in the House, Essex Tories promised to tax less and to deliver more? Yesterday, however, they announced education spending cuts of three quarters of a million pounds, including more than a third of a million from under-fives education. Does that not just go to prove that people who vote Tory are jeopardising their children's education?

The Prime Minister: I suppose that at least we could accuse the Tories of consistency. What they are doing at

a local level they are committed to doing at a national level. To anybody who doubted what we were saying about the £16 billion worth of cuts, let me inform the House of what the shadow Chancellor said just a few weeks ago:

> We have committed ourselves at the moment to matching them on health.

The interviewer asked, "And education?" The reply was:

> No we haven't made that commitment.

It is perfectly obvious that the investment that has reduced class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds, the investment in school buildings and the investment that has given us the best test results for 11-year-olds this country has ever seen would all be taken away by the Conservatives, were they returned to power.

Q4. [135627] **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): The Prime Minister will be aware that, after voting Labour, people in Preston are experiencing the highest council tax in Lancashire. What steps will he take to deal with the situation, at a time when members of his party in Preston are still busy fighting each other about who will speak for Labour in the by-election?

The Prime Minister: The level of the tax, of course, is a matter for the local council. Let me just say—*[Interruption.]* Well, it is. Let me just point out that, actually, the rises in—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members should quieten down.

The Prime Minister: Let me just point out to hon. Members that the council tax rises in the last three years of the Government whom they supported were more than double the rate of inflation.

Q5. [135628] **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): What efforts is my right hon. Friend making to assist homeless families, especially in Greater London, in recognition of how adversely they were affected by Tory Governments and their failed housing policies?

The Prime Minister: We are taking measures, particularly in relation to the homeless, that have, for example, reduced the number of rough sleepers by a third in the past couple of years. We will also, by 2003, put an extra £1.6 billion worth of investment into housing. The most important thing that we can do for housing is to keep interest rates and mortgages low. Let me remind the House that in the 18 years of Conservative government, interest rates averaged 10 per cent. Under this Government, they have averaged 6 per cent. That is a saving of well over £1,000 a year to the average mortgage payer.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Will the Prime Minister tell the House what is now the total cost to the public of the millennium dome?

The Prime Minister: The figures have been set out many times before and there has been £660 million of lottery grant—*[Interruption.]* Well, because the right hon. Gentleman has been going around the country attacking the funding of the dome, saying what a terrible idea it was and that he would never have thought of it, let me refresh his memory about the Cabinet Committee GEN 36, which was established in February 1996 by the then Prime Minister to consider all aspects of the dome, including funding, financial management, who should be appointed, where the dome should be sited and how it was to be designed. I shall read out the membership of that sub-group. It was chaired by the then Deputy Prime Minister, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and—guess who else?—the right hon. Gentleman, who was then Secretary of State for Wales. I will accept criticism of the dome from members of the public, but not from the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hague: So the Prime Minister does not know how much he has squandered on the dome as a result of his mismanagement and cronyism. If he wants to quote what was said about the dome in the past, we should look at his speech in the royal festival hall, "Why the dome is good for Britain". The Prime Minister said:

> It is costing just £400 million . . . It will turn in a profit for Britain.

Last December, the Prime Minister said:

> Like anything new in Britain, the Dome has to see off . . . those . . . who are made uneasy by success.

Since then, because of the Prime Minister's plans—not the plans of any previous Administration—the Prime Minister put in £50 million when the dome started, £60 million in February, £29 million in May, £43 million in August and £47 million in September. Will the Prime Minister tell the country how much in total has now been taken out of the public pocket because of that monument of ministerial mismanagement?

The Prime Minister: Let me run through what was in that Committee's remit—

Hon. Members: How much?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot tolerate hon. Gentlemen shouting, "How much?" The Prime Minister will answer the question in his own way.

The Prime Minister: The decisions to build the dome and to choose the Greenwich site were taken by that Committee. The appointment of senior managers was decided by it, as was the lottery money and financing that the right hon. Gentleman now complains about. It took the decision to split jobs between two Ministers and, we have discovered, it gave the visitor number projections. The only difference between the robbers who were caught at the dome yesterday and the right hon. Gentleman is the fact that the Tories are never caught at the scene of the crime.

Hon. Members: More.

Mr. Hague: It defies credulity—[HON. MEMBERS: "More."] Oh, there is plenty more. It defies credulity that the Prime Minister now thinks that it is all to do with the previous Administration. There was an attempt to drive a bulldozer into the dome yesterday, but the biggest robbery is the fact that the Government did not drive a bulldozer into it two months ago. Visitor number figures were reviewed by the Deputy Prime Minister and his colleagues and were confirmed. They were not set in place by the

previous Government. How can the Prime Minister claim that the planning was due to the previous Administration, when he said:

> These plans require a leap of faith . . . ?

He went on to say that they were

> the most exciting thing happening in the world in the year 2000.

How can he blame the previous Government, when he said:

> The Dome itself will last for decades to come after the year 2000. It will become an international landmark . . . ?

How can he blame it on the previous Administration when he said:

> And believe me—

which always arouses our suspicions—

> it will be the envy of the world . . . ?

If the National Audit Office report to be published tomorrow seriously criticises the Government and the Ministry for their mishandling of the dome, will the Minister with responsibility for the dome take that responsibility and resign?

The Prime Minister: Let us see what the report actually says. I should point out to the right hon. Gentleman that the visitor number estimates were first done by his Government and his Committee. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!] Yes, it is true that they were reviewed by us, so let us share a bit of the responsibility. As for his comments about the dome, it is correct that those visitor numbers were out, although more than 5 million people will go to the dome this year; but on the other side of the balance sheet, the total value of the north Greenwich peninsular is liable to be about £1 billion. All that is true. However, I will not accept criticism from the right hon. Gentleman. When I was doing his job, I was visited by the Cabinet Minister then in charge of this project who was chairing the Committee that the right hon. Gentleman was on. He asked us for our support, and told us that if we did not give that support thousands of jobs would be at risk and a great international event would not be staged in this country. I am prepared to accept, and have accepted, criticism from the public, but I am not prepared to accept criticism from the person who sat on that Committee, took those decisions and, now that a little bandwagon has gone out, has decided to motor it off.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister once boasted that the dome would be the first paragraph of the next Labour election manifesto. Had he proposed to start his election manifesto by saying that his party shared this responsibility with the Conservative party? Was that what he had in mind? Now he wants to share the responsibility. Has not the whole saga shown that Ministers cannot be trusted with the public's money? Is it not true that this story of hype, emptiness, cronyism, lack of delivery and rash promises is not the first paragraph of Labour's manifesto but the last word about this Government?

The Prime Minister: Even though the right hon. Gentleman decided the financing and the management of the dome, he now tells us that it was the wrong thing to do. Two things come out of this exchange. First, he wants to deny the part that he personally played in bringing about the dome. Secondly, his opportunism does not end there. I am amazed that today of all days the right hon. Gentleman has not come to the Dispatch Box and asked us about the economy. He has been going round the country telling us that it is in crisis as a result of our mismanagement. Why has he chosen to go on the issue of the dome? Because he knows that when it comes to the economy he has nothing to say.

Q6. [135629] **Gillian Merron** (Lincoln): Has the Prime Minister seen the survey in *Saga Magazine*, which shows that seven out of 10 people have given a big thumbs down to the Opposition's plans to axe winter fuel payments and free television licences for the over-75s? The survey shows that pensioners want to keep those vital payments as well as have an increase in the basic state pension—a fact that the Tories have singularly failed to grasp.

The Prime Minister: That is right. The Conservatives would take away the winter fuel allowance of £150 and the free television licences. The thing about both those sums of money that have been given to pensioners is that they are not affected by tax or benefit. It is crucially important that pensioners are allowed to receive those benefits. Once again, the Conservative party shows how it would let down the pensioners of this country.

I should also say that we will be putting more money into pensions overall in this Parliament than we would have done had we relinked the basic state pensions with earnings. That is because we on this side of the House care about all pensioners, not just a few.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): In view of increasing public concern about the concentration of power in Europe, is it really true that the Prime Minister is planning to surrender the veto in substantial new policy spheres? Would it not be better for Europe and for Britain if we asked the European Union to use its current powers more sensibly, rather than passed over more power from a democratic Parliament to a non-elected body?

The Prime Minister: No; as I have made very clear, we will not surrender the veto at all on tax and treaty change issues or on a range of other issues. However, there are issues on which we would be prepared to examine qualified majority voting, when it is in our interests to do so.

Conservative Members now take the position that they will not have any extension of qualified majority voting at all. However, of the two largest extensions of qualified majority voting—far larger than anything that we have either done or proposed to do in government—the first was made by Margaret Thatcher, when she was Prime Minister, in 1986, and the second by my immediate predecessor as Prime Minister, in the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): They got it wrong.

The Prime Minister: That is not what Conservative Members said at the time.

At the time, qualified majority voting was important. If we did not have qualified majority voting in relation to some agriculture issues or in respect of completion of the single market, for example, we could not properly protect British business interests. We should therefore judge it on a case-by-case basis. We should keep the veto when it is

essential in our national interest to do so. We should also, however, engage constructively in the rest of the debate and get the best deal for Britain.

Q7. [135630] **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): My right hon. Friend will be aware that, on many occasions and over a long time, the issue of compensation for former prisoners of war in the far east has been raised. I am pleased, and indeed proud, that it is this Government who have made the decision to award that compensation. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a matter not only of financial settlement, but of this generation recognising the sacrifice and suffering incurred, on its behalf, by an earlier generation?

The Prime Minister: The financial gratuity can never, of course, compensate properly for the pain and suffering that people went through: more than 12,000 people died as far east prisoners of war or as civilians. Yesterday, I met some of those who survived, and some of the widows of those who were killed in those camps, and one simply cannot fail to be struck by their courage, fortitude and commitment. I am pleased that we were able to make this payment to them. I think that it is long overdue, and that it goes some way to recognising the sacrifice that they made in the interests of this country.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Does the Prime Minister share my concern about the news overnight that the motor company Daewoo has gone bankrupt, and the impact that that will have on the Daewoo European Technical Centre in my constituency in Worthing and the 700 jobs that it provides? Will he and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry bring every pressure to bear on the Korean authorities, particularly the receiver, to ensure that new owners can be arranged as soon as possible, to maintain that centre of excellence in my constituency as a viable and intact business that has a great bearing on our whole economy and not only on that of the south coast?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman that we will do everything we can; indeed, our ambassador in Korea is already in touch with the Korean authorities. It is an extremely difficult situation, and I understand the concern and anxiety that his constituents must have. We will do all we possibly can. The centre is highly renowned and very much valued indeed. I am sure that, if we can, we will secure a future for it. However, it is something that will have to be discussed in detail in the coming days and weeks.

Q8. [135631] **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, on the economy, the real choice facing the British people is not between those who claim to spend more and those who claim to tax less, but between the 1 million new jobs created by the Labour party—thereby allowing more spending and lower tax, as people do not draw the dole when they are working—and Tory boom and bust, in which there are millions of people on the dole, bankruptcies, repossessions and, consequently, higher taxes and service cuts?

The Prime Minister: Two very obvious things will happen with the Conservatives, the first of which is the £60 billion of spending cuts. It is increasingly clear that those spending cuts will fall on schools, hospitals, transport, police and so on. Additionally, the policy that they are now pursuing is an absolute replica of boom and bust—which is exactly what would happen. We must avoid the danger of replicating those policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

To show you, Mr. Speaker, that the Opposition do not even know in which direction they need to drive their bandwagons, how about this speech from the shadow Chief Secretary this morning? Once they have decided that we might be helping people in the pre-Budget report, the shadow Chief Secretary goes on the radio and says:

> If the Chancellor gives a large amount away, either in tax reductions or in spending increases, the fact is you'll just have a huge hit on interest rates from the Bank of England.

The interviewer said:

> So we could expect prudence?

The shadow Chief Secretary said:

> We certainly ought to demand prudence.

The Opposition have been going around telling us to do all these things; now they come along today and ask for prudence. Well, I hope they cheer when they get it.

Pre-Budget Statement

3.30 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): In 1997, Britain had a £28 billion deficit, a national debt that had doubled and rising inflation, and was at risk of repeating the old familiar cycle of stop-go. So in this pre-Budget report, which will address specific and immediate concerns, we will do nothing to put at risk the economic stability that has given this country the lowest unemployment for 20 years, the lowest inflation for 30 years, mortgages 4 per cent.—£1,000—below the average of the previous 20 years, and a Budget discipline that has enabled us to cut borrowing and to invest more every year in hospitals, schools and public services.

This hard won and newly won stability now gives Britain an opportunity that we can either seize or squander. It is the opportunity to achieve high levels of productivity growth, and so to ensure long-term prosperity not just for some, but for all. Yet every time the British economy has started to grow—as in the 1980s—Governments have made short-term decisions on tax and spending which have put inflation, interest rates and economic stability at risk. So Britain has a choice: the choice that underlies the pre-Budget report.

The risk for Britain is to repeat the 1980s mistake of taking economic strength for granted when we still have a large productivity gap with our competitors, and trying to run the economy at a capacity not yet achieved. Our choice—the choice of this pre-Budget report—is that we build economic strength by investing and, through tax incentives, encourage a new generation of entrepreneurs.

The risk for Britain is to repeat the late 1980s mistake of claiming that a surplus in one year could fund tax cuts for every year, and, by committing in tax what had yet to be earned, stoking up an unsustainable consumer boom and forcing interest and mortgage rates to rise. We will take no risks with stability. Our choice—the choice of the pre-Budget report—is to lock in stability by, as I shall announce today, prudently cutting debt and debt interest payments to keep inflation and interest rates low.

The risk for Britain would be to cut investment in education and infrastructure and to perpetuate decades of neglect and undermine our economy. This pre-Budget report makes a different choice: to move forward with our three-year spending plans, which will double public investment—from investment in education and health to investment in transport, policing and the environment; and, while continuing to cut unemployment and debt interest, to combine public spending with targeted tax cuts to do more for pensioners and, as I will show, to give families the lowest direct tax burden for 30 years. This pre-Budget statement sets out a balanced approach: first stability and prudence to keep interest rates low, secondly tackling under-investment, and then, when it is affordable to do so, making targeted tax cuts for the nation's priorities.

Let me deal first with the forecasts for the economy. Since 1997, our first and most fundamental choice has been—through Bank of England independence, tough controls on public spending and difficult decisions on tax—to build economic stability. There were those in the House who predicted that our policies would bring recession. I can report that this year inflation is meeting its 2.5 per cent. target, and that long-term interest rates are now the lowest for 30 years—the same as those in Germany, and lower than those in America. The economy is forecast to grow by 3 per cent. this year, and manufacturing—despite its difficulties—by 1½ per cent. Exports are growing by 8 per cent. and consumer demand by 3½ per cent., with living standards rising. Business investment has grown by 1 per cent. this year as we lock in a higher level of investment as a share of our economy—14½ per cent.—than at any time in 40 years. Investment is now a bigger share of our economy than it is of the American economy.

In total, fixed investment this year has grown by 2.5 per cent. With 1.1 million men and women in work, Britain now has the lowest unemployment since 1979, the lowest long-term unemployment since 1978, the lowest youth unemployment since 1975, and the highest employment ever among women. Unemployment is now lower in every region: today, there are 1 million vacancies spread across the country. This month, we plan to reach our promised target: 250 young people moved from welfare into work—*[Interruption.]*—250,000 young people.

It is precisely because we have taken the trouble to build the long-term foundations for success, and precisely because we have resisted short-termism that would threaten stability in interest rates, that I can report that, even in times of uncertainty for the world economy over oil prices and exchange rates, the Treasury forecast for next year is as follows: inflation will again meet its target of 2½ per cent; manufacturing next year will grow by between 2 and 2¼ per cent.; exports will grow by 7 to 7½ per cent.; growth will range from 2¼ to 2¾ per cent.; consumer demand will grow by 2¼ to 2½ per cent.; business investment will grow by 1½ to 2 per cent., and total investment will grow by 4¼ to 4½ per cent.

There were those who predicted our public spending plans would lead to higher inflation and that the economy would run out of control. Between 1979 and 1997, inflation averaged 6.2 per cent. Since 1997, it has been less than half as much—2.4 per cent. Interest rates averaged 10 per cent.; since 1997 they have averaged 6 per cent. Mortgage rates from 1979 averaged 11 per cent.; since 1997 they have averaged 7 per cent. Growth from 1979 averaged 2 per cent.; since 1997 it has been 2.7 per cent.

We have steered a course of stability, but we are not satisfied. Long-term prosperity for all is our objective. We want to achieve, in this decade, full employment, higher education for the majority of young people and sustained improvements in our public services. With an end to child and pensioner poverty, we want not just some but all of our citizens to share in rising prosperity.

That long-term prosperity depends on us reaching American levels of productivity growth. By removing the barriers, tackling under-investment and skill deficiencies, overcoming resistance to new technology and removing restrictive practices wherever they arise, we will build a stronger enterprise culture open to all. Today, as part of the Government's contribution to a new and necessary drive for higher productivity, I am proposing measures, to consult on, to encourage entrepreneurship and expand investment.

To make Britain the best place in the world for multinational companies to locate, we will build on our cut in corporation tax from 33p to 30p—the lowest of all

major countries and the lowest in our history—by consulting on three major, additional changes. We propose to abolish from April 2001 the withholding tax, not only on international bonds, but normally on payments of interest and royalties between companies in the UK, and to relieve tax on sales of substantial shareholdings by companies. Finally, in line with the needs of the new economy, tax relief will be given for intellectual property and goodwill as we try to create the best environment for modern business in the world.

I can tell the House that this year corporation tax revenues are £2½ billion lower than we forecast. It has been put to me that North sea oil companies earning higher profits from higher oil prices should be subject to special taxes, but I can tell the House that I am determined not to make short-term decisions based on short-term factors. The key issue is the level of long-term investment in the North sea. This will be the approach that will guide Budget decisions in future.

My second set of proposals help small businesses, whose numbers have grown already by 150,000 since 1997. Last year we cut small company corporation tax—once 23p—to 20p and we introduced a new 10p rate, an overall cut in small company tax bills of nearly 25 per cent. Today I am publishing for consultation with small businesses a set of proposals that simplify small business VAT; they will be of direct help to up to half a million small businesses. Capital allowances and tax credits to encourage investment have already saved over £800 million for business since 1997, a third of a billion pounds of that in manufacturing.

Because I understand and recognise the importance of manufacturing, I will now examine, for the Budget, further incentives to help the manufacturing sector: in particular the proposals from the Confederation of British Industry and the Engineering Employers Federation to extend the research and development tax credit.

To help smaller high risk and e-commerce companies recruit and retain the staff they need, we propose to expand tax relief for share options and to make Britain the most attractive environment for e-commerce. In future, all employees can benefit from our enterprise incentive scheme—up to a company limit of £2½ million worth of share options. For the period to May 2000, I propose to make provision for companies to limit and settle their liability for national insurance contributions on share options.

Having cut capital gains tax from 40p to 10p for long-term investment, I now propose an even further widening of the scope of the 10p rate—to non-trading companies and to venture capital companies so that employees of all types of companies can now benefit from the 10p capital gains rate.

To enhance the contribution of institutional investors to the economy, we will consult on the Myners report proposals to reform the minimum funding requirement and to remove regulatory barriers to investing in venture capital.

To expand savings generally, and especially to double the number of low-income families who save, we will review all the capital limits that deter saving. Already, 9 million individual savings accounts have been opened, and £3 billion more is being saved in them by low-income savers. The tax-free limit for ISA savers has been set for next year at £5,000. I propose once more to set it at £7,000, a figure I shall set now for the next five years.

To build enterprise and balanced economic development across all the regions and public investment, including public-private partnerships, we are proposing today that regional development agencies have greater freedom and flexibility to decide locally how money is invested for them to meet local needs.

The rate of small business creation in high unemployment communities is still one sixth of that in more prosperous areas, and unemployment is still twice as high. Future jobs and long-term prosperity will not come from benefit cheques or the old subsidies, but by a radically different approach—encouraging economic activity and business development along the lines proposed by the Cohen and Rogers reports.

I now propose a radical reform of tax incentives that is designed to raise business investment and economic activity in the high unemployment areas of the country by £1 billion. I propose to introduce stamp duty exemption for all properties in our most disadvantaged communities; accelerated tax relief for cleaning up contaminated land; VAT cuts to reduce the costs of residential property conversions; and tax relief to bring empty flats over shops back into use.

I propose to consult on further business rate relief for small businesses in the assisted areas, and a new and generous tax credit for community investment, including support for the creation of the first community development venture fund.

To assist the upgrading of listed buildings that are central to community life in all parts of the country, I can also announce that we are today asking the European Commission to reduce VAT from 17½ per cent. to 5 per cent. for repairs to churches.

I have one other proposal for a special tax relief. We will not only continue to work for the cut in third-world debt that this and other countries are fighting for, but we now plan to do more to meet the international targets of cutting world poverty by half and cutting by two thirds infant mortality, which, through preventable diseases, carries off one in seven of the world's children before they reach the age of five.

As one of a number of proposals that the Secretary of State for International Development and I are working on to tackle child poverty, the Government will investigate a new tax incentive and a spending measure to develop, cut the costs for and ensure the supply of anti-TB, anti-malaria and anti-AIDS drugs—drugs that could save lives and that are tragically still unavailable in the poorest countries, but drugs which have the potential, which must now be realised, to reduce avoidable suffering and unacceptable deaths.

I turn to the pre-Budget measures to meet our goal of full employment. In addition to making work pay through the 10p income tax rate, our working families tax credit and the new deal—which some would abolish, but which, as independent research shows, has cut youth unemployment by 40 per cent. more than would have happened without it—the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I will work to intensify coaching help for the 50,000 young people who are still out of work. We will consult on introducing a new service that will help redundant workers to move quickly into new jobs. We will investigate how, with tax-free and, in some cases, free adult learning, we can help to upgrade fast-changing workplace skills.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

We will extend the new deal for lone parents with our nationwide programme of choices starting next April, and extend to a further 150,000 lone parents not on income support the opportunity, in the programme of choices, to get back to work. We will agree a new partnership with the voluntary sector to help those with disabilities who want work to get it, while with a £200 million a year additional package that the Secretary of State for Social Security will announce tomorrow, we will take action to improve the living standards of those unable to work who are disabled, and of those who care for them. For each area, we will proceed to draw up local full employment plans addressing all barriers to full employment in their local areas.

High productivity and rising employment depend not just on ending decades of under-investment and targeting tax incentives on our priorities, but on entrenching a low-inflation culture that prudently keeps interest rates and mortgage rates as low as possible. It is because we have learned from the mistakes of the 1980s and before, that I can tell the House that, in spite of the demands that are being made to me, I have decided, in the interests of keeping interest rates and mortgage rates as low as possible, to lock in over the coming years a fiscal stance that is the same or tighter than we set at the time of the Budget.

Let me give the House the background and the full financial figures. Our first rule—the golden rule, which is necessary to keep interest rates and mortgage rates as low as possible—is that over the cycle there must be a current surplus. So, however tempting it may be for some to identify large temporary surpluses as an excuse for permanent injections of resources into the economy, our golden rule demands that there is constant prudence.

In the Budget, I forecast this year's current surplus at £14 billion. I now forecast it to be £16.6 billion. In the years from 2001-02 onwards, the current surpluses are forecast to be £16 billion, £14 billion, £8 billion and £8 billion—figures that will ensure that we remain on course to balance the current Budget over the economic cycle, even on the most cautious of cases.

Our second fiscal rule—the sustainable investment rule, which is a bulwark against short-termism that again helps to keep interest and mortgage rates as low as possible—is that while, over the cycle, we will borrow for investment, we do not borrow for consumption and we keep debt at a prudent and sustainable level below 40 per cent of national income.

After a doubling of national debt in the early 1990s, the ratio of debt to national income had by 1997 risen to 44 per cent. Having made the necessary and difficult tax and spending decisions, in the three years since 1997 we have reduced the ratio of debt to national income from 44 per cent., to 41.9 per cent., to 39.6 per cent., and now to 36.8 per cent. this April. I can report to the House that two decisions—first, the decision to use the proceeds from the spectrum auction to reduce our debt and, secondly, to use this year's surplus for repayment of debt—now make possible a further and even more substantial reduction in debt that will keep interest rates low.

Because we are, in total, cutting the debt by as much as one third, I can report to the House that the public sector net debt as a share of gross domestic product will now fall from 36.8 per cent. last year to 32.3 per cent. this year to 30.9 per cent. in 2001–02. In addition, from what was a debt to GDP ratio as high as 44 per cent. in 1997, I can report that this ratio is forecast to fall to 30 per cent. and remain there in future years. With long-term interest rates lower and debt well within that 40 per cent. ceiling, we are not only well placed to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of the economic cycle, but we have the best platform possible for years for sustained long-term growth.

Our budget forecast for net borrowing was a surplus of £6½ billion this year. Now, we forecast the surplus to be £10 billion, and £6 billion next year. In future, the deficits will be £1 billion, £10 billion, £12 billion and £13 billion as we borrow to invest. In every one of the next five years, adjusting for the economic cycle, there will be a fiscal stance that is the same or tighter than at the time of the Budget—and this year, with the spectrum proceeds, the net cash debt repayment will be £28 billion.

Our approach is to reject the old vicious circle of the '80s—rising debt, higher long-term interest rates, higher debt repayment costs, lower growth, higher unemployment, then enforced cuts in public spending. That was the old boom and bust. Instead, as we have promised, we have by our decisions created a virtuous circle of falling debt, lower long-term interest rates, lower unemployment, lower debt repayments and a stronger economy releasing more resources for public services.

I can report to Members that because of this virtuous circle, lower unemployment has brought savings in social security which, compared with the Budget, provide an additional £1.5 billion next year, and £2 billion and £2½ billion in the next two years after that. In addition to higher Government revenues this year from higher employment, higher earnings growth and from steady growth, debt interest payments are now lower than we forecast at the time of the Budget—by £2½ billion next year and £2 billion in each of the next two years after that.

When we came into Government, we were paying out more in debt interest payments than we were spending on all our schools in the country. Soon, as a result of cutting these debt payments, we will be able to spend 50 per cent. more on our schools than we do on debt interest. Over the past 20 years, 42p of every additional pound spent went to debt interest and social security. In the early '90s, it rose to 50 per cent. of every additional pound spent. Debt and social security will now require only 17p of every pound, and that leaves more than 80p in every pound of additional spending to go to hospitals, schools and vital services, and it enables us to tackle the long-term under-investment in Britain.

Because we have cut the costs of debt and unemployment—now costing £5 billion less than in 1997—and because we have secured sustainable growth, we are able to lock in the fiscal tightening and meet all our fiscal rules, and, within this prudent framework, we are in an even stronger position than in July to tackle under-investment and to target tax cuts on our nation's priorities.

Since July, I have received representations from many people in this House about public spending, including representations from the Conservatives, who propose spending growth only in line with 2 per cent. GDP growth a year. I have studied that proposal in detail. It would

mean, by year three, cuts in spending of £16 billion—and after taking into account the measures I will announce on pensions today, more than £16 billion.

I have rejected those representations, and because the economy both needs and can afford to—and cannot afford not to—tackle the under-investment in our country, the Education Secretary will tomorrow, as part of allocating his annual 5 per cent. real-terms increase in education next year, announce new resources for the Learning and Skills Council.

Because investment is needed in our infrastructure not just for social but for economic reasons, the Minister for Transport will announce how every region, city and town will benefit from new investment in roads. With new funds from the spending review allocated to each region for economic regeneration, the Deputy Prime Minister will shortly publish his rural and urban White Papers.

As part of the 5.6 per cent. real-terms rise in NHS spending for the next three years, the Secretary of State for Health will announce for each of those years his allocation to health authorities up to 2004; giving them the stability and certainty that they want for their spending.

In addition to the statement on pensions from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security tomorrow, and the extra allocation that we have made to improve flood defences, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will announce today additional allocations to our schools.

The windfall tax is money raised from the utilities specifically for the purpose of extending employment opportunity through the new deal and educational opportunity through renovating, so far, 17,000 schools. Such has been the success of the new deal in getting people back to work that the windfall levy account is underspent by £200 million. So my right hon. Friend and I have decided that, in addition to this year's rise in education spending, lower unemployment means that we can allocate new money to every school in every constituency of the country—money to be available this year for repairs and improvements; money to be paid direct to the school.

The head teacher of every primary school will receive a cheque for between £4,000 and £7,000. The head teacher of each secondary school will receive, for the smaller schools, £10,000, and for the larger schools, £30,000: prudence once again for a purpose, enabling us to target resources to our priorities and in a sustainable way. That prudence now allows us to match public spending increases by tax cuts targeted on the country's priorities, including making reforms in the tax treatment of transport and the environment, to which I now turn.

Between 1997 and 1999, retaining the fuel escalator introduced in 1993 helped cut borrowing by £30 billion, helping deliver lower interest rates. It enabled us to begin the long-overdue investment in transport, the NHS and schools, and it will have brought about a cut in carbon dioxide pollution by an estimated 1 million to 2½ million tonnes of pollution by the year 2010.

Today, like all countries, we are having to deal with the rise in world oil prices from $11 to $31. Because the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries itself accepts that the world price is unacceptably high, our international efforts are geared to ensuring that production is raised and prices fall. Therefore, I recognise and understand the very genuine concerns that motorists and hauliers have. It is because we have already managed to cut our deficit, already set aside £180 billion for our 10-year transport plan, and already shown how we are meeting the Kyoto targets, that in the last Budget we removed the fuel escalator and made environmentally based cuts in car and lorry licence fees, and gave new incentives for environmentally efficient fuels. In line with the principles that we set down then, I am now able to show how we can complete those reforms and do more to meet people's concerns, without putting at risk economic stability, necessary investment in public services or the environmental gains. Indeed, the reforms that I propose today are tailor-made to meet our environmental obligations.

The annual rise in the price of fuel that would be automatically introduced on Budget day would raise £560 million, putting petrol and diesel up by about 1½p a litre. I propose, at that cost of £560 million, a freeze in excise duties—an across-the-board duty freeze on all fuels that would initially last until April 2002, and, if the oil price remains high between now and then, I can tell the House that there would be a duty freeze for a further year.

I intend to go further, however, in three vital respects. On top of the duty freeze that we had budgeted for in our fiscal arithmetic, the first of the proposals I will consult upon would itself involve additional expenditure of as much as £1,000 million and help to promote substantial benefit to the environment. Yesterday, we published a report showing the environmental benefits from the introduction of ultra-low sulphur diesel in reducing local air pollution. As a result of cuts we made in excise duty on ultra-low sulphur diesel, usage of that fuel has risen in Britain from 20 per cent. in 1997 to 40 per cent. in 1998 to 100 per cent. in 2000. It requires no change to be made in lorry and van engines. It now accounts for virtually 100 per cent. of the market for diesel in Britain today, and Britain is now leading in this cleaner diesel fuel.

We now need to build on that environmental achievement. The widespread use of ultra-low sulphur petrol would further and significantly improve local air quality. Crucially, it would require no change to existing car engines. It is now time to make this cleaner fuel available in every petrol station in the United Kingdom and to make the use of this fuel, which requires no change in any car, cheaper for everyone. To do so I propose to cut the excise duty for ultra-low sulphur petrol so that it replaces unleaded petrol in every petrol station and at a lower excise duty.

On 1 October, we reduced the duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol by 1p a litre. I propose from Budget 2001 a further reduction of 2p a litre—making a cut of 3p in total on all ultra-low sulphur petrol. Because it is right to maintain the proper balance between petrol and diesel, I propose also from Budget day to match the cut in ultra-low sulphur petrol with a 3p cut in excise duties on ultra-low sulphur diesel, which will go to all diesel users. I expect ultra-low sulphur petrol and diesel to account for 100 per cent. of the market next year. When the excise duty cut is introduced at Budget time, motorists using any petrol station in Britain should be able to benefit from this duty cut.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

It is by giving this incentive for cleaner fuels that we can both advance our environmental principles and ensure—with the 3p cut per litre in all ultra-low sulphur duty—a cheaper cleaner fuel available in every garage, a better deal for drivers and cleaner air across Britain.

I can also announce that for all cars that still use lead replacement petrol—where there is no longer an environmental case for a higher duty rate—I propose from Budget day to end the differential and cut the excise duty by 2p a litre.

I now intend to go further to help the haulage industry, which is undergoing restructuring. I propose support for scrapping or converting older lorries, with a £100 million investment fund that will include help for buying the new lorries that meet the technological and environmental standards of the future and support for the introduction of logistics and computerisation in the industry. The Deputy Prime Minister will also announce help for an industrywide training and retraining scheme.

We can do more. So that foreign lorries pay their share of the costs of using our roads, we intend to introduce in Britain a vignette system, a British disc under which non-British companies and lorries pay their share to Britain for using British roads.

The Government have considered an essential-user rebate or blue diesel scheme for lorry diesel. However, such a scheme would be administratively cumbersome; it could be levied only on future purchases of diesel; it would have to be open to foreign lorries using British roads; it would not help hauliers where their fuel prices are directly passed on to customers; and it would have no environmental benefits in itself.

The scheme I am proposing is far better. Subject to consultation and legal clearance, I now propose to bring forward a much needed reform, begun last year, in vehicle excise duty for lorries. It will radically cut rates for larger lorries that have traditionally high licence fees. The scheme will be implemented in Budget 2001. It will sweep aside the 100 separate rates; it will consolidate them into only seven rate bands, which will be linked to environmental standards; and we shall cut the rates to match the lowest in Europe.

Lorries in the most competitive sector will save over £2,000. Over 250,000 lorries will each pay lower licence fees as a result of a £300 million total cut in licence fee costs. One hundred thousand lorries will save over £1,000. The average saving per lorry will be £715 a year. The cuts are equivalent in value to a cut of 3p in the price of diesel for the haulage industry—again, with environmental incentives built in to the new licence system. Our proposals for the detailed new scheme and licence rates are published today, and the Government are able to start the transitional arrangements to the new licence system immediately.

I have allocated £265 million for this financial year—half of the annual revenue raised from lorry VED—to be spent before March for a refund scheme that can repay lorry owners up to half of this year's licence fee. Two hundred and fifty thousand lorries and all large lorries will benefit from the refunds—they will be worth, for some of the largest lorries paying the highest fees, £1,000, and up to £4,000 this year. Refunds will be paid from next month, with payments to be completed by the end of January. The detailed arrangements will be announced by the Minister for Transport.

To help restructuring and investment in farming, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced last week an addition to this year's £220 million packages of measures: agrimoney compensation for arable producers. In addition to freezing red diesel duty at its current rate, I intend in Budget 2001 to abolish vehicle excise duty on tractors and agricultural vehicles.

I now have a similar proposal for car licence fees. It is consistent with our environmental principle that we tax vehicle ownership less, and I now want to complete the environmentally based reform of vehicle excise duties for cars. The new licence fee that we are introducing for new cars registered from March 2001 is linked to environmental efficiency. For all cars under 1200 cc, there is now a lower rate licence fee with a £55 deduction on the standard fee.

While that change has been welcomed, many—especially those in rural areas—have put it to me that greater choice would be available to rural motorists and motorists generally if the £55 deduction could be accessible not only for cars under 1200 cc, but for cars up to 1500 cc, including the Focus, Golf, Astra, Escort and Rover 214. Therefore, I propose to extend the lower rate licence fee and the £55 discount to cars up to 1500 cc, to be paid out from July but to be backdated to today. All those who have a car from 1200 cc to 1500 cc—that is, an extra 5 million cars—will be entitled to £55 off their annual licence fee from today. In total, $8\frac{1}{2}$ million existing cars—one in three—will now pay £55 below the standard fee.

So for motorists as a whole, with the duty freeze, the new reduced licence fee and the cut for ultra-low sulphur petrol, the proposed Budget package will make changes worth the equivalent of a 4p a litre cut while meeting our environmental objectives. By next year, for the haulage industry, there will be changes worth the equivalent of a cut of 8p a litre. In each case, we shall be meeting our environmental obligations and not putting at risk public investment in our vital services or the stability of the economy. Ministers are now inviting discussion of those measures in the pre-Budget consultation, which will take place as Ministers visit every region of the country.

I come now to specific measures of benefit to families and to pensioners. Our aim is that not just some, but every child has the best start in life and that we halve child poverty in the coming decade. Families need help most at the time when parents are bringing up their children. As we extend our new integrated system of child support—from £15 a week for every child to a maximum of £50 a week—our priority in the coming Budget is the new children's tax credit, which is a tax cut for families. This family tax cut, which replaces the married couple's allowance, will be paid on top of child benefit to around 5 million families at £8.50 a week, worth £442 a year.

On current figures, the proposals on which we are consulting would, if implemented, mean that overall the tax burden would not rise next year, and I will achieve my aim of next year cutting the direct tax burden on the typical family to below 20 per cent. It will fall to 18.6 per cent., the lowest level since 1972. However, I believe that in the coming Budget we can offer a larger tax cut for

families. My aim is to increase the family tax cut to £10 a week, in total a £520 a year tax cut that will increase families' incomes.

Just as we are introducing a new system of child support based on the foundation of child benefit—at the heart of which is the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit—so too it is now time, based on exactly the same principles, to raise pensioner incomes by a tax and benefit reform that will have as its foundation the basic state pension, and will have as its building block—like the working families tax credit—a new and generous pension credit.

Our aim for pensions reform is both to end pensioner poverty and to ensure that all pensioners share in the rising prosperity of the nation. In a new world of rapidly diverging pensioner incomes—already, 17 per cent. of couples are retiring on more than £20,000 a year, a percentage which grows year by year—and where, as a result, inequalities between pensioner incomes are as great as inequalities within the population as a whole, we will best meet our obligations to pensioners by a new approach.

To plan for the future based on a flat rate earnings-linked rise paid to all, which would give exactly the same to those with incomes above £20,000 as to those on middle incomes—and because the income support system would do absolutely nothing for the poorest—would mean that by the time today's 45-year-olds were retiring, for every £6 billion extra spent on the earnings link, £2 billion would go to pensioners with incomes above £20,000 at today's prices. That would mean that less would be available for the middle and lower income pensioners in greatest need, who are our first priority.

We need a policy that does most for those who need most and at the same time ensures that all pensioners—the very poor, those on modest incomes and the relatively comfortable—share in the rising prosperity of the nation. Let me tell the House what the new system, which will integrate tax and benefits and build upon the basic pension a new pension credit, will look like in 2003, and then I will set out the transitional arrangements.

First, for those in and at risk of poverty, we will radically improve the minimum income guarantee. I can tell the House that the minimum income guarantee, which was £68.80 in 1997, is £78.45 today, and will be raised in April by £14 a week to £92.15. For thousands of our poorest pensioners, that will mean £700 extra a year. I can also tell the House that when the new system is introduced in April 2003, the minimum income guarantee will be set not at £92, but at £100 a week, £22 a week more than today. For the first time, a single pensioner will be guaranteed at least £100 a week. For couples, there will be a rise from £106.60 in 1997 to £154. Every year after that, I can tell the House that the minimum income guarantee will be raised in line with earnings.

With the winter allowance, there will be a 32 per cent. increase in pensioner income for this group even after inflation. That demonstrates our determination that no pensioner is left behind as the Government work to ensure that pensioner poverty in this country becomes a thing of the past. More than 2 million pensioners will benefit. People will be able to claim by phone. They will do so at the point of retirement, and adjustments thereafter would need to be made only when circumstances changed.

We have a second obligation—to millions of pensioners who, after a lifetime of hard work, have modest occupational pensions and modest savings, but receive nothing, and have received nothing over the years, from the system on top of their basic pension and have until now been penalised, not rewarded, for their savings.

These are people whom we meet every week in our constituencies, and this Government are determined that people who have worked hard and saved hard all their lives should now receive more.

Tomorrow the Secretary of State for Social Security's statement will outline the new integrated tax and benefit system—both the pension credit and the new pensioner tax arrangements. I said in the Budget that we wanted the beneficiaries of the new credit to be single pensioners with incomes of up to £100 and pensioner couples with incomes up to £150. I can now say to the House that pensioner couples with incomes below £200, and single pensioners with incomes below £135—many millions of pensioners—will now receive this new pension credit when it is introduced. I can also tell the House that, while the pension will rise in line with inflation, the new pension credit will also rise in line with earnings every year.

In this way, we will give recipients of the pension credit more than even the earnings link in the basic state pension would give them. The pensioners tax allowance will be set at April 2003 at an even higher level—£6,560 for the single pensioner before tax is paid—and for the next Parliament we propose the pensioners tax allowance will also rise in line with earnings.

For the vast majority of pensioners, therefore—middle and low-income pensioners—in Britain, the new system will provide extra cash on top of the basic pension: sums of between £1 and £23 a week extra. And we will achieve all our aims: for millions of the neediest pensioners, relief from poverty; for those on modest incomes, a reward for their savings and occupational pensions higher than an earnings link would give them; and ensuring that all pensioners can enjoy a share in the rising standards of living of our country.

As we move to this new and better system, the Secretary of State for Social Security and I have decided that the transitional arrangements should ensure that over the next two years, pensioner incomes should rise faster than inflation—indeed, faster than earnings—so from April next year we propose that, for the single pensioner, there should be a cash increase of £5 a week; and for a married couple, a rise of £8 a week. I can tell the House that in the following year we can also guarantee the pension will rise above prices—a cash increase of £3 for single pensioners and £4.80 for married couples. Over two years, therefore, there will be a cash rise of £8 for single pensioners and £12.80 for couples—for pensions, £2.6 billion more: more than the link with earnings would give; more each year, on top of more for health, education, transport, policing and the public services.

Those who would spend this money on tax cutting should now tell us which hospitals, which schools, which public services they would cut. The Government have made our choice: investment; targeted tax cuts; keeping mortgage rates low; more for pensions and families—a stronger, fairer Britain.

I have one final announcement. I have had representations to abolish the winter fuel allowance, and, indeed, to abolish the free TV licence for over-75s. I have

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even received representations to abolish the Christmas bonus. I have rejected such options, which would give with one hand and take with another.

I can confirm that, now and in future years, the free TV licence will remain for the over-75s as we have promised; the Christmas bonus will continue; and the winter allowance will be paid at £150. But the transitional arrangements to our new pension reform will start not next year but this year; indeed they will start this week. I can confirm that cheques are being sent out from Monday that will be paid to every pensioner household in Britain. The winter allowance will not be paid at £150 this year. Nor will it be abolished. For this year specially—the first year of the transitional arrangements—it will be paid not at £150, but at £200 for every pensioner household, free of tax.

I commend the statement to the House.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I begin by drawing attention to my declaration of Member's interests.

This is the first chance that I have had to address the Chancellor since his wedding, and I should like to congratulate him and his wife and wish them both every happiness.

There is much in the right hon. Gentleman's statement which, on reflection, we will be able to welcome, particularly the changes in VAT on churches and the initiative that he announced today on aid to the third world. However, it was certainly not the statement that the Chancellor intended to make.

In all the Chancellor's public pronouncements, he boasts about how he always plans for the long term and how he abhors quick fixes. The statement was all about short-term tactics and quick fixes. *[Interruption.]* The Chancellor today was in full retreat. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, this was the statement that the Chancellor told us he would never—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House must come to order.

Mr. Portillo: This was the statement that the Chancellor told us he would never be able to make. Did not Ministers tell us time and again that they could give no concessions to pensioners and no concessions to motorists? *[Interruption.]* Yes, they did, because they said that that could be done only at the expense of closing schools and hospitals. Why did not the Chancellor repeat that spurious nonsense today? Can he tell us, as a result of the changes that he has made today, how many schools and hospitals he has had to close? Once again, the insincerity and spin of this Labour Government have been laid bare.

The Chancellor tells us that things have changed because he now has a large surplus. Whose surplus is it, anyway? It is the people's surplus. It has arisen because the people of this country have been overtaxed. The Chancellor has overtaxed the British people: £5 billion of that surplus has come from the taxes that he has imposed on pension funds; £5 billion has come from the extra taxes that he has imposed on business; and £5 billion has come from the extra duties that he has imposed on petrol and diesel.

Those foolish increases in duty led to one of the two problems that the Chancellor had to come to the House to address today. The fuel protest was in fact a revolt by the taxpayers of this country, who have been overtaxed by the Chancellor—people who are not well off and who have been overtaxed—but he proposes to tax them even more.

The Chancellor's figures revealed today confirm that there would be no room for tax cuts under a future Labour Government. *[Interruption.]* Today the right hon. Gentleman is in pre-election mode, but will he admit that his plans to raise public spending by more than the country can afford year after year mean that there will be tax increases year after year in the coming Parliament? Does he have any understanding of what the extra burden of tax and regulation means for our economy? *[Interruption.]*

Today's statement, like all the Chancellor's others, was characterised by a great deal of micro-economic meddling by a highly interventionist Chancellor who is fiddling while Britain slips behind. [HON. MEMBERS: "No.!"] Oh, yes. The Chancellor was very selective in the figures that he gave us today. Why is it that since the Chancellor has been in charge—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members should listen to this.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House to allow the right hon. Gentleman to state his case.

Mr. Portillo: Why is it that since the Chancellor has been in charge, Britain has grown half as fast as the United States? Why is it that, over the past three years, the growth in the British economy has been slower than it was in the previous 15 years? Why is it that under Labour, Britain's share of world exports is slipping fast? Why has productivity been cut by half under the Government, so that it is now half the United States rate? Those are the proper measures of Labour's lack of economic success.

Let me tell the Chancellor today that his changes to individual savings accounts will not help. This is the Chancellor who raided the nation's pension funds and abolished PEPs and TESSAs, and this is the Chancellor who has reduced the nation's savings to their lowest level since 1963.

Is it not ludicrous, too, that the Chancellor who abolished mortgage interest relief, and who has done more than any other to raise stamp duty year after year, now tries to pose as the house buyer's friend in inner cities? If he claims that cuts in stamp duty in inner cities will help householders and businesses, will he now admit how much damage he has done with the swingeing increases that he has imposed in the past?

For all the Chancellor's gimmicks, the simple fact is that, because taxes have been rising, real disposable incomes in Britain have not been growing. People noticed that before the economists did, and that is what the fuel protest was about, and that is when the taxpayers bit back.

The Chancellor loves to talk of stability, but he has delivered a standstill. He has delivered a Britain in which living standards are not rising and the traffic does not move. The Chancellor's proudest invention—the stealth-tax policy—now lies in ruins.

Was it not this Chancellor—let us all remember this—who not only caused the problem of the fuel protest, but the problem with the pensioners as well? It was this

Chancellor, was it not, who insulted Britain's pensioners by raising their pensions by 75p? Was it not this Chancellor who, being far too clever by half, decided to raise the pension by 1.1 per cent. and fuel by 3.4 per cent., and claim that both were in line with inflation? I tell the Chancellor of the Exchequer today that Britain's pensioners will never forget what he did to them. *[Interruption.]* We welcome—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) should not shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Portillo: We welcome the extra money for pensioners, but here again there were short-term fixes. When will the Chancellor of the Exchequer come up with a long-term solution for properly funded pensions in Britain? Will not today's announcement dent the Chancellor's credibility even more? Is not this the man—and listen to this—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Well, I am going to quote the Chancellor. If hon. Members do not want to listen to the Chancellor, that's all right. Is not this the man who, addressing the Labour party conference before the last election, said, "I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in 50 years of the welfare state has never been achieved—the end of means-testing of our elderly people." Yet today he has announced the most massive extension of means-testing for elderly people. I remind Labour Members what means-testing means. It means all the indignities and humiliations of filling out the form.

The Chancellor has done that in two ways. He has vastly increased the number of people who now have to apply for means-tested benefits, and, on top of that, pensioners with savings must now also be means-tested if they are to qualify for their credits. Is not the whole scheme typical of the Chancellor? It is a scheme so incredibly complicated that none of our constituents will be able to understand it, and none will know what they are entitled to.

Today, the Chancellor has announced the rates of pension that the Conservatives will inherit if we come to office in May. We welcome them, but we, the Conservatives, will do better. Under a Conservative Government, the pension next April would be £9.50 higher for a single pensioner over 60 or 65; £13 higher for a pensioner couple over 65; £11.60 higher for a single pensioner over 75; and £16.10 higher for a pensioner couple over 75.

We are perfectly straightforward about the fact that we would roll up the winter fuel allowance, the Christmas bonus and the free television licence for the over-75s, and we would use all that money, and the many millions of pounds saved in administration costs, to pay a higher weekly pension. Moreover—I want the Prime Minister to take this in—we would make that money tax free and we would adjust the income-related benefits as well.

The taxpayer revolt this summer marked a watershed, and the moment when people in this country realised that the Labour Government had betrayed them. Conservatives warned the Government *[Interruption.]* Oh, yes. We said that we should charge foreign lorries for driving on our roads. We voted against the duty increases and campaigned against them; we recommended a 3p cut for fuel, and the Chancellor would not listen. However, it seems that he has had to listen. It seems that he has had to listen to everything that we said. The vignette has been introduced today. It was a Conservative idea, as was the 3p cut for fuel. We accept the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to our policy.

The Chancellor proudly told the Labour party conference that he would not give ground to those who pushed the hardest and shouted the most. Does anyone seriously believe that we would have had today's statement if it had not been for fuel protest, the panic on the Labour Benches and the fact that the Government are planning an early election?

When the Chancellor first became a Minister, how did he lose touch so quickly with real life? When he increased the pension by 75p, how did he have so little understanding of what it is like to be a pensioner struggling to get by? How did he have so little understanding of what it is like to be a mother trying to take her children to school *[Interruption.]* Oh, they laugh—they laugh at mothers taking their children to school. How did the right hon. Gentleman have so little understanding of what it is like to be a mother having to find £50 out of her purse to fill the tank?

The right hon. Gentleman is truly the Chancellor who did not understand. He has come to the House today to shore up his political position. However, he has shown no sign of understanding, and he never says he is sorry. *[Interruption.]* That refusal to apologise diminishes the Chancellor. He is not half the Chancellor he was a year ago. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Once again, I must appeal for order in the House. There should be no shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Portillo: I do not believe that people will be grateful to the Chancellor for what he has done today. People will remember that he was the cause of the problems. He caused the fuel problem by overtaxing the British people; he caused the pensions problem by insulting our pensioners with the 75p increase. Today he has merely returned a little bit of the people's surplus, but he still plans to take it back through higher taxes if he wins the next election.

When the Chancellor stood up today, Britain had the most expensive petrol in Europe. Now that the Chancellor has sat down, Britain still has the most expensive petrol in Europe. That will be the verdict of the majority. The statement revealed a Chancellor in full retreat, blown about by public opinion, but still a man, who, even in those circumstances, could not come to the House and say, "I'm sorry."

Mr. Brown: I shall answer in detail every point that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) made. If he wants to compare our respective records, let us remember what happened when he was at the Treasury: 22 tax rises, interest rates at 15 per cent. for a year, interest rates above 10 per cent. for four years and the exchange rate mechanism debacle. He was the Minister who introduced the fuel escalator, put VAT on fuel, and introduced the airports tax and the insurance tax. He was even one of the brains behind the poll tax.

When the shadow Chancellor said that he welcomed some of our measures—the overseas development tax relief and some of our pensions measures—his silence on

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other matters was notable. Does he welcome our spending on schools? Does he welcome our spending on transport? The Leader of Opposition said yesterday that under-investment in transport was a problem in Britain. Does he welcome our spending on children's benefits? Does he welcome our spending on getting people back to work?

When the shadow Chancellor says that spending in this country should increase by 2 per cent., not 3.4 per cent; that the gap must be bridged by spending cuts; and that anything more than 2 per cent. is unsustainable and would lead to recession, he has a duty to tell the House how many nurses and doctors, and which schools, hospitals, public services and constituencies, including those of Conservative Members, would suffer as a result of the cuts. And he has no credibility when he says to the House that he will give tax cuts to the people of this country if he will not tell the country where those spending cuts will be made.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he supports some of our measures on pensions, but let us remember that Conservative policy is to abolish not only the winter allowance and the free television licence, which is now going out to several million pensioners, but the Christmas bonus. In 1987, when the shadow Chancellor was the Minister responsible for the Christmas bonus, he said: "Pensioners budgeting for Christmas need the assurance of that contribution to their expenses which this payment provides. The bonus is something to which the majority of the elderly look forward very much. What other people call fringe benefits are of substantial help to the poorest groups in our society."

I thought that Christmas was a time for giving but, under the Conservatives, it would be a time for taking. I can imagine the Conservative pledge card during the election campaign. It would say: "Abolish the new deal. Abolish the working families tax credit. Abolish free television licences. Abolish the winter allowance. And abolish the pensioners' Christmas bonus." The Conservatives would abolish good will for Christmas.

When the shadow Chancellor moved on to the question of the economy, I began to see the wisdom of the words of Lady Thatcher, who said, only a few days ago: "He"—that is, Portillo—"has become very confused. He no longer understands his beliefs." On 18 September, the shadow Chancellor was asked about the effect of public spending commitments on the economy, although today he has not lived up to his promise. He said, "We have to show how all the sums would add up. We have to make sure we have a coherent programme for reducing taxes—how we would save the money necessary to reduce taxes. We want to present that in detail and show how it all adds up together." Today, what did we hear from him? No specifics, no detail, no promises—not even an analysis.

When the shadow Chancellor imagines that he can go into the general election and promise tax cuts year after year on the basis of a year or two's surplus, he is making exactly the mistake—the fatal flaw—that the Conservatives made during the 1980s. His economic policies would return us to stop-go boom-bust. There were four fatal flaws in the Conservative policies of the 1980s, each of which are also flaws in his approach. There are no fiscal rules, so there is no budget discipline. He has given us no indication of the rules that he would follow, which is what produced traditional Tory boom and bust.

The shadow Chancellor told us that he would have tax cuts instead of investment, but the neglect of investment produced the problems in our supply side that meant that we could not sustain a consumer boom because there had been no investment during the 1980s. He has no inflation target—not even our symmetrical inflation target—and he even doubts whether he would keep the Bank of England independent if, as he put it, he could judge it to be incompetent. Most people have that view of him and his economic policies. In all those areas, the Conservative party's economic policy, by its sheer recklessness and irresponsibility, points to the fact that it has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The Conservatives are ready to take this country back to boom and bust.

Who said that the Conservatives had made a mess during the 1980s? It was none other than the shadow Chancellor himself, who said, "Of course the Conservative party should be apologetic for mismanaging the economy."

The economy's growth rate is higher than under the Conservatives. We are tackling the productivity gap and this country's under-investment, and we are getting people back to work. We will not allow the new deal to be abolished, as the Conservatives plan to do. They have no policies for the economy's future. Their party would take this country back to boom and bust. Sixteen billion pounds of spending cuts and a return to boom and bust: the choice for this country has never been clearer.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Treasury Committee will want to question him in detail about the pre-Budget report? From what my right hon. Friend said this afternoon, it is clear that he has managed to combine very welcome increases in pensions with well-targeted help on fuel and sustained investment in education and health, and that he has done that without putting at risk the great prize that we have achieved of economic stability. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will maintain fiscal discipline and that he will not put any strain on Britain's very successful monetary policy?

Mr. Brown: I accept what my right hon. Friend said. He is Chairman of the Treasury Committee and I look forward to discussing these matters with him. Of course, the balance between monetary and fiscal policy decides the strength and growth rate of the economy. As the figures show today, we are running a surplus, repaying £28 billion of debt, and the fiscal stance is tighter or as tight in every year for the next few years, as set out in the Budget.

Of course, the Bank of England must make its own monetary policy decisions, and I look forward to hearing what it says when it makes the decisions tomorrow. The important thing is that by combining a tough fiscal policy with an independent monetary policy, we have moved this country from a permanent relapse in every cycle into boom and bust to a cycle that is capable of greater stability. I hope that even Conservative Back-Bench Members support what we have done to strengthen monetary policy in this country—as some do, I believe.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Hon. Members may have noticed that today's statement was

not so much a pre-Budget consultation as a mini-Budget in its own right. The Chancellor's Labour predecessors introduced mini-Budgets in times of financial crisis precisely because of boom and bust, whereas the right hon. Gentleman introduces them at times of political crisis to bring in policies of bust and boom. Three years of cuts in public service are followed by a general election splurge to buy back the electorate.

The iron Chancellor has buckled in the face of protests from pensioners, Liberal Democrat Members and, indeed, some Labour Back Benchers, who said that he was wrong. The shadow Chancellor is wrong to ask for an apology for the fuel tax increases that his own party introduced. He should have asked for an apology for the measly mean-minded 75p on pensions that the Chancellor introduced only a matter of months ago. Today, the Chancellor has effectively had to admit that he was wrong to do that.

The Chancellor has left even more pensioners reduced to having to claim on the means test. For all the real pension increases that he announced today, which we welcome, he will leave millions of pensioners to the indignity of means tests. His so-called transitional announcement amounts to two years in which pensioners will get above-inflation pension increases only to go back to 75p inflation-based increases thereafter. That is the reality of the policy announced today, which is a policy of more means tests. Do not pensioners need real investment in long-term pension increases?

On fuel, the Chancellor must be aware that the policies that he introduced today are, lock, stock and barrel, those that we have been urging on him and his Conservative predecessors for nearly eight years. We have to wonder why those changes are coming now that the Chancellor faces a general election and fuel protests, rather than as part of a long-term strategy. He is not an iron Chancellor, but a Chancellor who buckles in the face of politics. That is no wonder, as the real hat that he is wearing today is the hat of the chairman of Labour's general election campaign.

Of course, some of the measures for business are welcome, but it is odd that there is total silence on the one issue that is really causing a crisis in British manufacturing and British farming—the high level of the pound. There was not a policy or a promise to help either of them.

Even after all the hype about this pre-Budget report—which was announced to the press 72 hours in advance and rolled out in the House of Commons as an afterthought—the Chancellor will still have spent in this Parliament less of the national cake on education and health than the Conservatives did, and will leave more pensioners reduced to the indignity of the means test. He has not had the guts to admit that his policy on pensions was wrong. Even today when he reversed it, he did not have the guts to apologise.

Mr. Brown: I do not know where the Liberal Democrat spokesman stands. He accuses me of buckling under pressure, including pressure from him, by giving away too much, and ends up telling me that I am giving away too little. He will have to work out what his position is on these matters. No doubt his position in one part of the country will be for more, and in another part it will be for less, as is usual with the Liberal Democrats.

On the specific issue of pensions, the Liberal Democrat spokesman—the champion of pensions—should remind himself of what he and his party said at the general election.

Mr. Taylor: That was the last century.

Mr. Brown: That is right: the Liberal Democrats are living in the last century. Their 1997 manifesto said that the basic state pension would remain indexed to prices. The hon. Gentleman should congratulate us on what we have done, rather than condemn us.

As for our adopting Liberal Democrat policies, one which we have not adopted, and about which I do not hear him talking much when he speaks every week on economic matters, is the road fuel duty escalator of 8 per cent. a year in real terms. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Presumably that is a policy for inner-city areas only, not for rural areas.

Having heard the Liberal Democrat spokesman today, I suggest that he works out whether he thinks we have given too much or too little, because he cannot make up his mind.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Earlier, I asked whether there was a doctor in the House, because I have never seen so many sick people as I saw on the Opposition Benches this afternoon while my right hon. Friend was speaking.

Will my right hon. Friend accept that from my political perspective this has been a welcome statement? Its implications for different parts of the country and different parts of the economy are far-reaching. It is innovative, and I applaud it. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that, given the extraordinary statement from the shadow Chancellor, the choice facing the country has now been set? It is between investment in economic, social and human capital as set out in my right hon. Friend's statement, and the £16 billion of unspecified cuts proposed by the Conservative party.

Mr. Brown: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I know that he will welcome the measures we are taking for inner-city development and to create employment throughout the country in areas such as Liverpool. He is absolutely right that the country faces a choice between investing in our future or returning to the old stop-go, boom-bust of the past. Until the Conservative party, and the shadow Chancellor in particular, tell us where their proposed cuts will fall, the right hon. Gentleman will have no credibility either in arguing for tax cuts or in arguing that his is a coherent economic policy.

I remind the shadow Chancellor what the Leader of the Opposition said a few days ago—on the Jimmy Young show, of all radio programmes: "I have to present a coherent programme for government. It is my job to provide the country with an alternative government, not to ride around on whatever bandwagon from time to time. It is my job to present an alternative government, and that means we have to put forward a coherent programme." We are waiting for that coherent programme.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): It gives me and others pleasure to hear the Chancellor continuing to use the language that he took over from the previous

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Government of "no return to boom and bust" and "stability." However, will he stop using it? He presents two Budgets a year, when he comes along in response to the latest events to ensure that no lobby group is left unsatisfied, that no pressure group is unpaid and, on this occasion, that Barbara Castle and the hauliers are allowed their triumph—all in the hope that he gets re-elected. Will he confirm that the only reason why he can reconcile all that with his previous fiscal forecasts and his estimate that debt-GDP ratios would go down to levels that we have not seen since the boom phase of the late 1980s is that he and the Treasury keep getting wrong their forecasts of the revenue that they are receiving? Will he repeat his warning to the House that those revenue forecasts can change rapidly—overnight—and lead to very great disappointment?

Will the Chancellor take a little look beyond his hopes of being re-elected at the next general election and accept that—after three years in which he has increased the tax burden and reduced public spending to the lowest percentage of GDP since the 1960s—he has embarked on tax-raising potential and spending programmes that will far exceed any likely growth of the economy? Why will he not admit that that is unsustainable, and that a new Government will have to go back to the drawing board to recover those very qualities of prudent management that he sometimes affects to scorn even in the Government whom he succeeded?

Mr. Brown: I am always interested to hear the former Chancellor, usually because he is in total disagreement with the current shadow Chancellor about the way forward. As for the statements made to the House in the course of a year, it was the previous Government who—because of protests that people made quite rightly, and defeat in Parliament—had to come to the House and rewrite all their legislation on VAT on fuel. Therefore, he is not the one to comment on our introducing proposals over the course of a year.

I should have thought that, on his general point on economic management, the former Chancellor would have been in agreement with me that the stop-go policies of the 1980s were not the right policies for the British economy. I remember—I wish that I had brought the quotes with me—his own criticisms of those policies. As he himself has admitted, in those times, excessive tax cuts were made in one year that could not be afforded in every year. There was also a neglect of investment in the supply side, so that, as the economy grew, we could not sustain the growth that we wanted.

Equally, the former Chancellor, as a supporter of independence of the Bank of England, knows that the lack of a tough and tight monetary policy that is absolutely explicit about where we are trying to go is another recipe for a return to the situation that we had in the 1980s.

I believe that, on those three matters, the former Chancellor and I would share common ground—if it were not for the fact that he also thinks he is preparing for a general election.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I congratulate the Chancellor on the measures that he has announced today. His measures will help to bring long-term prosperity to inner-city areas, which is in marked contrast to the years and years of dereliction caused by Tory policies. I also know that my right hon. Friend believes, as I do, that the future for inner cities lies in enterprise, not welfare, and in getting local people involved in their own companies, thereby bringing life to our inner-city areas.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the measures—all those incentives—that he has announced to encourage business, research and development and enterprise will be targeted particularly at some of our poorest and most deprived communities, to encourage them to share in the prosperity that is available to the rest of the people in Britain?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I applaud the work that she does in securing regeneration in her own constituency and in the areas surrounding it. It is very important to recognise that the combination of public spending and targeted tax incentives will be necessary for the regeneration of areas which for too long have been left behind, and for people and places that have been too long forgotten. It is not only the measures that I have announced today but the measures that were announced in the public spending review that will give additional money to some of the hardest hit areas, so that they can meet higher standards in education, create more business development and, consequently, create more employment.

I believe that the challenge for the Government—having cut unemployment in the past few years and increased the numbers of people in employment by 1 million—is to go further. In every area of this country where there is still unemployment that is avoidable, we want with our measures to take the action that is necessary so that full employment becomes a reality for every region of this country.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I generally welcome the Chancellor's statement, but should like to deal with a couple of matters. First, I urge him not to get too rigidly locked into the perpetual surplus to which he referred, as there may be times in the economic cycle when he needs to be free of such a commitment.

Secondly, a moment ago, the Chancellor mentioned regional policy. Will he clarify whether there will be consideration of operating aids—particularly within objective 1 areas such as Wales, Merseyside, South Yorkshire and Cornwall—to help secure inward investment into those areas? Will he also give an assurance that that package will be helpful for people in work but on low incomes, to increase GDP per head, which is a real challenge in so many areas?

Mr. Brown: Only a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting Wales and talking both to the Welsh Pensioners organisation—I had a very interesting and constructive meeting with its members—and at a seminar of entrepreneurs and local authority leaders who were planning the next stages of the development of objective 1 projects. I consider that both the enthusiasm and the determination to make the projects work stands Wales in good stead for the future, and we want to back them up in whatever ways we can.

Extra money is available for the new deal in areas where unemployment is still high. The working families tax credit is the main means by which we can make

work pay—as the right hon. Gentleman is asking us to do—in a part of Wales in which, in the past, a large number of people have been either on the minimum wage or just above it. The working families tax credit is specifically designed to make work pay.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the level of regional development incentives provided by both the British Government and the European Union. We will do what we can to ensure that regional development in every part of the country can move ahead. The fact that the regional development agencies are today being given new powers and new flexibilities is a measure of that—and, of course, they were given new money in the July spending review. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, Wales was given a 5.4 per cent. real-terms increase in expenditure, not least to meet the needs of objective 1 areas.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): After 18 years of Conservative Governments, this was a report worth waiting for. It used the language of social justice, and it also shot a good many Tory foxes.

I particularly welcome my right hon. Friend's ingenious approaches to the pensioner, the haulier and the farmer. In Deeside and throughout Wales, the increase in the basic state pension will be widely welcomed as a measure of social justice. May I say that we want the right hon. Gentleman to say loudly throughout the land that there is a choice between this report and £16 billion worth of cuts in public services?

Mr. Brown: I entirely accept what my right hon. Friend says. I know that he is a long-standing fighter for the needs of the pensioner community, as well as for the industrial needs of his constituency.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the country will face a choice—the choice whether to invest in the future, or return to the stop-go of the past. The choice is whether we are prepared to make money available to expand our public services and help pensioners, or whether we are to return to a Conservative agenda that would cut a massive £16 billion from our public services.

The shadow Chancellor himself admits that that is the record of the Conservative party—a record that he is having to defend. As he said in his lecture to the Tory party conference in October 1997 that Tories were linked to harshness, thought to be uncaring about unemployment, poverty, poor housing, discipline and single parenthood, and that they were thought to favour greed and the unqualified pursuit of the free market, with a devil take the hindmost attitude, I do not need to add any more to those remarks about the Conservative party.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Given the amount of the taxpayer's money that the Chancellor has had in his election war chest, does he accept that motorists in my constituency who must have cars to get to work, take the children to school and go shopping will be very disappointed by the parsimonious reduction of only 2p per litre? Will he confirm that the extra cost of sulphur-free petrol is 1p a litre? Will he also confirm that he has put up the price of petrol by 15p per litre since he went into No. 11, and that, despite the latest reduction, our tax on petrol will still be the highest in the European Union? The right hon. Gentleman has proved today that he is an anti-motorist Chancellor in an anti-motorist Government.

Mr. Brown: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman heard the shadow Chancellor say that we had been far too generous. It is difficult to know what the Conservative party's position on these matters now is. Perhaps the Conservatives should call another meeting of the No Turning Back group, and try to reach a conclusion on whether they can agree on anything nowadays.

I have been following the hon. Gentleman's comments with considerable interest. It was he who said in the House two years ago, after that pre-Budget statement,

> I believe that, in the United Kingdom, despite the Chancellor's optimism about growth next year, we face recession.—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1998; Vol. 318, c. 913.]

I will think twice about whether to listen to all the advice that I receive from the hon. Gentleman in the future.

As for the cost of travel, I believe that motorists in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and throughout the country will welcome the fact that, while we are maintaining a very tough fiscal discipline—indeed, we are repaying £28 billion of debt this year, and have reduced the debt ratio to 30 per cent.—we are still able to help the transport and haulage industries. I wish that the hon. Gentleman had welcomed the justice for pensioners from which thousands of his constituents will also benefit, despite his failure to advocate their case.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today. Constituencies such as mine were ignored by the previous Tory Government, but it is clear that they will benefit from today's further redistribution of wealth, which will devote more resources to those who need it most.

Pensioners in my constituency accept that this Government have done more than the Tories, but they expect more from us because we are Labour. They have got more today, which is why I welcome the statement.

Land in my area suffers badly from chemical contamination. My constituents will welcome the acceleration in tax relief that my right hon. Friend announced today. When he talks to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, will the Chancellor ensure that areas where there is chemical contamination of land get priority in that respect?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend describes the measures that he would like my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and me to take up, and we will certainly examine what he proposes. We welcome what he says about the urban regeneration measures. I believe that we are tackling the problem in a way that will bring results.

I also welcome what my hon. Friend said about pensioners in his constituency. Our aim is to ensure that every pensioner shares in this country's rising standard of living. We know that the world has changed over the past 50 years, and that different groups of pensioners have different needs. We will raise the basic pension by £5 a week from April next year and by £3 a week the year after, and we also intend to raise the winter allowance. Our new proposals are very important, as they will do more than a restoration of the earnings link would do for those pensioners who need the help most and whose savings must be rewarded.

I hope that my hon. Friend will join me in getting that message across to the country.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Does the Chancellor believe that he has managed to abolish the

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trade cycle somehow? If not, what would happen if a recession occurred while the right hon. Gentleman was still Chancellor? Would he carry on with his supposedly immutable spending plans and run into uncontrollable debt, or would he have to introduce no doubt very massive tax cuts?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I understand that he is an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, but his line seems completely different from that expressed by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday morning. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said that there was more money around and that the Government should be spending it. He also said that today's announcement would not do enough, but today the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) says that we have done too much. The Opposition really must decide what their position is.

Mr. Davies: Answer the question.

Mr. Brown: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman heard me say that we had taken action, and that our surpluses and fiscal disciplines had left this Government better prepared than others in the past for the ups and downs of the economic cycle.

Of course economic cycles occur—growth is higher in some years than in others. However, we must avoid the mistakes by those members of the Conservative party who were in charge of macro-economic policy in the 1980s. They pushed the country into a violent recession in the early 1990s, when growth collapsed, because they had not invested. The previous Conservative Government made tax cuts that they could not afford, and they had no monetary or fiscal discipline.

The hon. Gentleman supported the independence of the Bank of England long before Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen even considered doing so. I hope that he, like the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), will recognise that the Government have brought a monetary and fiscal discipline to the conduct of economic policy that did not exist in the 1980s. Because that discipline did not exist then, the country suffered from the policies of boom and bust that I have described. The hon. Gentleman supports the independence of the Bank of England: he should also support the Government's fiscal rules.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): As Second Church Estates Commissioner, and on behalf of the Church, may I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement that VAT on church repairs will be cut from 17.5 per cent. to 5 per cent? I do not want to appear in any way bipartisan, but the campaign to reduce that charge has been all-party and has gone on for 30 years. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend is the first Chancellor in 30 years to have listened to the Church's representations.

Will my right hon. Friend devote his energies and endeavours to ensuring that any European Union directive that has to be modified or promoted in respect of the proposal comes into force as soon as possible, so that the VAT payable can be reduced?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who does a tremendous amount of work as a Church Commissioner. I applaud the case that he has made for those changes; I know, too, that it is an all-party campaign. We will push the European Commission for a change in policy. We recognise that although churches receive money from the lottery and from other funds, particularly from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, they have bills that must be met, in some cases in areas where they cannot raise money easily from charitable donations. We therefore want to do what we can to help.

It is part of our policy to preserve and advance community life in areas in which there are old buildings that should be kept in existence and undergo the necessary repairs. I have met the Archbishop of Canterbury to talk about these matters and we will continue to talk to the churches. It is our determination that they will have the additional money that is needed.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I welcome many of the things that the Chancellor has said today, especially about pensions. I am sure that pensioners will be well pleased with what they have heard. Of course, pensions are a continuing problem, and I am glad that the Chancellor has gazed into the future.

People in Northern Ireland are a bit aggrieved with the Chancellor. They feel that in matters of consultation, other parts of this United Kingdom have been listened to, while our farming community and the freight men did not get direct access to him.

The right hon. Gentleman has been on wheels. Northern Ireland is not so very far from his own country—it is just 20 miles over the sea, and there is a very good boat service, as he knows. As he carries out further consultations, will he—even if he cannot come himself—meet a deputation of farmers and freight men? The Chancellor talked about a virtuous circle. The farming community and the freight men in Northern Ireland are in a vicious circle.

Northern Ireland is the only part of this United Kingdom that has a land border with another country in the European Union. The number of men and women who have lost jobs on the border because of the price of petrol is fantastic. All one sees driving along the border is closed filling stations. Of course, the farming community—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but he must understand that other hon. Members wish to speak. I think that the Chancellor has enough to work on.

Rev. Ian Paisley: May I just say in closing, Mr. Speaker, that the farming community and the freight men need the Chancellor's attention?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting the case for the farmers and the haulage industry. The pre-Budget consultation will include visits to every part of the United Kingdom. Ministers will be visiting Northern Ireland and will listen to the concerns of farmers and hauliers. My good friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has already invited me to come across to Northern Ireland to talk about some of those matters.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I thank the Chancellor for the equivalent of a cut of 4p per litre of fuel for drivers of smaller cars, such as myself, through the car tax discount of £55.

On pensions, is not the shadow Chancellor correct on one point, but one point only? Pensioners will not forget what the Government have done, because the Government have increased their incomes, particularly for the poorest and those with modest occupational pensions and savings.

Many pensioners in my constituency have asked me about the winter fuel allowance of £200. Can my right hon. Friend let them know the latest date by which pensioners in Tower Hamlets and across the country will have that cheque for £200 in their pockets?

Mr. Brown: The cheques will start going out on Monday. The intention is that they will be paid over November and reach people before Christmas. That is what we are trying to achieve.

On the general policy on pensions, I should have thought that there would have been all-party support for the view that, first, we should tackle pensioner poverty. By raising the minimum income guarantee, we are taking hundreds of thousands of pensioners out of poverty. Just as we want to make child poverty a thing of the past, we want to make pensioner poverty a thing of the past. That is possible through the actions that we take.

I recognise, however—and this is the second stage of our reforms—that we must help people who have saved all their lives and who get nothing from the system. It is all very well the shadow Chancellor criticising measures that he says are income related. Those are measures that encourage and reward saving—they tell people who have saved all their lives that we will do more to help them.

When people consider the proposals and look at the scale of the payments that can now be made, they will realise that the pensioner credit is a means by which we can give justice to middle and lower income pensioners and at the same time tackle the problem of pensioner poverty.

I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will get the cheques that will start to go out from Monday. Equally, I hope that they will support our new pension reform proposals.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Can the Chancellor of the Exchequer explain why he has so little trust in pensioners to spend their own money? Why cannot the winter fuel allowance, the Christmas bonus and the free television licence fee be incorporated into the basic state pension?

Mr. Brown: First, the £200 winter allowance, which I assume that the Conservative party would not pay—*[Interruption.]* That is an interesting revelation. We have now had an admission that, even this year, the Conservative party would not pay the winter fuel allowance—even before the Conservatives get into power, they say that they would not pay it this year. I am sorry that attendance in the Chamber is low at the moment, but hon. Members here will note, as will everyone throughout the country in the next few days, that the Conservatives would not even pay this year's £200 winter allowance.

As for telling pensioners how to spend their money, we are giving pensioners that money to spend. The difference between the two parties is that the Conservatives would not even give pensioners the money.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, in particular on what he intends to do about vehicle excise duty. The rural poor, who drive on average perhaps 8,000 miles a year, will benefit far more from a £55 cut in that duty than they would have benefited if he had simply cut the price of petrol. We are doing the right thing—enabling people to pay as they go when they drive. We are cutting the cost to drivers of getting on the road. That will help the poorest people and it will allow the rural poor in particular to drive as they need to do. Many of them have limited needs, which we should not exaggerate—they need their cars, but not for long journeys, and not on the scale that they would need them if petrol tax were cut as dramatically as some people have advocated, which the country could not have afforded and which would have denied money for schools, pensioners and other things.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and has been taking evidence on the matter. I know how vigilant he is when he represents the needs of his rural as well as his urban constituents. The important point is that for the past 20 years those in rural areas have been calling for tax on the ownership of a car to be less and saying that people should not have to pay such a high licence fee. Now that the new lower fee has been extended to cover vehicles up the cc scale to 1500 cc people have a real choice as to whether to pay the lower fee.

Our policy was based, first, on getting rid of the deficit, secondly, on ending the under-investment in transport and, thirdly, on doing nothing to hurt stability. Our fourth and fifth objectives were to meet the environmental needs that we have set down and to tax ownership less and treat motorists more fairly. Taken as a whole, the measures today achieve those aims.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The Chancellor will no doubt be delighted to hear that I agree with his strictures on spending temporary surpluses as though they were permanent features. I welcome the fact that he is spending at least part of the temporary surplus on repaying public debt and I hope that he will continue with that course until the public deficit is eventually eliminated. Does he agree that the fatal flaw of the Conservative party when in government was not that it undertook that course of action but that it entered the exchange rate mechanism? Those of us who objected to that policy object equally to any possibility of our entering the single currency.

That said, the measures that the Chancellor announced on the cost of fuel will go nowhere near meeting the real problems alluded to by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) in respect of the border with the Irish Republic, where filling stations and many other businesses have suffered grievously. Much more will have to be done. Will the Chancellor give an undertaking that he will pay serious attention to that problem, and that the bill imposed on foreign lorries will also apply to hauliers from the Irish Republic?

Mr. Brown: We continue to investigate cross-border flows of petrol and diesel. Customs and Excise has been concerned about that and we shall keep it under review.

I shall not be drawn into a debate on the single currency, but simply repeat that our policy is—as it has always been—that in principle we see benefits in the single currency; in practice, the tests that we have set must be met.

[Mr. Brown]

As for the Conservatives learning the lessons of the past, one sees total opportunism from them; every time we make a spending announcement, they say that it will cause a recession, but when it fails to do so, they ask—on the day before the announcement—for huge sums of money to be spent. They have shown complete opportunism in this effort too. Neither Front-Bench nor Back-Bench Conservative Members have a clue as to what the Conservative policy or attitude is. They were certainly no wiser after hearing the shadow Chancellor.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Chancellor aware that it is a pleasure to hear a Labour Chancellor setting out a long-term policy that will show, at the general election, that for the first time there will be fewer people on the dole under a Labour Government than when they came into office? That policy means that we are planning to spend money—unlike the miserable years of 1978–79, when a Labour Government cut public expenditure.

As my right hon. Friend is probably aware, last week I called for money for jobs in the regions and a big chunk of money for the pensioners. It would be churlish of me not to say thank you. We have a listening Government—especially to me. The Tories should be more inclusive; they should thank the Chancellor too, because he has reduced the tax on the Leader of the Opposition's flat-back lorry.

Mr. Brown: I think that the Leader of the Opposition has got rid of his lorry; he does not seem to be going about the country as much as he did in the past. [HON. MEMBERS: "It has broken down".] It has broken down—like his party's policy.

My hon. Friend referred to jobs. We have created 1 million jobs, but that is not enough. We must do better and we will do more. We can help many people back into work through the new measures under the new deal that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is pushing forward.

My hon. Friend has been a champion of pensioners over the years—especially in putting their case to me and to others. He thanks us for our efforts for pensioners; we should recognise that he has been a champion of their case. He says that he likes to support Labour Chancellors; I shall report that remark to one of our colleagues in the House of Lords.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): The Chancellor has been bruised and battered by the haulage industry and by the protests calling for fuel tax cuts. Now that he is the U-turn Chancellor, will he make a further U-turn to abolish the hated IR35 in order to help the high-tech industry? Will he do a U-turn to help home owners by cutting stamp duties that he raised much too far? Will he apologise to pensioners for the big increase in taxes on them? Is it not true that, even after the statement, he is still the rip-off Chancellor in a rip-off Government?

Mr. Brown: Here it is: the shadow Chancellor saying that there should be a bit of prudence from the Conservative party and then someone who would like to be shadow Chancellor—perhaps he would like to be the party leader—saying that we should lose lots of tax revenue from IR35 and other measures. I do not know what the policy of the Conservative party is.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is still a member of the No Turning Back group, so he is fighting his corner for the right-wing cause. He has always said that public spending increases would cause a recession; the only problem is that he is wrong.

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement? In particular, I welcome his comments on manufacturing and the proposals for the abolition of the withholding tax, the introduction of intellectual property and goodwill relief and for small business VAT simplification. I am sure that they are all measures that will be welcomed by industry.

Will my right hon. Friend tell us whether the stamp duty exemption in deprived areas will apply to all property types and not just residential ones? Will he consider extending the VAT reduced rate for churches to other types of property in deprived areas? Why do we have to wait until 2003 for the pensioners credit?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend has asked many questions. Detailed proposals are being published today for consultation, and I hope that he will join that consultation. He has been a great promoter of economic development in his region and he has had ideas that the Government have accepted in some cases because they were excellent proposals for industrial regeneration throughout the whole country. I ask him to examine in detail the proposal for stamp duty relief, which is worth about £120 million for industrial regeneration.

On VAT on churches, we are considering the matter of public buildings as a whole. On my hon. Friend's question about 2003, the pension arrangements will give a rise above inflation in basic pensions for the next two years. When we introduce the system in April 2003, we will get it right so that tax and benefit integration move forward. That is why the system will be introduced in 2003.

On my hon. Friend's general point about industry, I forgot to remind the House that the one of the last statements made from the Front Bench by the right hon. Member for Wokingham, the former Secretary of State for Wales was, "The Government are losing control of the economy." Once again, the right hon. Gentleman got it wrong.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that 99.6 per cent. of British businesses employ fewer than 100 people, that they account for 57 per cent. of the private sector work force and that they generate approximately two fifths of our national output, why is the Chancellor so proud of the fact that he has done nothing whatsoever today to reverse the tide of regulation which, thanks to him, is now deeper and more hazardous than any that British companies have ever faced?

Mr. Brown: First, we have taken measures to help small businesses. The hon. Gentleman has obviously not looked at the detailed documents or obtained them from

the Library, which is not out of character for him when he asks a question in the House. He should look at the documents and he will find—

Mr. Bercow: I have studied them.

Mr. Brown: Oh, the hon. Gentleman has studied the documents. Well, there is a VAT simplification scheme and it affects up to 50,000 businesses. We have cut small business tax, and he should recognise that fact.

As for the burden on business, the VAT scheme is a deregulation scheme; it is designed to simplify the system. I also remind him that the shadow Chancellor said of the Conservative party's record on regulation, "We were rather notable regulators. We passed volumes of new rules and laws, interfering with almost every aspect of business and social life." Perhaps, many of the hon. Gentleman's complaints are directed on this, as on other issues, to those sitting on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Is my right hon. Friend aware that his careful management of the economy over the past three years has produced the brightest economic prospects for more than a generation? Will he make sure that his prudence with a purpose will now move a little more towards the purpose that he had in mind and, in particular, towards the investment and productivity that I know that he has very much at heart? They are important for the long-term future of his plans, which I hope to see realised.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He was a Minister in a previous Labour Government and is always a strong defender of manufacturing industry. His speeches on the economy are always listened to by the House.

I agree that productivity is the central issue that we must address with work forces and managements. In many sectors, the issue is not what Government can do, but how management and work forces can tackle together the problems in skills and restrictive practices that they must address and how they deal with the areas in which new technology must be introduced. However, as I said to the TUC and the CBI, to whom I have spoken in the past two months, we must continue to address such problems. I believe that over the next few months, my right hon. Friend will see a number of initiatives in skills, benchmarking, management training and the introduction of new technology. A great deal more work is being done so that we can rival the world's best.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Was it political prudence or his economic judgment that led the Chancellor not once to mention the euro in his original statement? Was it because the economy is doing much better outside the eurozone than it could ever do within it, or is it perhaps because he was frightened that the voters would be scandalised were he to admit that he is wasting inordinate sums of public money on the changeover plan to the euro when, for example, my constituents have to endure interminable delays on the tube, and face the closure of the premier heart hospital in the United Kingdom, Harefield?

Mr. Brown: In that case the hon. Gentleman will be pleased that I talked in my statement about the health service, transport and all the other issues that relate to public services. Only the hon. Gentleman thinks that every debate in the House of Commons must be about the euro. Today we are debating public services and the pre-Budget statement.

As for European measures, I made a number of proposals for European economic reform to Finance Ministers this week. We published our updated report on euro preparations, and we will continue to pursue the policy of prepare and decide. The hon. Gentleman must make up his mind whether he agrees with the official policy of the Conservative party, which is not to be against the euro in principle, or whether he will hold to his own position, which is always to be against it, under all circumstances. He will find, of course, that the shadow Chancellor has not made up his mind on that either.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, we must move on.

Lifelong Learning (Paid Study Time)

5.26 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an entitlement to a national minimum time allowance for training and educational purposes for people in employment.

It is particularly appropriate, in view of the report published a few days ago by the National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets, that I have the opportunity to present my Bill. The report paints an interesting picture of the level of skills in the United Kingdom and, in particular, compares them with the skills of our major competitor countries. In light of the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement and the emphasis that he placed on raising productivity levels in British industry, it is relevant that my small Bill contains a proposal that would take a small but significant step towards achieving those higher levels.

During the past three years, the Government have significantly improved post-16 education and training in the UK. No Government in my lifetime—or, I would argue, this century—have put as much emphasis on the importance of post-16 education and training, lifelong learning, vocational training and retraining, as the current one. Following the important commissioning of the reports by Professor Fryer and Baroness Kennedy; the publication of the Green Paper "The Learning Age" and the White Paper "Learning to Succeed"; the measures contained in the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, which restored the important right of young workers to have day release once a week; and, more recently, the Learning and Skills Bill, which consolidates the multifarious streams of funding for post-16 education and training, we now have a framework for the delivery of lifelong learning that we have never had before. The two major colleges in my constituency have certainly benefited from the record investment that is being put into further education and vocational training.

However, in welcoming the importance that is now being attached to lifelong learning and the new investment in it, we must not underestimate the scale of the problem of a work force who are significantly less well trained and well qualified than our major competitors. That is why our productivity levels compare poorly with those of France, Germany, Japan, the United States and, indeed, many south-east Asian countries, and why we cannot shake off the problem of skills gaps and skills shortages.

The recent report by Sir Claus Moser suggested that 20 per cent. of the adult work force in the UK have serious literacy and numeracy problems. In Britain, fewer than half of all adult workers have qualified at national vocational qualification level 3 or above. In Germany, it is almost two thirds. In Britain, one quarter of workers do not have a single level 2 qualification. Let me clarify: that does not mean a full NVQ level 2, or five GCSEs at grades A to C; it means a single component of those level 2 qualifications—a single GCSE or a single NVQ2 module. Among older workers, the problem is more serious: one fifth of workers aged more than 50 have no formal qualifications at all and almost two fifths do not have a single qualification at level 2.

We must avoid the tendency to assume that those without specific job qualifications or general educational qualifications are inadequate in their jobs. However, the reality is that the rapidly changing labour market brought about by the impact of new technology and globalisation means that the number of people without formal qualifications and the number of jobs available requiring only very low-level skills are diminishing day by day. Therefore, the skills level of the labour force is not only an issue of productivity and competitiveness, but one of economic survival for the unskilled and their families. I would argue that a national minimum entitlement to training will, in time, be seen to be of equal importance to the national minimum wage.

The problem in Britain is not necessarily that we do not invest enough in vocational education, but that we do not get the best return for the money that we do invest. The most recent survey indicated that British industry provided 49 million days of training annually, at a cost of more than £10 billion. However, the distribution of that training is heavily skewed in two directions. First, larger firms are understandably better than smaller ones: the skill needs in Britain survey showed that more than 90 per cent. of firms with more than 200 employees provided on-the-job training, whereas only 20 per cent. of firms with fewer than 25 employees did so.

Secondly, the lion's share of training is taken by graduates and equivalent professionals. The recent labour force survey showed that almost 20 per cent. of those with level 4 qualifications had benefited from training within the previous four weeks, compared with little more than 5 per cent. of workers classified as "operatives". Therefore, those unskilled and semi-skilled workers who, as schoolchildren, were victims of a divisive and selective system of education find that, in the workplace, they are still at a disadvantage in terms of the training opportunities available. Training opportunities tend to be allocated to the cause of increasing the skills of those who already have higher levels of skill, at the expense of the unskilled and semi-skilled.

Other countries do things differently. Our major competitors realise that, these days, no nation that wants to prosper in the knowledge-driven economy can afford to be so casual or so elitist about the development of technical skills as the United Kingdom has been in the past. Let us remember that British industry invests more than £10 billion in approximately 49 million training days a year—an average of about 2 days for every adult of working age. Yet, despite that average allocation, millions of our workers have no access to training of any sort.

Many of our major competitors ensure that all workers benefit from training opportunities by establishing a national minimum allocation of training hours, or a right to paid leave for training purposes. Such schemes exist in Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, France, Italy, Belgium and Greece. In the United Kingdom, where 20 per cent. of adult workers struggle with basic literacy and numeracy and there are fewer than two thirds the number of workers with higher technical qualifications that there are in Germany, and bearing in mind my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's call for higher productivity in his pre-Budget statement today, there is a powerful argument in favour of introducing a basic entitlement to training for everyone.

Quality and quantity of vocational training in Britain is not a new cause of concern it was identified as a serious national weakness more than 100 years ago by a royal commission and it has been the subject of continuous debate ever since. The publication of the "Aiming Higher" report by the national advisory council reinforces the

message about the gap between skills in Britain and skills in our major competitive countries. Yet structures that had been patiently built up in the post-war period—industrial training boards, day release for young workers and the training levy—were demolished in the 1980s, along with the remnants of the old apprenticeship system. I am proud that the Labour Government are now developing a modern system of vocational training that will significantly increase opportunities for millions of young people in this country.

The thrust of the Government's new initiatives is, to a large extent, focused on expanding the supply of training, but I would argue that the British problem is not primarily a lack of supply, nor a shortage of training in aggregate terms. However, there is a distortion in the demand for training, and a skewed distribution of training that serves to increase the skill of the already skilled and to neglect the needs of the unskilled. The longer that happens, the wider our skills gap will be.

If we want seriously to tackle the problems of the low level of skills in British industry, the skills gap and the skills shortages, we must approach the problem from the demand side of the equation. That is why I believe that the establishment of a national training entitlement—building on the success of the national minimum wage—which is expressed in terms of an annual minimum number of hours of paid training time for every individual in employment is the most effective way of ensuring that the opportunities opened up by the Government's massive new investment in lifelong learning will be available to people in all walks of life. There will be vocational training for the many, not only for the few.

The national minimum wage established the right to earn. The national training entitlement would establish the right to learn. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Chaytor, Charlotte Atkins, Mr. Hilary Benn, Mr. John Cryer, Mr. Kelvin Hopkins, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Judy Mallaber, Mr. Gordon Marsden, Mr. Allan Rogers and Ms Debra Shipley.

Lifelong Learning (Paid Study Time)

Mr. David Chaytor accordingly presented a Bill to establish an entitlement to a national minimum time allowance for training and educational purposes for people in employment: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 17 November, and to be printed [Bill 178].

Orders of the Day

Trustee Bill *[Lords]*

Not amended in the Standing Committee, considered

Order for Third Reading read.—[Queen's consent, on behalf of the Crown, and Prince of Wales's consent, on behalf of the Duchy of Cornwall, signified.]

5.37 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I shall be extremely brief. This is a Law Commission Bill, which has been received with approval by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. It has been thoroughly debated both here and in another place. It provides for the reform of the law of trust, especially as it relates to the powers of trustees to invest trust funds in default of the inclusion of express powers of investment in the will or trust instrument. In England and Wales, it recommends a range of reforms that is intended to facilitate more effective trust administration in areas including collective delegation by trustees, the use of nominees and custodians, powers of insurance and the remuneration of professional trustees. The Bill has been widely welcomed by the great majority of commentators. Those with reservations have, in the main, wanted the Bill to do more. Few have objected to what it does achieve.

The Bill will be of substantial benefit to beneficiaries of trusts, including many charitable trusts. As I have said, it has already been debated at length. There was a long debate on Second Reading and extensive consideration in Committee. I commend the Bill without further explanation.

My noble Friend the Lord Chancellor and I are grateful for the generally constructive atmosphere in which debate on the Bill has been conducted, both here and in another place. In many respects, it has been a model of the way to run uncontroversial Bills, and I hope that it is a model to which we can return where appropriate in future.

5.39 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I confirm what the Minister has said about the way in which the Bill has been dealt with. Its passage has been relatively uncontroversial in another place and in Committee, both in the Second Reading Committee and in Standing Committee. However, one or two matters have been raised in another place, and in this place by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), who has given his apologies both to me and to the Minister for the fact that he is unable to be in the Chamber this afternoon.

The Minister will confirm that there was a relatively extensive debate in Standing Committee A on my hon. Friend's amendments in relation to clause 30 dealing with the remuneration of trustees of charitable trusts. My hon. Friend raised concerns that had been raised with him by the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators, and by others. Those points were similar to those that were raised by several Lords in another place.

Following Standing Committee A, the Minister wrote at considerable length both to my hon. Friend and to other members of the Committee. I should mention that my

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) has dealt with the matter at all its Commons stages. I declare my interest as a member of the Bar, although I add, as most other Members in both Houses have done, that I have never pretended to be any sort of expert on trust law. However, like, I suspect, the Minister, I had to pass examinations on it as part of my Bar finals. I remember some interesting, arcane points about the Trustee Investments Act 1961, the weaknesses of which the Law Commission has sought to address in putting forward the proposals that led to the legislation.

I join Lord Kingsland, the shadow Lord Chancellor, in paying tribute, as many other Lords did, to the work of the law commissioner Mr. Harpum, who led the work that led to the Bill. I know that the Minister and the Lord Chancellor have similarly paid tribute to him in debates.

I return to the Minister's detailed letter, which runs to four and a half pages. We still have a concern, which I would like him to deal with. In his letter, he rejected my hon. Friend's arguments about issues relating to clause 30. It says:

> Some have suggested that any such extension should be a matter for primary legislation. However, it should be noted that it is very difficult to find Parliamentary time for law reform legislation. The Law Commission always has a number of important Reports awaiting implementation and is restricted by the availability of Parliamentary time. As I am sure you—

meaning my hon. Friend—

> are aware, the pressure on Parliamentary time is such that there is often a considerable time lag between the completion of a project and its eventual implementation by Parliament.

It goes on to set out the reasons why the Government chose to address the particular issues in the way that they did—by giving powers for secondary legislation.

The concern that I share with my hon. Friend is that it should have been possible for the Government to accept the thrust of his points in this primary legislation. We have repeatedly pointed out, both in the Chamber and in Committee, our concern that the Government are making a practice of giving themselves many more general powers to enact later delegated legislation. The Bill is perhaps only a small example of that, but given that amendments were tabled in another place by the Government—the Lord Chancellor tabled a number of amendments put forward by the Charity Commission, which were accepted by Members on both sides in another place—we think that there should have been time for the Minister to table amendments to meet my hon. Friend's concerns in the Bill itself. There was no particular time problem. We certainly do not have any particular time problem this evening. We think that, in the four-and-a-half page attempt to justify their position, the Government have got it wrong.

It is only a small point. We have given a general welcome to the Bill. Nothing that I say this evening should be taken to undermine that general welcome—the Bill is undoubtedly a welcome updating of trust law—but I hope that the Minister will try to give a better answer than he did in the letter.

We do not think that the Government have finished the job. It is always unsatisfactory when, in a short Bill designed to enact Law Commission proposals, the Government leave a gap. We believe that they have done so on this occasion, and that the Minister's reply is inadequate. I speak not just for my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, but for a number of those outside the House who are specialists in this field of law and who backed my hon. Friend's arguments in Committee and the same arguments when they were put in another place.

5.45 pm

Mr. Alan Meale (Mansfield): While the Bill is before the House, I take the opportunity to highlight concerns that have arisen since my recent experience in dealing with trust law, with the help of the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock).

I refer to three trusts centred on my constituency—the F. B. Bailey Thomas charitable fund trust, the F. B. Bailey Thomas provident fund trust, and the F. B. Bailey Thomas personal fund trust. The trusts were set up in 1970 to prevent a situation whereby, under the Mental Health Act 1959, the moneys from the trusts could be lost to the many workers employed at Mansfield Brewery. A considerable sum was involved—for all three trusts, a combined total of many hundreds of millions of pounds.

Another reason for the establishment of the trusts was to safeguard the independence of the Mansfield Brewery company and the interests, welfare and employment of the many thousands of people who work for the company.

As my hon. Friend knows, the trusts were run by a gaggle of people who served on all three trusts simultaneously. One of the members on the personal trust acted as the solicitor for all the trusts. The provisions of the trusts contained a rider to the effect that the shares in the brewery should not be sold unless that was in the interests of the beneficiaries, but members of the trusts decided on that while serving on all three trusts at the same time. A contract was awarded for private consultation with one of their own companies. Indeed, a senior trustee on two of the trusts was a senior director at Ernst and Young, which was involved with the trusts.

That is not a satisfactory situation. Despite all the work done by the Standing Committee, there are still tremendous gaps in trust law—for example, in the case of trustees serving on a number of trusts, all intermixed, and handling matters in which they have pecuniary interests. Conflicts of interest must inevitably arise. Mr. Nagel whom I mentioned as a director of Ernst and Young is an example. Another example is the solicitor who was a trustee and also acted as the solicitor for all three trusts.

Pecuniary interests were also involved when trustees who held shares in the company saw an opportunity to cash in those shares and took decisions that favoured themselves and their families to the tune of many millions of pounds. The Bill does not cover all those situations, as I have pointed out privately to my hon. Friend.

I am concerned also about the role of the public trustees. When these matters arose 12 or 14 months ago, I met the public trustees more than once. It seemed that they were intent on only one thing: allowing the sale of the shares on the open market. I pointed out to them that in the case of the provident fund, which was established to protect the welfare of the beneficiaries—people who used to work for Mansfield Brewery or still worked there, numbering about 3,200 in total—not a single one of the beneficiaries wanted the sale of shares to go ahead. Petitions were presented to the Public Trust Office,

the Minister and the company, showing that no beneficiary wanted any part of their shares sold on because it would put at risk their jobs. Nevertheless, the sale of those shares proceeded.

Other matters also caused much concern. For instance, of the many hundreds who applied for aid from the provident fund, which held millions of pounds, who had worked in the company for a number of years after 1970, nearly all were denied. They were told firmly by the trustees in charge at that time that the trusts were established not to benefit the beneficiaries, but as a simple mechanism to prevent funds leaving the company, possibly damaging it. That flies in the face of all the evidence and the rules on which such matters were established. Not one case of a collective submission for aid from the company's workers to the trustees has been passed, stretching back many years.

In many trusts, only about 10 or 20 people, and certainly fewer than 100, are involved. But in this case, more than 3,000 workers were involved, and we are talking not about a few pounds or a few thousand pounds but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman because I am conscious that his remarks relate to the Bill, but this is a Third Reading debate and he must talk specifically about the Bill's contents, not what is not in it or what it cannot do.

Mr. Meale: The Bill does not fully cover the need to protect the beneficiaries of such trusts. As I said, the trusts involve many hundreds of millions of pounds, yet 3,200 beneficiaries can obtain no help. Despite repeated requests for a representative on the board of trustees, that has been denied them.

Can the Minister give some assurance that some of those 3,200 beneficiaries will be allowed to represent their interests on the board of trustees? The trust was managed in such a way that huge amounts were transferred from the provident to the charitable fund. Interests were clouded, and Mr. Bailey Thomas's personal fund, which had to be transferred on his death, was transferred to the charitable fund not to the provident fund, as it should have been under its remit. Two or three people are now sitting on hundreds of millions of pounds, at least a third of which should be in the rightful ownership of and managed by the beneficiaries of the provident trust, but it is not.

Will the Minister give some assurance that such situations will not occur in the future? Will he further use his good offices and the Bill to influence the public trustees to examine whether a representative of the beneficiaries could be appointed to protect their interests? Will he use his influence to cause the Public Trust Office, of which he has charge, to change the current public trustee? I can say categorically that, of the 3,200 beneficiaries who have a claim to the beneficiaries' cash, not one has any faith whatever in the person holding that position.

5.54 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the debate, which I knew would come quickly and pass relatively quickly. I propose to make a couple of comments, but I am conscious that, like the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), for today's purposes I am from the substitutes bench. Like the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) cannot be here, and I give his apologies to the House. He is opening a school in Devon today, which he regarded as something that only he could do, whereas I could easily fill in for him here.

I also wish to place on record, as my hon. Friend did at an earlier stage, our thanks to our colleagues in the other place, particularly our noble Friend Lord Goodhart, who is an eminent trust lawyer. I did my trust law course at university, and it produced the only memorable quote from any lecture during the whole of my three-year law degree, and that was from Gareth Jones, himself an eminent trust lawyer. The week before our final exams, which were to take place on Ascension day, he said, "Some of you will understand this and some of you will not understand it, and next week some of you will go up and some of you will not go up." Some of us just managed to get up high enough to be able to move on, at least to another degree.

Trusts, as the Minister said, are perceived by the outside world as being dull, dry, technical, legal and complex, but they are everywhere. I, probably like every other hon. Member, am a trustee of a few small, relatively unimportant trusts. We are all asked to perform that role, either in a family or community context. But trusts are often responsible for huge assets and important issues.

I thank the Minister, his colleagues, and the Conservative spokesmen for their collaboration and co-operation. The Bill was brought forward as a result of the Law Commission's view that the law needed to be reformed, and it received widespread support throughout both the profession and the professions, and on both sides of the House. Whatever its demerits—Liberal Democrats have not argued that it is a perfect Bill—it improves the law considerably, particularly in the way in which it widens investment powers, which was its main purpose.

I want to ask the Minister the one question that has remained as a recurrent theme in the speeches, contributions and questions of my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon, and that concerns people in professional capacities, not usually lawyers, although they could be, charging trusts, which have no recourse, at such a level that their funds are seriously depleted. We are all conscious that it is easy for professionals—if I may be so bold to say so, it is often banks and such organisations—to charge considerable amounts of money, because they administer funds and are effectively in control of day-to-day management, unlike in the auditing of accounts for a small local community or organisation, which is done for £400 a year.

People have often sought a way to challenge professional fees. That is not dealt with here, but it is a recurrent concern. When the Minister replies will he say how the Government envisage remedying that problem? What recourse is there? Do they contemplate either further legislation in the context of trust law, or further legislation in the context of Department of Trade and Industry legislation, which will deal with the regulation of professional bodies and their accountability?

There are one or two other matters of lesser importance that my hon. Friend raised to which at some stage the House will return, but, consistent with the approaches of

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

other hon. Members, it is sufficient at this stage to say that the Bill considerably improves the law and is a good piece of legislation. Society will be better off as a result and we wish it well.

5.59 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): Like others, I propose to speak briefly. First, I declare an interest as a practising solicitor and doubtless a trustee of several small trusts.

I am spurred to speak by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale). I am not in a position to speak about the facts relevant to the trusts to which he referred. However, I fully comprehend the difficulties that beneficiaries encounter, especially in cases of clear, blatant and dishonest breach of trust. Such a breach may be a matter for the criminal law, but that does not necessarily help the beneficiary if the money has been made away with and there is nothing left.

The Bill is to be applauded for introducing a concept of duty of care. I am not sure how much further it goes beyond the obligation on trustees to act in good faith. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) hinted at the difficulty of enforcement when a problem arises. It becomes even greater if the trust is relatively small. In some ways, it is easier when a large sum of money is disputed. The cost of seeking a legal remedy for breach of trust in the case of small sums may outweigh any possible gain.

If I remember it correctly, the case of Jarndyce *v.* Jarndyce in "Bleak House" was pursued for decades and ended only when all the trust money was spent on the fees of the competing lawyers. I do not necessarily claim that that is the worst that can happen, but it is not helpful to trustees for moneys to be squandered in that way. I therefore hope that, in due course, my hon. Friend the Minister might be able to consider remedies that would make it easier for beneficiaries to follow up what they perceive as defects in the administration of the trust.

I should like to consider the way in which to undertake a proper assessment either of the trustees or those whom they employ, as the Bill envisages. In some ways, it is easier if those involved are solicitors. I shall have to consider the matter in more detail, but it may be possible to obtain a remuneration certificate for charges from the Law Society. That facility does not exist when the relevant trustee or agent is not a solicitor, but perhaps a banker. People, who are possibly elderly and in circumstances that worry them, often enter into a trust arrangement with their bank on standard term document clauses. Those clauses carry horrific charges, to which they have already agreed, for remuneration. I referred to that briefly in Committee.

When a small trust has been entered into, perhaps many years previously under the terms of a will, and the testator dies and the estate is very small, banks are not unknown to renounce probate. They thus abdicate their responsibility for what they took on as a profitable exercise 20 years previously because it is no longer profitable for them. That might be regarded as a breach of trust. It certainly does not constitute acting in good faith, and there is currently little remedy for the beneficiary who suffers the consequences.

6.3 pm

Mr. Lock: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate. I am grateful for the welcome that hon. Members of all parties have given the debate. I shall attempt to respond as briefly and succinctly as possible to the various points that hon. Members have made.

First, let me deal with the points of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), and the matters that I set out in detail in a letter to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien). The Bill contains two separate secondary legislation powers. First, clause 30 includes the power to make regulations for remunerating charitable trustees. That is highly appropriate because the definitions of the circumstances in which some charitable trustees should be remunerated, and adaptations to them, are ideally suited to secondary legislation.

The main anxiety of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath was about clause 41 and the suggestion of a Henry VIII power to make regulations to overrule trustee investment criteria in local or private Acts. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman simply made a bad point. Schedule 2 amends the Cereals Marketing Act 1965, the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963, the National Heritage Act 1980, the Universities and College Estates Act 1925 and several other measures. They are all the relevant measures that we have been able to find, but a full Lexis search will not reveal every single trust. To hamper the beneficiaries of a trust under a private Act that has not yet been identified with having to wait for primary legislation before doing the good for them that the Bill does for all other trusts is an outrageous proposition, which does not bear consideration.

I must place on record the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) has diligently pursued the interests of his constituents in relation to the Mansfield brewery trusts. He has done that relentlessly and is fully aware of the need for the trustees to be accountable to the beneficiaries. The standard investment criteria in clause 4(3) may assist him. Paragraph (b) provides for trustees to bear in mind

> the need for diversification of investments of the trust, in so far as is appropriate to the circumstances of the trust.

I understand that that is one of the bases on which the public trustee believed that it was necessary to diversify the ownership of assets in the case that we are considering. It is a matter for the public trustee's discretion.

Jurisdiction over the public trustee is not within my ministerial capacity, but I will draw the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield to the attention of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy). She is primarily responsible for that aspect of policy, and I am sure that she will write to my hon. Friend in response to his remarks.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) talked about trustees overcharging. That is a serious point, which was made in a responsible fashion in Committee, and I am grateful for the opportunity to return to it. Clause 29 provides that trustees of a trust corporation, not a charitable trust, are entitled to receive reasonable remuneration from the trust. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey

described circumstances in which trustees do not act in the best interests of the trust or of the beneficiaries, but primarily serve the interests of the trustees, as a commercial body. That is not appropriate behaviour by trustees.

It is now clear that trustees are entitled to charge only reasonable remuneration—the definition of reasonable is not the same for a multi-million pound trust and for a small trust in a will. One would expect proportionality between charges and the assets in an estate. That is incorporated in the Bill. I bear in mind the comments about renouncing trusteeship, but the Bill is a warning to professional trustees that, if they take on a trust, they must ensure that their charges are no more than reasonable. The Bill provides that clarity, and I hope that that is welcome.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister clarify for the record that the Bill applies not only prospectively to new trusts that will be established after it is enacted, and to people who become trustees, but to the actions of existing trusts from the day of enactment?

Mr. Lock: Yes, I am certainly prepared to give that assurance. The Bill contains a set of default powers, which can be overridden by specific provisions in the trust instrument. However, existing trusts will be governed by the Bill because, once it receives Royal Assent, it will apply as much to them as to those that will be created. I hope that that is the assurance that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed, without amendment.

BNFL (Public-Private Partnership)

[Relevant documents: Ninth Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 307, and the Government's response thereto, HC 848.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

6.10 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I am pleased to have this opportunity to debate the report. When my colleagues on the Committee and I started work on this subject in June 1999, we assumed that we would undertake a fairly routine but, given the difficulties that people occasionally have following the arrangements of British Nuclear Fuels, somewhat complex operation. Little did we realise that we would be involved with far more controversial subjects, including safety procedures, the organisation and delivery of data, what might be regarded in some circles as the scandal affecting the organisation—that resulted in the departure of several senior staff and the sacking of a number of people further down the line of command—and the questioning of the organisation's whole character.

When we started, our remit was—and, indeed, it remains—to consider the suitability or otherwise of the proposed public-private partnership as a way forward for BNFL. That required us to examine the activities and liabilities of the company, which has four main areas of activity: nuclear reprocessing, the fabrication of mixed oxide fuel, the generation of electricity in Magnox stations, and substantial business involvement in the United States, involving waste management, nuclear facilities and nuclear fuel services. Moreover, we had to set alongside those revenue-generating aspects of the business a consideration of the scale, character and reporting of its liabilities.

To say that we found issues that concerned us in those areas would be an understatement. BNFL is a big company—it employs some 23,000 people who operate in some 15 countries—and in its ranks can be found some of the best qualified nuclear scientists and engineers in the world.

The report contains an interesting section describing BNFL's background and organisation—a short but interesting history of the British nuclear industry. That may be the first time that such a history has been written in a coherent and easily intelligible form. That section is not recommended bedside reading, although anyone who suffers from insomnia would not necessarily find it to be the best cure—it is quite a good read. However, I intend to discuss not so much the report's contents as some of the areas on which the Government's helpful response did not touch.

Some of BNFL's exceptionally qualified people have been involved in the nuclear industry since the outset. Its traditions come from the military and civil nuclear industries and its origins can be traced back to the 1940s. Understandably, great pride is taken in its achievements, but there is still a culture of secrecy, which is often unnecessary in a modern energy-oriented business. Such is the scientific complexity of its operations that there has been a tendency among some staff to patronise mere mortals, such as my colleagues and myself, and query the need for our work. That led to a stridency among some of those who are critical of its operations, which in turn created a tendency towards megaphone diplomacy on both sides of the debate.

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

We found among all levels of staff at BNFL a willingness and an anxiety to be helpful. They sought to provide us with the information that we wanted. However, the manner in which the accounts were drawn up suggested a degree of opacity that could be explained only by the cynical suggestion that there was something to hide. My colleagues and I had considerable sympathy for Dr. MacKerron, of Sussex university, who sought to get behind the facts and figures, but has been thwarted in all too many ways. I hope that BNFL's new chairman, Hugh Collum, who is a distinguished figure in the world of accountancy and finance, will be able to secure far greater transparency in the recording of the company's affairs.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): First, I apologise to my hon. Friend for having missed the first two minutes of his speech, and to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I assure you that when I saw my hon. Friend's name appear on the monitor, I broke the world record for running from Norman Shaw North to the Chamber.

My hon. Friend touches on the key point that if we want BNFL to develop, and nuclear technology to become acceptable again, absolute openness in all that the industry does is essential. I refer not only to commercial considerations, but to scientific and safety aspects.

Mr. O'Neill: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, whose apologies I accept. We all suffer such problems, but some hon. Members have heart conditions that are better suited to running like that.

Frankly, there is now a recognition that last year's events, and the public's reaction, mean that a new approach is required. I hope that as well as Hugh Collum, the new managing director, Norman Askew, who was appointed in the wake of the data falsification scandals, will be successful. I stress that what occurred was not a technical failure in the company, but the falsification of data. The major concern was the threat not to safety, but to the company's business integrity and good name.

The company deals with sensitive contracts throughout the world. It was therefore essential to bring in new management—people with a sense of responsibility—and to break with what might be called the mere civil service tradition in BNFL's business culture. That is why several new senior management figures, including the two whom I mentioned and others, are trying to inculcate in the company a radically different culture. I hope that it will embrace openness and a willingness to share technologies.

Although the industry is nuclear, its engineering is not that complex. None the less, the materials that it uses require care and a safety culture, although those have not always been as strong as they should have been. We should face the fact that the nuclear industry is not alone in being affected by such considerations. The north-west of England contains chemical plants of a complexity that requires the highest safety standards. I do not suggest that such an approach is necessary only in the nuclear industry—it has been achieved across British industry and in the most advanced areas of technology.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): On the question of safety, the inquiry was into the proposed public-private partnership for BNFL. My constituency is close to Sellafield and Chapelcross, and we regard safety as paramount. Does my hon. Friend believe that there would be any compromise on safety if we took in a private partner? Obviously, if a private partner comes in, money will go to the Exchequer. There has been disquiet in Cumbria for many years about the fact that even though Sellafield is in the area, money has not come from the Government to improve the infrastructure.

We all realise that there will be a decline in the number of jobs in the nuclear industry, especially on the west coast. Does my hon. Friend believe that money should be given to improve the infrastructure? The road from my constituency to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) is a disgrace, and this is a perfect opportunity to put money in and give us a better infrastructure so that we can encourage other industries to come to the west of the county when the number of jobs at BNFL declines.

Mr. O'Neill: On my hon. Friend's last point, it is easier to get from Edinburgh to Carlisle than to get from Carlisle to Cockermouth. The area is not well served by its infrastructure, but I leave the lobbying for roads to others, as we all have our own agendas on where road funding should go.

My hon. Friend asked about compromising safety. We had lengthy discussions with Mr. Lawrence Williams and his colleagues in the Health and Safety Executive, who were very sensitive to the issues that we raised. We know them and have had dealings with them in relation to other parts of the British nuclear industry. We got the feeling that their concerns about safety will not be compromised by any change in the nature of ownership. The standards that the HSE is now imposing on the nuclear industry will not be changed in any way as a consequence of a change in ownership.

In recent years, the British nuclear industry has had traumatic experiences at Dounreay, Sellafield and other parts of its operation, where there has been overdependence on outsourcing. The problem was that in many cases, the existing management did not know what was going on because the work was being done not by them but by a range of contractors, who sometimes were not as safety-conscious as they should have been, and were not part of the big picture. As a consequence, the nuclear industry is now somewhat chastened.

There are also suggestions that in some parts of the British nuclear industry—not at Sellafield—there was a hint of regulatory capture. Perhaps people had got too close to the organisations and the individuals whom they were supposed to be regulating.

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): Is it not the case that if subcontractors are not as safety-conscious as they should be, it is BNFL's responsibility to make sure that they are?

Mr. O'Neill: I do not dispute that. However, the previous Government set themselves on a particular road, and if they could not privatise parts of the nuclear industry, they wanted to outsource as much of the maintenance and engineering activities as they could. As a consequence of diktats from Ministers, there was a tendency throughout the nuclear industry to be overdependent on people who did not necessarily always have the safety awareness that they ought to have had, as is well recorded.

We took the question of safety very seriously, and, as I said, we held long sessions and had briefings and visits. When we went to Sellafield, we were briefed by the Health and Safety Executive before we went and saw what was happening. None the less, when we put things together, we came to the conclusion that there was a case for a public-private partnership. There was certainly a case for injecting money into the industry, over and above what was coming in from the public purse for what was, in the past, a fairly profitable business for us as British citizens.

On the other hand, in the increasingly privately owned world nuclear industry, it is essential that proper commercial disciplines are introduced in organisations that still have a legitimate, but irrelevant, civil service tradition of administration. We have to get across to the work force and certain parts of the management of BNFL the message that what was good enough in the past will not be good enough in a globalised market, where there is always a downward pressure on costs and a need for a degree of flexibility in management—which have not always been the hallmarks of BNFL's operation.

People will tell us that BNFL has been extremely effective in cutting costs and has made itself more efficient. I do not deny that, but I get the impression that BNFL and other parts of the British nuclear industry have lived for too long in a kind of cosy relationship and, as we say in Scotland, have been taking in each other's washing. They would do wee numbers for people, and jobs would be done. The point is not about safety; it is largely about sound business practice, which was not always present. Business was conducted by nods and winks, and, as the books were terribly difficult to understand and follow, it was sometimes difficult to track expenditure trails through the morass of the companies' accounts system, as Gordon MacKerron of Sussex University found.

There was a veil of secrecy over the organisation, so there were understandable concerns about security and similar matters. Extremely hazardous materials are being used, so there must be a secure means of dealing with them. Indeed, it was a civil libertarian, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who, as Secretary of State for Energy, armed the police who guard BNFL establishments. My right hon. Friend introduced that measure because he recognised that the threat of terrorism was such that security had to be in place.

The Select Committee came out broadly in favour of the PPP, for the reasons that I gave. We were a wee bit bemused by the question of whether the Government had considered the possibility of total privatisation. I realise that the company is involved with military, security and safety matters, and there may well be a case for a PPP, but the terms of the remit given to the accountancy company KPMG, which was called in as a consultant to conduct the exercise, were very narrow. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe explain why the option of full privatisation was not offered? Was that on grounds of principle or practicality? We accept that, as a result of the events last year, the date for the creation of the PPP has slipped. However, will my right hon. Friend give us an indication of when the company will be ready for a widening of ownership?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): When I read the part of the report that dealt with those matters, I could not quite work out the motive behind the question. Why would we necessarily want to know whether that issue was included, when there would be open hostility in west Cumbria to 100 per cent. privatisation? An acceptable compromise has been made, so why was that question posed? Did people simply want to put it on the record that the option of privatisation should not be pursued?

Mr. O'Neill: As my hon. Friend knows from his long years sitting on Select Committees and on the Public Accounts Committee, we always try to establish as much of a consensus as we can. Conservative Members on the Committee may want to know the arguments for full-blooded privatisation and Labour Members may want to know the arguments for a PPP. We felt that, as an exercise in open government, there would be no harm in asking the question, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will provide clarification.

Mr. Askew told us that the targets would not be met this year, which will be important when we get to the practicalities of the PPP. He anticipated that additional, new, more stringent targets would be introduced. When are those targets likely to be published, and what form will they take? Will they be published or will they be put in the Library? We would be obliged if the Minister could give us that information.

Once the company has passed those milestones, any potential investor would like, as a matter of due diligence, to be able to read and understand the accounts. I keep coming back to this issue, because it was a recurrent theme in the Committee. The reporting accountants were instructed to look into the clarity of the accounting procedures. Can the Minister tell us what bill of health they were given?

In the Government's reply to the report, they said that there were opportunities in Japan. Can the Minister tell us what the position is now, and when, if at all, the transportation of spent fuel from Germany will be resumed? What is the state of play on the apparent disagreements between BNFL and its major customer, British Energy? British Energy has sent a document to a number of Members suggesting that it would require an immediate cut in the charges that BNFL imposes for work carried out. It is beginning to rattle the cage on the issue of storage rather than reprocessing after 2006. It is only right that we have a clearer understanding of the difficulty that has arisen between BNFL and its largest customer, British Energy.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue of storage versus reprocessing has not suddenly burst on to the scene recently? It has been given emphasis because of the position of British Energy. For many years, a solid body of evidence has suggested that storage is a safer long-term prospect, and cheaper than reprocessing. Does he not think that BNFL should have grasped that nettle long before now?

Mr. O'Neill: My hon. Friend says that there is a body of evidence. There is certainly a body of opinion, but I am not sure whether the two are necessarily the same. I shall give an example. Prior to the privatisation of British Energy, the old Scottish Nuclear Ltd. was in protracted negotiations with BNFL on the processing of the Torness material. There was a debate at that time

[Mr. O'Neill]

about whether it should be stored at Torness, and it became clear that that was as much a negotiating tool used by Scottish Nuclear Ltd. as an environmental argument. None the less, we must recognise that storage on site is desirable if we want to avoid worries about transportation.

There is also the question whether appropriate space and facilities are available on site at reasonable cost to provide the storage required. Storing is not a simple process. It is perhaps more attractive than having trains containing waste or spent fuel trundling across the country, and the worries that that would cause some people. Whether those anxieties would be justified is a different matter.

We did not want to get into that issue in any great detail. However, we recognised that it was important, and that, as a revenue stream for a company that may be partially privatised, it would be of more than passing interest to anyone involved. We want to find out the Government's thinking.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the Government's response to this particular aspect of our report is complacent in the extreme? They take a hands-off, "nowt to do with us" approach, and consider that this is a commercial matter for the two companies. Surely they should go to the root of the viability of any public-private partnership. We know from the Committee's other work that it is increasingly the practice in industry to work alongside suppliers. BNFL accounts for some 25 per cent. of British Energy's costs, and for them not to talk to each other and reach a common agreement on the issue is ridiculous.

Mr. O'Neill: I would not go quite as far on this issue as my colleague on the Select Committee. I think that there is an appropriate relationship between state-owned corporations that are moving towards partial privatisation. There is an arm's-length relationship, and the decisions and the responsibility rest with the company.

However, there is a problem. In some areas of reprocessing, such as MOX facilities, Ministries other than the Department of Trade and Industry are apparently reluctant to come to a decision about the licensing of the plant. We must question the working of government there. I would be happy for BNFL to have the maximum independence that it can have under the DTI within its present system of ownership. The hon. Gentleman and I agree that a public-private partnership would not be a bad thing. In order to prepare for it, BNFL's management must show that it is capable of running the company in the big, dangerous world with the maturity and independence that it has not always had hitherto.

I want to put down a marker. It is not the demonstration facility for MOX that worries me, because I realise that that is not a major issue any more. However, we need to know what will happen to the main facility that has been constructed and is awaiting licensing. If it does not appear in the corporate plan, there will be a gaping hole in the finances.

I have complained about the fact that we do not know where half the money is or where it goes—but we are now beginning to find out. It would be even more worrying if, when the plan is produced and we start to look for potential partners for BNFL, such issues were not properly dealt with. They must not be handled with indecent haste, but there should be a decision. Governments should not hide behind indecision on such matters. Either we take this step or we do not, and if we do not, we must accept that the company will be that much smaller and perhaps less attractive, although we do not know.

Since the report was published, we have had the rundown table for Magnox, which is helpful. However, we must ask questions about the prospects for fuel manufacture at Springfields and reprocessing at Sellafield, and what the consequences will be for those facilities given that Magnox probably has another 10 or 12 years before it is completely finished as a source of generation. We want to know what alternative uses will be sought for the Sellafield and Springfields sites.

We should also like to know more about the Magnox liabilities. The longer Magnox is in operation, the longer the period over which liabilities can be spread, whereas if the operation period of Magnox stations were contracted, the liabilities would be spread over a shorter period. It is only fair to put that information in the public domain so that the impact of the change in the timetable on those liabilities is on the record.

We should know a little more about the United States business and what has happened about Hanford. Contracts were renegotiated, and it was understandable that the problems of emerging work—as it used to be called in the refitting of British naval ships—were a lot bigger than anticipated, and the price had to be changed. A number of issues are involved, but the Hanford issue must be dealt with.

I should like to deal with another, slightly different aspect of Magnox. What income stream replacement will there be when Magnox is removed from the company's activities? Although those reactors may be the dirty old warhorses of nuclear generation, they provide about 8 per cent. of our energy requirements. They are also linked to the national grid. Therefore, as the wires are there—to put it very simply—do Ministers have any proposals for alternative generation systems that could, if necessary, be connected to the system?

Conversely, have the Government, in partnership with BNFL, considered whether there is a case for further nuclear generation? I am a bit ambivalent about that. Although I realise that, in terms of emissions, it is a very clean energy, I also know that it has problems with back-end costs and with liabilities. Nevertheless, if we want to create and sustain a proper generating mix in the United Kingdom, we have to recognise that, although windmills and wave generation may have considerable attractions, the attractions of alternative forms of generation have probably been exaggerated. I therefore think that we ignore the nuclear element at our peril.

It is rather depressing that the Prime Minister, in an estimable speech to the Green Alliance, completely ignored the nuclear option. It is as if the Government have decided collectively to run away from the issue. I think that it is an abdication of intellectual responsibility to fail to consider one of the great British scientific achievements of the 20th century and to seek to discard it, as some people seem to be doing.

I am not certain that, at this time, nuclear generation is the most economic means of generating electricity. I also recognise that it has environmental costs that are different

in character from those associated with gas-fired or coal-fired stations. However—as I have always said, as one who has always acknowledged a constituency dependence on the coal industry—if we are to continue arguing for electricity generated from coal, we shall have to continue using the nuclear industry, for some time to come, to create some space in the envelope. We have not yet found ways of bridging the potential generating gap that will begin to emerge from about the middle of this decade.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does my hon. Friend accept that part of BNFL's importance lies in its links with Westinghouse and fourth-generation reactors? Does he also agree that if we do not proceed with that technology, the French or perhaps the Americans will lead the way? There is no doubt that we will need new nuclear capacity.

Mr. O'Neill: The worst argument for any form of energy technology is that if we do not build it, someone else will. The history of the British electricity generating industry is littered with mistakes that are the consequence of such arguments. Across the country, we have power stations that were built because boiler suppliers were running out of orders. People have said, "If we try just a wee bit harder, we will have generators"—advanced gas-cooled reactors, pressurised water reactors, and Magnox, although not the latest ones—"with one type or another of the Union flag wrapped around them." We tend to go for such generators not because they provide safe and cheap energy, but because they create a lot of jobs at the same time. I think that we should have a single-mindedness about the way in which we consider power generation.

As I said, in such a complex business there are other problems, such as the continuing anxiety about safety. Whatever happens, people will worry. The Dounreay situation is one of the interesting aspects of nuclear generation that the Committee investigated. Although it is one of the smaller-scale operations, in some ways Dounreay is just as dirty and difficult as others. In Scotland, and especially in the north of Scotland, there was anxiety about the condition of the site, safety procedures, its evident past sloppiness, and the fact that we now have to reap that whirlwind. However, under the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, and particularly with the leadership of John McKeown and his colleagues, there has been a transformation not only of the site but of the public's attitude towards it. Those anxieties have been largely diminished.

There is a very vigilant group of individual critics of many of Dounreay's previous activities, but in evidence taken by the Committee, we saw a noticeable shift in their attitude. They were not embracing the facility, but they were certainly much less worried about it than they had been.

I look forward to a public-private partnership involving BNFL, although I do not know as yet what activities it will engage in. My colleagues and I have as many unanswered questions as answered ones, as the situation was not clear when we were investigating. However, it is fortunate that we are having the debate today, when the Government and BNFL can look at the situation with a rather more detached and cooler eye than was available earlier this year to the new management.

My colleagues and I look forward to a public-private partnership. We think that BNFL can operate at a world-class level in various sectors of the nuclear industry, and that it has a tremendous contribution to make to British technology and science and to the economic well-being particularly of the north-west of England, and especially of Cumbria, where so many good jobs have depended on BNFL for so long.

6.46 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and the Select Committee on Trade and Industry on their report. His speech and the Committee's conclusions touch on some of the most important issues surrounding the proposed BNFL public-private partnership.

I have a strong constituency interest in the matter, as the Springfields works are just outside Preston. When strangers come to my constituency and see the lovely, low and, in many cases, modern facilities, and ask, "What goes on in there?", to shock them I say, "That is the home of the United Kingdom's nuclear fuel manufacturing capability." It always surprises them. Great investment has gone into Springfields.

I have also had the pleasure of meeting Springfields' work force and management, who are dedicated to quality, cost reduction and competitiveness. Although all those are buzz words, they are also real words that entail efficiency in modern business. They also demonstrate that, mentally, in their approach Springfields' work force and management are very much in the private sector. Although they very much welcome the proposals for a public-private partnership, as the Committee Chairman indicated, some may even be thinking more about full-scale privatisation. However, if the Government wish to pursue the PPP model, it is our job to discuss the industry's needs within that context.

So often when we discuss British Nuclear Fuels, the difficulties of the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and his constituents tend to dominate the debate, whereas the business's front and clean end—the manufacture of nuclear fuel—tends not to receive so much attention. However, BNFL's takeover of Westinghouse Electric Company's business has had great implications. It has absorbed into its midst not only a private enterprise, but the heart of world nuclear fuel manufacturing. It also demonstrates the difference in approach between BNFL's fuel and reactor services division and its other divisions.

As BNFL's latest report indicated, those services are seriously big business: £730 million of BNFL's turnover is accounted for by the fuel and reactor services division. Although there have been natural growing pains as the company has taken on Westinghouse's responsibilities, that is driving the thinking about the fuel division and its future. I shall develop one or two of those points in a moment.

I was grateful to the Select Committee Chairman for sharing his observations on the Prime Minister's speech on the environment. However, I do not want to get into the realm of party political point scoring, as the matters that we are debating are too serious and affect the livelihoods of thousands of people in my constituency whose jobs depend on the nuclear industry. Nevertheless, if we are to ensure that the British nuclear industry is

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effective and that, in the not too distant future, it will be capable of seriously considering investment in new forms of nuclear generating capacity, we have to address some strategic issues. According to figures supplied to me by the company, in 1999–2000 our nuclear industry, BNFL and British Energy, will together have avoided the emission of about 79 million tonnes of carbon dioxide.

I do not want to strike an unnecessarily controversial note with the Minister at this early stage, but in response to a question I had tabled inviting her to give me some feedback on the impact that the closure of the Magnox stations would have on the Government's meeting of its Kyoto targets, she rather surprisingly said that there would be no impact. There may well be some statistical reason for that, but—in the light of a point that I shall make shortly—I think that it would be useful to have it put on record why there will be no impact, given the likelihood of the closure of a major part of our nuclear generating industry over the next decade. We should view the matter in a European context. The nuclear energy generating industry avoids an emission of 800 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, and the European Union's Kyoto target of an 8 per cent. reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases is equivalent to 400 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. That makes clear the importance of the nuclear industry.

When preparing for the debate, I visited BNFL's Springfields plant. I asked members of the work force to come and talk to me, and over 130 did, at two meetings. I told them that the debate represented a fairly rare opportunity for the House of Commons to discuss the nuclear industry, and that I wanted my questions, and the views that I would express, to be theirs rather than mine. A common theme in what they told me was their wish for the Minister to make a clear statement about how the Government see the strategic position of nuclear generation in this country.

We can all talk about the business advantages of a public-private partnership or of full-scale privatisation, but we must ask what is the purpose. Part of it will be to change the business culture of BNFL. In this year's annual report, Hugh Collum said:

> We have set priorities for each business group to deliver their own short term targets; the continued prospect of a Public Private Partnership will provide a powerful incentive to improve performance.

The Chairman of the Select Committee mentioned a number of changes that would have to be made in the management, and the management culture, of the company, but my dealings with the fuels division have shown me that many of those changes are already part of its working approach. If we are to realise the potential of a market which, in terms of nuclear fuel in the world, is worth some £20 billion, the commercial modernisation of BNFL—in terms of the fuels division, the potential for more capital and investment, and the improvements in production techniques that will enable BNFL to build on what is already there—is vital. It is vital if quotations such as the one that I read from the report are to become reality, and if the company's performance is to be improved.

The main message from the work force at Springfields is, "We are as good as anyone in the world at making nuclear fuel, and we want to be given the opportunity to show what we can do." For example, at present they do not make any of the pressurised water reactor fuel. It is a commodity in world terms, but they recognise that through quality comes safety, and that through a combination of quality, safety and excellence comes reduced cost—and an opportunity for them to compete again for parts of the nuclear fuel business to which they currently have no access. If that is to be turned to commercial advantage, the public-private partnership will be an extremely good way of ensuring that the commercial potential of the fuel division is properly realised.

The Chairman of the Committee used the word "openness", and I concur with him entirely. I think that the fuels division is, if anything, more open than the back-end business, by the very nature of the occupation; but I pay tribute to BNFL. Who would have thought a few years ago that tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people would go every year to a location next to the most radioactive site in the United Kingdom to learn about the nuclear industry? BNFL has provided for just that with its visitor centre, and efforts are made at the Springfields plant to give the local community a greater understanding of the industry.

That is welcome—it is a way of demonstrating that nothing is happening in the industry of which people should be frightened. When the workers at Springfields are asked about their reaction to what happened at Sellafield, they make the powerful point that they live in local communities and are answerable to local people, and run a safe ship. They deeply regret what happened, but they have pride in their work. Springfields, in Lancashire, is one of the beacon locations for high quality, high-precision engineering.

At a time when our manufacturing industry is under pressure, the advent of a public-private partnership and the opportunity for more investment will prove a very good way to sustain an industry in which the United Kingdom has considerable expertise and demonstrates considerable excellence. The Committee Chairman rightly reminded us of that.

There is, however, a downside of openness. Sometimes BNFL says that it will not do something, for quality reasons. For example, the company—in true private-sector mode—told British Energy, its main customer for advanced gas-cooled reactor fuel—that it was not satisfied with a particular batch of fuel rods, and would withdraw it because it was worried about the weld. It was then vilified in the press because it had taken up an issue relating to safety and quality control.

Let me return to my meetings with members of the work force. They would like us to talk more positively about the company's good points, because most discussion has been about the difficult aspects. Here is a responsible company, which is prepared on occasion to say to its principal customer, "We are not sending you this product because we are not satisfied with it." That is good management. We should encourage it, and the attitudes in the work force that go with it.

I think that it would be helpful to the work force, in the context of the industry's future, for the Minister to address the strategic issues. Those workers asked me, "If we are to see the decline of the Magnox stations, what is the potential for investment in new techniques such as Magrox, a new reactor design such as the AP600, or the

introduction in the United Kingdom of the pebble bed reactor system in which British Nuclear Fuels in South Africa has already taken a minority investment stake?"

On my recent visit, I found it interesting to observe the positive attempts that are being made to find ways of developing new designs at an affordable price, commensurate with benefits to the environment. I think that it would be helpful, while the Government own BNFL, to know how they feel about the subject, because I was asked more questions about it than about anything else. We can talk about new business arrangements and other procedures until the cows come home, but the people at Springfields want to know what is their future—and their future lies in the ability to make high-quality nuclear fuel for a long time to come.

The workers are also concerned about the impact on their business of the new electricity trading arrangements. Perhaps the Minister will say a word about that. Does she feel that the system does not properly recognise—as does the climate change levy—the benefits that can be gained from the nuclear industry? There was a feeling among the work force that coal had benefited once again, in terms of the structure of the electricity trading market, to the detriment of clean fuel technology.

Without doubt, the fuels division is ready for the competition that may result from the public-private partnership and the further introduction of private-sector techniques. However, as the Select Committee noted, the fuels division operates in a commercial world and it is right to place it in a commercial environment. That is the best way for it to learn how to react to competition from world companies such as Siemens, and others.

The future business strategy will also be influenced by the public-private partnership. For example, the fuels division will have the opportunity to enter manufacturing for eastern bloc companies with the so-called VVR system of fuel. Another matter to be resolved is the future of hexafluoride production. Such major commercial decisions must be taken in the context of a clear understanding of when the public-private partnership will come into being.

I welcome this debate on the nuclear industry, in the context of the public-private partnership proposal. I hope that the Minister, when she winds up the debate, will say more in response to the many important points raised by the hon. Member for Ochil and by the conclusions of the report from the Committee that he chairs.

My constituents who work at Springfields want to know about the future of their business. They are anxious to take on the burden of more competition. They know that they are good, and they are dedicated to quality. Above all, they are dedicated to safety, but they want this debate to give them a clear indication as to the future of their industry.

7.1 pm

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and the Select Committee of which he is Chairman on a thorough, positive and concise report that is a vindication of the role of Select Committees in our proceedings. I have always strongly supported that role.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech, in which he touched on all the key issues that are germane to the debate. In addition, I welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, and the Government's positive response to the report. Some questions remain unanswered, and I shall come to some of them in a moment.

The BNFL Sellafield site is in my constituency, and I have represented it in the House for 30 years. At present, it employs about 10,000 people directly. It is a huge, complex, advanced, high-technology industrial site, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) is present, as many of his constituents work there.

The influence of BNFL on the economy of the north-west goes far beyond the boundaries of my constituency and of the whole of Cumbria. The north-west region of England benefits hugely from the engineering and other contracts in which BNFL is involved, and from the massive investment that goes into the company every year. The company makes a very considerable contribution to the economy as a whole, and not merely to west Cumbria or the north-west region of England. It is probably still the biggest earner of yen in the British economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) pointed out that, although employment and investment at BNFL brings huge benefits for local people, there are some less positive factors. For example, there is not as much as 100 metres of the A595 from Carlisle to west Cumbria—the only trunk road to the Sellafield site—that is devoted to dual carriageway. That acts as a disincentive. The road is often horrendously congested, especially in my constituency. In addition, its lack of dual carriageway is presented as a reason why we cannot diversify the economy of west Cumbria more satisfactorily and successfully. That is something that we certainly need to do.

I have absolutely no difficulty with the proposals for a public-private partnership in which the Government would retain a 51 per cent. interest. In fact, I welcome it as a positive proposal. It has been seriously delayed by events surrounding the MOX demonstration facility, but getting the company into a position to take that option forward successfully should be a short to medium-term objective of the Government and BNFL.

I welcome, too, the fact that the company has a new chairman, chief executive and board. The Government's response to the Committee's report states:

> In its role as shareholder, the Government needs to ensure that it is properly informed about, and can support, the company's overall strategy.

That has not always been true in the past of the Government's role in respect of BNFL. I am reassured by the deep commitment of my right hon. Friend the Minister to ensuring that the Government is properly informed about the company's strategy and can support it. As colleagues, she and I have had many meetings and discussions about the situation at Sellafield.

I have also had discussions with the nuclear installations inspectorate, which has published reports detailing the changes that it wants implemented at the Sellafield site, and other changes that it wants the BNFL management to implement. I have called before, and do so again, for the full and comprehensive implementation of all the recommendations from the nuclear installations inspectorate. Wide-ranging management restructuring has

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already been undertaken, at board level and at the Sellafield site, and I am delighted to say that some of the unsatisfactory elements at the site are being corrected.

Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil mentioned cost cutting, which is fine if it improves a company's efficiency and productivity. However, the previous board indulged not in cost cutting but in corner cutting, and that has been very deleterious to the successful operation of the company and the site. Many people pointed out those errors at the time: I am delighted that they are being corrected and that the company is recruiting workers in west Cumbria to replace many of the people in supervisory positions who were wrongly removed. That is very good news.

So far, the nuclear installations inspectorate has been very positive about the response of BNFL to reports that were pretty searching, if not coruscating. However, a great deal remains to be done, not least when it comes to the better management of Sellafield's legacy. That legacy originated in the military programme at the site, and was reinforced by other activities more recently. It is good to know that the nuclear installations inspectorate is satisfied with the progress made so far.

Emphatic support has been expressed for BNFL and its future by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, and by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who said earlier this year that he believed that BNFL should be left to get on with the job. It is a world leader in many aspects of what it does. I agree with what the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said in respect of Springfields, but it is also true of much of the work carried out at Sellafield. There is massive support for the industry among the communities that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington and I represent in west Cumbria.

In particular, we welcome the support that the Select Committee gives to BNFL's future, and we are pleased that it highlights the need for the company to continue fuel reprocessing at Sellafield. Indeed, we would go further—we hope that there will be an early decision to commission fully the Sellafield MOX fuel plant. That point was also raised in the Select Committee report. Such a decision would, in turn, open up new opportunities for business for BNFL. The global market for nuclear business is increasing. Many other countries, including many of our European neighbours, already have much larger nuclear contributions to their energy generation than we do. There will be business opportunities not only in Europe but further afield, in Japan and elsewhere.

I am in no doubt, and never have been—I have been a lifelong supporter of civil nuclear power—that the world will need an increasing contribution if we are to have any hope of turning the dangerous tide of global warming. The reality is that we will not meet those challenges without a contribution from civil nuclear power.

The company faces other problems as well, not just those flowing from the falsification of quality control data. Let me say again how pleased I am that the Select Committee has put that properly in context. This was never an issue of safety. It was an issue of falsification, which was quite wrong—indeed, it was devastatingly damaging to the company and to the jobs of those who, sadly, got involved. However, it was not an issue of safety on the site. It went to the heart of the integrity of the company and its products and processes. That is what has been so damaging not only to trade opportunities but to the core finances of the company. We all know how poor its financial results have been.

I am quietly confident that the new management, together with the dedicated, skilled work force, will be able to turn the company around. They should certainly be given the support, encouragement and opportunity to do so, not just from the Select Committee but from the Government.

The targets set at Kyoto for climate change will be challenging enough in themselves with the present contribution of civil nuclear power to electricity generation. If we got rid of that contribution altogether, as some argue we should, the ability to meet those targets would disappear over the horizon. That seems evident, and it is not only my view but that of many others in this debate. I have never argued that we should generate all our electricity in nuclear power stations, and I shall not do so this evening, but as the evidence about the impact of global warming mounts, it is clear that civil nuclear power should have a role as one part of the solution—one option, one contribution—to a balanced energy policy.

The right hon. Member for Fylde pointed out that our modest contribution from civil nuclear power already obviates the production of about 79 to 80 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. In addition to that, it does not create oxides of nitrogen or sulphur, as does the burning of other fossil fuels. So using nuclear power offers quite a wide-ranging contribution to a better environment.

As I said, my views are not unique but are widely held. They are shared by other Governments and other countries and, in this country, by the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and by many British trade unions. They are also shared by at least some European Commission officials who point out that if we are to make progress on global warming targets, about 85 new nuclear power stations will be needed within the European Union. James Lovelock, the creator of the Gaia theory on the environment, has spoken out in favour of a contribution from civil nuclear power to electricity generation. That is widely welcomed by myself and others.

I pay tribute to my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington who dedicate themselves to meeting the highest possible standards of safety and skill that can be achieved. The work force at Sellafield contains some of the leading world exponents of engineering, nuclear physics and environmental science. They are very proud of what they can achieve and of the opportunities that they present for improving the performance of the British economy as a whole. They deserve our thanks for that skill and dedication. They get a little tired of Members of Parliament calling for the closure of the plant willy nilly—not to mention a little angry, since that would mean that about 15,000 families in west Cumbria, and some more beyond, would be on the dole. Of course, it is a ridiculous assertion to make in the first place. Even if some aspects of the activity at Sellafield were to close, for whatever reason, other aspects would have to continue long into the future.

There were exchanges earlier about the storage of irradiated spent nuclear fuel. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) asserted that that should

have been considered. He seemed to be implying that it had not been considered. Well, it has been. It is not that BNFL has not considered dry storage—it has considered the issue and dismissed it, and rightly so. BNFL thinks that reprocessing is the best practical environmental option when it comes to dealing with spent nuclear fuel, and I agree. It is rather curious to argue that nuclear sites present a threat to people and the environment and then in the next breath to say that we should nevertheless have more and more nuclear sites around the country as more and more dry stores are built. The people who advocate that never answer the question of what follows dry storage. What happens then? We all know that we cannot dry-store Magnox fuel in any event. Yet nobody ever answers those questions.

Mr. Chaytor: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Cunningham: Certainly, in a moment.

No one ever says what happens if we store fuel and 10, 15, 20, 40 or 50 years down the track, there are problems with it. That would lead to proliferation, at every nuclear power station in every part of the country, of potential problems that would almost certainly need to be resolved by moving the fuel, which would then be in a far less safe state than when it comes out of the reactors and can be safely transported to Sellafield, as it has been for decades without any significant accident of any kind involving people or the environment.

Mr. Chaytor: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way on this point. May I ask him to consider two issues? First, BNFL has always said that it was not possible to store Magnox fuel and that it had to be reprocessed. If that is the case, why is Magnox stored at Wylfa and not reprocessed? Secondly, I take the point that dry storage has a life cycle and that at some point we have to find a permanent solution. However, if we use the same argument, we have to find a permanent solution to the storage of plutonium. The difficulty at the moment is that, through reprocessing, we are creating mountains and mountains of plutonium—the most dangerous substance known to man—and we have no idea what to do with it. In defending reprocessing, my right hon. Friend must say something about plutonium.

Dr. Cunningham: There are two things wrong with what my hon. Friend says—at least two things. I am pleased that he concedes that dry storage is not in itself a permanent solution. However, his assertion that we are creating mountains and mountains of plutonium is simply an exaggeration. The plutonium that is created is all stored in my constituency, quite safely and securely, and presents no problem. It is not a threat to anyone. I can arrange for my hon. Friend to visit Sellafield and see for himself, if he has not already been. He talks about the problem of long-lived nuclear waste accruing from reprocessing. There is nothing like a visual aid when one is discussing these matters. I have one on my desk, and perhaps I should have brought it with me. If all the electricity that I consume in my life were generated from nuclear power, the resultant highly active waste would occupy a cylindrical shape about 2 inches in diameter and 2 inches high. That is the reality.

Of course the waste is a problem and we need to contain and deal with it. We have debated that matter in the past, and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington and I have differed on the best way forward, so I do not want to get into that argument again tonight.

Although I respect the right of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North to question and debate the issues, he does not serve anyone's cause by exaggerating the nature of the problem or overstating it. Some people try to scare the public—I do not accuse him of doing this—into believing that we cannot manage these matters: that we are not competent and that we do not have the skills, the scientific know-how and the engineering ability to deal with them. The truth is that we do. We have had nuclear power in this country for a long time. We have a lot of operating experience, and in BNFL we have some of the leading people in their fields in the world. That is one reason why the Americans are increasingly turning to BNFL to draw on its expertise and experience to decommission some of their military bases, such as Rocky Flats and Savannah River. We can make a huge contribution by helping the former Soviet republics to tackle the awful legacy and backlog of nuclear problems that they have. We can make a huge difference to the global environment if we have the courage and common sense to back our nuclear industry and give it the support that it needs.

I hope that the Government will give the go-ahead without too much further delay, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said, to the Sellafield MOX plant, so that we can deal in another way with a problem that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North raised: what we should do with plutonium. We can burn it, as mixed oxide fuel, in nuclear reactors. That is what we can do to decrease the stockpile that my hon. Friend rightly says exists. My hon. Friend says that there are mountains of it; I say that there are not mountains, but there is some.

The great thing about nuclear fuel is that 97 per cent. of everything that comes out of a nuclear reactor can be recovered and recycled. Surely that obviates the necessity for mining uranium, which is one of the dirtiest aspects of the operation.

Mr. Chaytor: Plutonium can be burned in MOX fuel, but we have to ask why British Energy does not want to burn it. It is because it is not economic. The second question is why BNFL has only 7 per cent. of the contracts that it needs to justify the operation of the MOX plant. That is because not enough utilities in Japan want to burn MOX fuel. Those are serious questions on which I hope my right hon. Friend will comment.

Dr. Cunningham: A number of people have mentioned British Energy. It is a privatised company and it is in financial difficulties. We all know that. I take no pleasure in saying it, but it is the reality. British Energy has simply said, "Let's abrogate our contracts with BNFL and put them into difficulties too." That is not the way business works. BNFL has lawful, signed contracts and has every right to insist that it be paid for the work that it has been contracted to carry out.

The right hon. Member for Fylde commented on the fact that there are no new-build nuclear power stations. I have always supported that idea and I would love to see it happen. The fact is, however, that after the privatisation

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of the electricity generating industry, the privatised utilities do not want to build such power stations. I am not saying that they will never want to do so, but they do not want to do it now. In that regard, I am almost on the same ground as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North.

My hon. Friend is wrong to say that the Japanese utilities do not want to purchase MOX fuel and use it in their reactors. I think that he will be pleasantly surprised—or perhaps unpleasantly, given his standpoint on these issues. We can recover in the Japanese market. In my constituency in west Cumbria—at Sellafield—we have had a long, profitable and good association with Japanese industries. Japanese people are very welcome in the area. They come regularly to visit my constituency, mainly on business, but sometimes for pleasure, too, since it is one of the most beautiful parts of the world. I very much look forward to the prospect of BNFL at Sellafield doing more business with the Japanese utilities. That would be good news for my constituents and for the Cumberland and United Kingdom economies, and it would enable us to tackle the huge problems and threats that are presented to us by global warming.

I look forward to the Minister's replies not only to my questions but to those of my colleagues. I pay tribute to her for the way in which she has committed herself to work with BNFL to try to sort out the difficulties—they are considerable and I would not want to underestimate them. I give her my wholehearted support. I will certainly work with her and other colleagues in the Government to ensure that we resolve those problems and that the company can go forward to further successes.

7.27 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I very much welcome the introduction by the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) to the debate on the Select Committee report and the work that that Committee has done. This is a long-overdue exploration by the House of the state of the nuclear industry and of BNFL in particular.

I am a Member of Parliament from the north-west and I am extremely conscious of the high skill levels in the industry and the large number of jobs that are at stake. I am also conscious of the contribution that it makes to the welfare of that region and the country.

Unexpectedly, I found myself in a deal of agreement with the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), in particular with his remarks about the need to pursue vigorously the rectification of problems and to explore diversification. I may have been able to reassure the right hon. Gentleman, as we made the occasional eye contact, that it is certainly not my view that we could or should shut the door and walk away from BNFL or our civil nuclear power programme. Clearly, that programme should be allowed to continue as long as it is safe and economic, as it helps us to achieve our Kyoto targets and it benefits the nuclear industry as it stands. That may provide some reassurance for those working at BNFL's various sites.

In many respects, however, the nuclear industry has been its own worst enemy. It has been secretive and defensive for decade after decade. Often, it seems to have put safety second and cost third, and something rather hazy, called a "national objective" in first position, which seemed to override common sense on many occasions.

The industry has not been scrutinised by the House for many years. We have had a number of notable debates, which seem to come at approximately 10-year intervals. In those debates, my colleagues on the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Benches have marked out the cause of common sense and the need to challenge the unwritten and unstated assertions that have underpinned the industry. Those are all good reasons to welcome the debate; and to welcome both the Committee's report and the Government's response to it.

BNFL, as a significant part of this country's nuclear industry, has received major investment over several decades. It remains a major employer and maintains a major lead in nuclear and other important forms of technology; it is certainly a world leader in the manufacture, control and management of nuclear materials and fuel. The company has world-class expertise in decommissioning facilities and it is using that well.

Those are three major pluses, but there are also some major minuses. The company has experienced major environmental failures. The right hon. Member for Copeland may claim that a huge amount of waste would fit into a tumbler; that is fine, but a fundamental problem with all forms of nuclear material is that, intrinsically, they are highly traceable. An amount far smaller than could be contained in a tumbler could be detected on a beach in Norway 25 years after it was discharged into the sea at Sellafield, and traced back to its source with absolute certainty.

A fundamental of nuclear physics is the traceability of material because of radiation. However secretive people are and however long they resist acknowledging the problems when environmental failures occur, the nuclear signature—the fingerprints, the DNA sign—is always there. Those major environmental failures have dogged the nuclear industry throughout its life.

There are major economic failures too. At present, nuclear power is not an economic vehicle for investment for future civil power generation.

There have been major safety and security failures. Perhaps they are rarer in this country than they used to be; perhaps they are acknowledged more quickly. However, it is clear on some occasions that safety and security are compromised internationally.

The pluses and minuses of the nuclear industry have been well rehearsed and are strongly polarised. That often makes it difficult to hold a rational discussion—it is assumed that one must take an extreme point of view to take part. It is extremely encouraging that the Select Committee has produced such a measured, objective and careful report. The report explores the issues thoroughly and provides much helpful briefing; in the past, there has been much comment on the nuclear industry—some of it polemical and harsh. No doubt, hon. Members will bring that to bear on our debate.

We must realise, however, that BNFL—whatever else it has to do—must refocus its business. The company must repair its reputation, which has taken a severe knocking during the past 12 months—as all those who have spoken so far agree. The company must retire from reprocessing. The House must address those issues. The Government must inform us about them and, as a shareholder, they must take an active role in promoting them.

It is clear that the determination of the Government must be applied to the interests of BNFL in order for the company to refocus its business, repair its reputation and retire from reprocessing. Time and money will be needed.

The deferment of the implementation of the public-private partnership proposal was inevitable, given the problems experienced by the company. However, that deferment is also beneficial and desirable; even the new date referred to in the report will be too soon. If BNFL is to have a role in the future, it is important that the company understands the international context in which it operates. BNFL must refocus its business.

I depart strongly and sharply from the views of the right hon. Member for Copeland; it is not true that nuclear power is expanding worldwide. The number of nuclear reactors in commission in the world has been locked at about 500 for the past 15 years. New reactors are being built and commissioned, but the pattern is that they are in countries that either have authoritarian regimes or a perceived military or strategic need for nuclear power—or both.

Nuclear reactors are being decommissioned in every liberal democracy, and even in some countries that would not qualify as such; for example, Turkey and Taiwan have both recently decided not to proceed with nuclear power. There are complex reasons for growth in some areas and for the decision to restrict and decommission in others.

Dr. Ladyman: There is an alternative way to explain the differences in the commissioning and decommissioning of nuclear power stations. Are they not being commissioned in countries that do not have access to, or the money to buy, fossil fuels? They are being decommissioned in countries that have access to such fuels, where people are prepared to close their eyes to the fate of the world and to global warming.

Mr. Stunell: That is an interesting theory. However, it is always a mistake to ask a question to which one does not know the answer. The theory is not true. India offers an obvious example; nuclear power is being developed there, but it also has huge coal reserves. China is installing nuclear power; it too has large coal reserves and is actually expanding its generation of both fossil and nuclear fuels. Switzerland offers an example for my point about liberal democracies. That country has almost no coal reserves, but has decided to abandon its nuclear programme.

Various arguments can be brought to bear on the subject—I was just about to deploy one of them—but the shortage or the presence of fossil fuels is not a significant reason for nuclear development. A significant reason for a decision not to expand or develop a country's nuclear programme is popular opinion expressed through the ballot box. That is the major constraint—not science or resources or the inability to secure cash: public opinion provides the obstruction.

The UK should not engage in an accelerated decommissioning of our civil nuclear programme, for all the reasons that have been set out in the debate. However, BNFL's plans—I am not sure if that is the right word—or ideas for building two plutonium-fuelled reactors at Sellafield seem to be wholly unrealistic according to those reasons, quite apart from any others that might be adduced.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman says that the use of nuclear power is not expanding. In 1999, according to BP Amoco's world energy review, its use expanded by 4 per cent. However, that is merely a difference of opinion between the hon. Gentleman and me.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the BNFL's plan to build two reactors at Sellafield in my constituency. I do not know where he obtained his information, but the company has no plan to build even one new nuclear power station at Sellafield—let alone two plutonium-fuelled ones. He is categorically wrong about that. The company has not even discussed potential plans to build such a station. Yesterday, I held a long discussion with the chief executive of BNFL about that myth. I have a letter from the director of the Sellafield site saying the same thing; there are no plans and there have been no discussions about plans. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that his information is fundamentally wrong.

Mr. Stunell: I am happy to accept the right hon. Gentleman's assurance. My information was not meant to be an extraordinary revelation, because, as he rightly says, it is taken to be common currency. It has been put to me by several quarters, but not by BNFL. Therefore, I am happy to accept the assurances that I have been given. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman's alacrity in wanting to state the facts clearly before the House only underlines my point that the chances of expanding the civil nuclear power programme in this country are bedevilled by the problem of persuading the public that that might be a good idea.

Mr. Chaytor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the trend away from nuclear energy in most liberal democracies is not just a question of public opposition to it—even though it would be interesting to learn how many Members would actively volunteer to have the next nuclear power station built in their constituency? The problem is not just public opposition, because liberal democracies now understand the costs of commissioning, decommissioning and dealing with waste. They have calculated that the cost is unsustainable over the full life cycle of a nuclear power station. In addition, those countries—the United States and Germany in particular—now understand the technology of renewable energy to a far greater degree than ever before and they are investing in hydrogen technologies and photovoltaics.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because his thinking overlaps with mine to some extent.

I referred to liberal democracies and to the problems that are created for nuclear power by democracy. However, the "liberal" element—by that, I mean trade liberalisation—also creates a problem. As the right hon. Member for Copeland rightly pointed out, a future civil nuclear power programme in this country will be seriously handicapped, because the privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation of our electricity services mean that it is not a financially sound prospect to invest in civil nuclear power.

Were the right hon. Gentleman and I to form a financial consortium and to go to the major banks to ask them to lend us a sum approaching £800 million to build a civil nuclear power station that would be on stream in 10 years' time if we were lucky, the banks would probably tell us that that would not be a sound proposition. If they had

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£800 million, they would prefer to give it to us to do something that would gain a return in a shorter time, in which the investment was more likely to be realised and, when that investment was realised, was likely to be profitable.

Mr. O'Neill: I missed part of the hon. Gentleman's speech, but I have been following it since I returned to the Chamber. What would his reaction be if the Government of the day—party non-specific—introduced a carbon tax on energy generation? Surely, the economics of that would be transparent overnight and, given the Liberals' enthusiasm for all things fiscal, it is likely that they would not choose to oppose a carbon tax. However, were they to support one, would they go the extra mile and face the consequences of choosing what might then be the cheapest fuel, namely nuclear power?

Mr. Stunell: Serendipity sometimes works remarkably well. I had reached precisely the point in my notes where I had written about the Ochil case. The economics of producing electricity, like the economics of producing anything else, can be tilted by fiscal and regulatory measures, and the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe might want to comment on that fact. I am sure that she will also remember that, when we served together on the proceedings of the Utilities Bill, I tabled amendments that would have introduced a carbon tax. Far from our opposing the suggestion, it is good Liberal Democrat policy and I have advocated it in the House.

Given that there will be state intervention—either fiscal or regulatory—to tilt the market in favour of one fuel or another, what will the cost of that be? I would be happy to supply the hon. Gentleman with a copy of my booklet on the topic. However, for an equivalent amount of investment by the state, one can obtain more electricity more cheaply, with less environmental impact and with much more certain support from the public by investing in renewables rather than in nuclear power.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, might be becoming impatient at the fact that we are exploring an issue that was not covered by the report, so I shall return to a previous point. BNFL's reputation as a company must be repaired. There is common ground in the House that, over 20, 30 or more years, the problems have followed a repeated cycle. Something happens, it is concealed and denied and that is followed by reluctant disclosure and then a promise of reform and change.

About six months before the most recent incident took place, I visited BNFL at the company's invitation in my role as the Liberal Democrats' spokesman on energy matters. I was given an extensive trip round the site and its facilities and much was explained to me. One of the key points that was made in the several presentations that I heard, including separate presentations from senior management and the trade unions, was that everything had changed and that the company now had a safety culture. I was told that the problems of the past had occurred under different managements and different regimes and before the problems had been understood. The company was absolutely focused on safety. However, I now know that, at almost exactly the time that I visited the company, people were filling in last year's numbers on the check sheets and creating the current problem.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Given that my hon. Friend is referring to BNFL's reputation, does he agree that it was an extraordinary Government decision earlier this year that the company should be put partly in charge of Britain's major nuclear arms centre at Aldermaston? Does he not agree that that is yet another good reason for putting off the privatisation of BNFL?

Mr. Stunell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It was a strange decision and it is a good reason for delaying the public-private partnership.

I now come to the company's business, how that might be related to what the PPP would deliver, and the risks of going down that route. It is time for the company to refocus its activities and to move on from reprocessing. As a constituency Member, as a former Minister and as a former Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Copeland has been a long-term, dedicated and properly committed supporter of BNFL's work. Equally, Liberal Democrats have been sceptical of the steps that have been taken and the investment that has been made. We think that, at least to some extent, we are entitled to say, "We told you so."

THORP has always been an uneconomic project, but it has been justified in a three-legged way. First, part of it is justified because the fuel is coming through. Burning the fuel is then justified because the reprocessing is coming through and storage cannot take place because it would not be economic to stop the reprocessing. For nearly 40 years, we have had a succession of arguments that have been entirely self-reinforcing. We now have a large facility that is not working and is supplying materials that every one of its customers would desperately like not to have to buy but which they have been trapped into buying by contractual arrangements. One could say the same of Magnox business and MOX business—of course, the MOX demonstration facility has been shut down.

What should happen next? There must be ways of involving and using the work force and the technology that has been developed. There is a major worldwide decommissioning industry, not to mention decommissioning on the site in west Cumbria itself. There is a worldwide need for clean-up facilities. There is also a need for a plutonium immobilisation programme because that will solve the problem of the mountain—or the molehill, as the case may be—of plutonium that is being generated across the world.

Dr. Cunningham: Is not this a rather curious argument for the hon. Gentleman to advance? He is saying that BNFL should use its skills, expertise and know-how to get into the huge global market, but a few moments ago he agreed that it was not fit to operate at Aldermaston. Both arguments cannot be right.

Mr. Stunell: Both arguments can be right. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) said that the existing company, with its current skills, is an unusual example of a contractor that one would appoint to run the services at a military installation. The issue of decommissioning relates not primarily to military

complexes but to civilian complexes around the world. The right hon. Member for Copeland referred to the former Soviet Union, where leaking reactors in civil nuclear power and associated facilities is a serious issue.

I hope, as the right hon. Gentleman does, that the company will restore its reputation and sell its expertise. The only difference between us is that he thinks that it should restore its reputation and sell its expertise on the next generation of nuclear power around the world, whereas I think that it should restore its reputation and use its expertise on the more significant job of decommissioning, which is, in economic terms, the more realistic option. I do not believe that there is a market for long-term significant expansion in civil nuclear power worldwide, let alone in this country.

For all those reasons, I believe that the prospect of a PPP is—quite correctly—being pushed further and further away by events. Paragraph 19 of the Select Committee's report states:

> From the published summary of KPMG's work—

the consultants who considered the whole issue—

> it is by no means self-evident that the injection of private sector capital through a PPP is the best way of injecting private sector disciplines,

which are supposed to be the benefit that accrues from the proposed partnership. The report also hinted that KPMG had had its wings clipped so that its study pointed towards a PPP because that was what it was expected to do.

My main point about the merit of the PPP—or, in this case, its lack of merit—is that the merit ascribed to it in the report is that it would introduce private sector disciplines. It is hard, however, especially this month, to believe that those disciplines are the same as a better safety culture. Without taking too many cheap shots, one only has to say the word Railtrack, which did not go ahead with the train protection system, did not get its maintenance techniques right and cut back on its investments, to prove that.

Private sector disciplines are more associated with reducing manpower costs, which usually means fewer staff, cheaper staff and not investing in trained staff. It usually means reduced overheads, outsourcing and the use of cheap contractors. It has already been mentioned that there was an over-reliance on precisely those practices. Private sector disciplines usually mean a search for short-term returns and profits. In addition, the House might be concerned to learn that private sector disciplines mean that secrecy would be brought into play even more often because the information would be commercially sensitive.

For those reasons I have doubts about whether private sector disciplines are really what we need, never mind what we would get from such a partnership. There is a further consideration: diversification will need direction and investment that is probably not available from the private sector.

I conclude by asking the Minister some questions and issuing her some challenges. Will she undertake that, as and when the PPP goes ahead, there will be no loss of openness and transparency? That is not a high threshold to reach, given what we have now. Will she undertake to report back to the House and give the House an opportunity to decide on the issue of a PPP so that, unlike many previous decisions, this decision will not be smuggled through without proper parliamentary scrutiny? Will she assure us about her understanding of what private sector disciplines mean as applied to this case? Will she also say something about the Government's commitment to diversification, or not, for the future business of BNFL? Liberal Democrat Members believe that only that diversification will allow us to underpin and guarantee the technology base, the manpower and the skills that the company possesses.

7.57 pm

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): More than 2,000 people work at BNFL headquarters in Warrington, most of whom live locally. Unsurprisingly, the company's performance and prospects are very important in my constituency and the north-west. Even by excluding investment in external capital and joint ventures, disregarding BNFL's 15 per cent. stake in NNC, which employs 1,000 people at Knutsford, and excluding Urenco, which BNFL jointly owns with Dutch and German partners, BNFL contributes £790 million a year to the north-west economy. It has an incredible impact on the supply chain in my region.

BNFL is extremely big business for Britain. Following the acquisition of Westinghouse and ABB nuclear business, about half of BNFL's £2 billion annual turnover now comes from overseas trade. Those overseas contracts are incredibly significant for the British taxpayer because they help to reduce liability costs. For example, THORP contributes more than a quarter of the Sellafield site overheads, at around £250 million per year. Without THORP's overseas work, much of that cost would fall on the British taxpayer.

My right hon. Friend the Minister and the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), will not be surprised to discover that I am particularly interested in BNFL's impact on the region's science base. It is a knowledge-based company and a number of hon. Members referred to its world-leading skills and technologies that are vital for the United Kingdom. BNFL spent £96 million on research and development in the last financial year, which puts it in the top 20 UK companies that are involved in research and development investment.

BNFL is a major player in science in the north-west. It is encouraging universities there to build on BNFL technological development. Developments, such as chemical vapour deposition technology at Salford University, laser scabbing at Liverpool university and UMIST, auxetic materials technology at the Bolton Institute and radiation neutron selectors at Lancaster university have been mentioned, but are worth considering in more detail. On average, over the past five years, the company has sought patent protection for about 40 inventions a year. That adds up to about 240 individual patent applications pursued over the years. The novel technologies include microchemical engineering, auxetic materials, sensing technologies, new methods of separation, laser technology, biotechnologies and supercritical fluid separation.

The company has more than 100 relationships with 35 universities, most of which are in the United Kingdom, through which it directly invests more than £3 million each year. It has established a radiochemicals centre in partnership with Manchester university and a

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particle technology centre with Leeds university. It also supports Westlakes postgraduate centre in Cumbria, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), where nuclear, non-nuclear, environmental, genetic and epidemiological research is undertaken. BNFL makes far more than a minor contribution to the north-west science base. It provides staff and other resources to several university courses and a number of the company's staff hold professorships at UK universities.

BNFL is a high-tech company that is driving Britain forward in the international knowledge-based economy. The prospect of the PPP gives us a timely opportunity rigorously to scrutinise the operations and performance of the company and to ensure best possible value for the taxpayer, within a framework and culture of safety for the public and the environment, while protecting crucial investment in what I and many of my right hon. and hon. Friends believe is the best and most important region in the country.

It is disconcerting that after 30 years in public ownership, it has taken the review of BNFL's status and structure that was decided on early in this Government's tenure, for the shareholders on behalf of the public—Ministers—fully to exercise their responsibilities. The evidence given to the Committee by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe is extremely welcome, especially her commitment to "shine a light into dark corners" at BNFL. We want the company to succeed and the shareholder on behalf of the British taxpayer must ensure that that happens.

Also welcome is my right hon. Friend's commitment to pursue the achievement of safety and performance targets set for the company, and her undertaking not to take her eye off the ball in respect of BNFL's performance. I am happy to put those statements on the record, because they are extremely important aspects of the evidence taken by the Committee. The Government's reply to the Committee's recommendation that new stringent, but achievable, targets should be set, linked to the company's own objectives and with clear time scales, promises revision in the light of the year's performance and the corporate plan. Will my right hon. Friend state what progress has been made and when the revised targets will be published? We shall continue to take a close interest in the targets, because they can be used to demonstrate whether the company is making progress.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I consider the appointment of a new chairman and chief executive who have said that they are

> determined to make a real and lasting change

in terms of reforming BNFL's safety and performance to be a significant indicator of improvement. I especially welcome the creation of a new post, director of operations at Sellafield, the holder of which will have responsibility for safety and operations throughout the whole site.

Sellafield has an unhappy distinction: according to their manifestos for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the only policy on which the political parties within the Assembly agree is their demand for Sellafield to cease operations and to stop discharges into the Irish sea.

I have made it clear before to board members and I say now, on the record, that Sellafield has to clean up its act and, most important, it must be seen to do so. The new team promises that safety and cultural issues are being addressed. Its members say that they recognise that safety is not only in the equipment, but in the mind. They have to be sure that it is in the mind of every person working in and monitoring activities of the business, which includes people who are contracted to carry out work for the company. Public confidence, both national and international, depends on their performance in the coming months.

We all know that safety has huge environmental and commercial significance. It has to be like the lettering in Blackpool rock, running all the way through, so that wherever one cuts it the message is clear. BNFL is a global player in the international energy market and making sure that it is a safe and successful player is the responsibility of the owner—the Government.

The Select Committee investigation clearly stated that BNFL has been allowed to go its own way for far too long. For most of the past three decades, it has been more constrained by regulators and pressure groups than by supervision and scrutiny exercised by Ministers and Parliament. British Ministers have to take seriously their responsibility for a business that has great significance to the British taxpayer. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe has put on the record her commitment to doing so.

One of the most significant opportunities that the PPP will bring to BNFL is swifter decision making on required investment. The company is of major economic importance to UK plc. Business lost by BNFL goes overseas, into a market worth more than £20 billion. The system that has been in operation for the past 30 years has proved to be over-long and cumbersome, and too often disconnected from the demands of business.

The company has reported that nearly half of the forty-odd key action points from the Health and Safety Executive Sellafield inspection report have been addressed—and so they should have been. There must be constant and systematic progress within the company in respect of safety management. Concerns about discharges from Sellafield and other BNFL sites, which the Environment Agency expressed to the Select Committee, are critical in every sense of the word. One of the regional general managers told the head of Magnox generation in November 1999 that

> the agency has gained an overall impression that the company is not demonstrating sufficient corporate ownership of the problem.

BNFL has already begun to tackle the issue with sweeping changes throughout the company, but progress toward a PPP and the parliamentary and ministerial scrutiny that that generates provides an opportunity to ensure that a vigorous and independent regulatory regime can carry out its intended function to the satisfaction of customers and the general public. We have to ensure constant, regular scrutiny—not examinations once every 10 years. The business needs such scrutiny and the British taxpayer has a right to expect it.

It would be helpful if my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe gave an indication of progress on the decision from the Secretaries of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and for Health on the full commissioning of the main

MOX plant at Sellafield. The PPP offers timely decision making, but the company cannot wait: the delay in full commissioning has been costing BNFL £1.5 million a month.

The Government reply stresses the need to take the decision in the light of the latest assessment of the market for MOX and its impact on the economic case for the plant. That is true, but in an ideal world it would be the responsibility of a more commercially attuned board to decide whether it was prudent to press ahead with the opening of the plant and to assess whether the low level of assured customers made the risk of opening worth while. However, we live in the real world: the issue is urgent and requires a decision to be made.

Safety management at Sellafield has been clarified by the appointment of a director of site operations, and a new team of senior independent safety compliance advisers is being appointed. The company is in the process of demonstrating that all 15 of the HSE's recommendations are being met, and Kansai has lifted its trade moratorium on BNFL. Ministers will retain rights and responsibilities as shareholders, at least for the next few years, and the Select Committee requires progress on a decision on MOX.

BNFL's importance to the north-west is not only economic. The company has a large presence in community initiatives in the region: last year, it put £5 million into local projects. I should like to thank the 120 BNFL graduate recruits who worked in Westy, the most deprived ward in my constituency, last month. They have made a real difference. Last Saturday, I visited the community centre at St. Margaret's and saw how they have transformed it. People coming to my constituency surgeries now have a wonderfully pleasant environment in which to wait to be heard.

BNFL makes a great deal of difference in the north-west in many ways. The clean-up across Westy has really improved things for the local community. BNFL is a local and national asset. It needs the active interest of the shareholder and a businesslike attitude from the Government. The taxpayer needs the Government to make timely and effective decisions about the future of BNFL. The company needs to perform excellently in addressing business and safety in the public interest. There should not merely be talk about safety, it should be demonstrated. Systems should be sufficiently transparent to enable people to believe that that is happening.

The debate allows me to refer to the significance of nuclear energy in achieving our Kyoto targets. The reality of weather changes from global warming have been brought home to hundreds of homes in Britain in the past few weeks. There have been headlines such as, "Chaos As Storms Return", "Storms Batter UK", "Sandbag Sales Rise Along With Water" and "Severe Flood Warnings For More Than 40 Rivers".

Wild weather in Britain causes misery to people and destruction to property. In the developing nations, thousands die and hundreds of thousands are made homeless. It is a catastrophe in human and economic terms. Hurricane Mitch, which ransacked Nicaragua and Honduras in 1998, caused more than 9,000 deaths. The two tropical cyclones in Mozambique at the beginning of the year left 1 million people homeless and more than 1 million cattle dead, the main form of the economy and the sustenance of people in that country.

The impact of global warming is not academic. It costs too high a price, and it is people who pay it. Thanks to the evidence of temperature records for 150 years, and information stretching over a millennium from ice caves, corals, tree rings and historical documents, there is no longer a serious argument among scientists about whether the earth is heating up. During the past 100 years, global temperatures have risen by more than half a degree. The seven warmest years on record were in the 1990s, and 1998 was the warmest year in the warmest decade in the warmest century of the millennium.

Higher temperatures mean that more water evaporates from the earth's surface. Water vapour is an energy source. It cranks up the heat engine that drives the weather. It leads to increasingly violent storms and gives greater energy to hurricanes and cyclones. Indeed, the news becomes worse. If rainstorms are more intense in one place, that means that there is less rain elsewhere. Terrible suffering is caused by drought in some parts of the world. Scientists are predicting that some areas will become steadily dryer as the world warms.

Nuclear power accounts for about 25 per cent. of Britain's electricity supply. In the past financial year, nuclear energy in the UK avoided the emission of about 79 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. That is equivalent to 50 per cent. of the carbon dioxide emitted by transport on the roads. The industry is critical in managing the balance between demand for energy and protection of the climate.

As a member of the Select Committee, one of the stranger things that I have seen this year is the Greens in Sweden managing a bizarre political coup. They closed a nuclear power station a decade earlier than planned. What is the most likely way in which they will replace that energy source? The answer is coal-fired production. We must have a realistic energy policy and an investment strategy for the future. Covering our eyes does not make global warming go away, and it is the poorest people on the planet who will pay the highest price.

8.13 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): First, I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to be able to contribute to this important debate. Various interests have been disclosed, and I should make it clear that I do not come from the north-west. I come from the glorious south-west. The old Magnox headquarters at Berkeley is in my constituency, and the British Energy plant at Barnwood, which is not a million miles away. Another interest is that I went to Denmark a couple of weeks ago, a trip which was paid for partly by the British Wind Energy Association. It may seem strange that I choose to put that on the record. I do so because the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), was also on the trip.

I welcome the Select Committee's report, which is balanced, incisive and thought-provoking. The Chairman of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), put the case well. I am sorry that there was a slight disagreement about my view that the UK should have something in particular to offer to nuclear energy. I was not trying to play the nationalistic card. We have an international obligation that I want to see delivered.

I shall not speak for long because I know that other Labour Members wish to contribute to the debate. However, I wish to outline two over-arching themes that

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demonstrate why it is important that public-private partnership for BNFL is debated, and to consider that within the context of the wider nuclear industry.

One theme has been well rehearsed already, and that is global warming. That being so, I shall not talk about it at length. However, it is important. There is the integral link between the nuclear industry and renewables. I have always been a supporter of the nuclear industry, and that is not necessarily because I represent many people who work in it. I like to see myself also as a keen supporter of renewables. That is why I went to Denmark. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) in his place, and I think that he and I share an interest of the Globe UK group in that we want to advance renewables. It is important that we try to understand the course that energy provision will take and the way in which the nuclear industry and renewables can be tied within it.

More important is the reason why I welcome the debate and welcome the Government's increasing commitment to the nuclear industry. It is necessary to retain the basic integrity of the industry. That involves the people who work in it, those who could do so and those who may choose to work in it in future. If we do not keep it buoyant and alive, even at a minimal level of provision, we must consider how decommissioning will take place in the UK and abroad.

It is essential that we attract the best, the brightest and the most committed people to the industry. I am saddened when the industry is subjected to easy digs. Its very fabric is attacked, including the people who work in it, who support it and are committed to it. That approach is reprehensible because we need these people. I take any opportunity to support them and to speak on their behalf. We are also talking about valuable sites and it is important to consider how we use them and develop them, and not only for nuclear purposes.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) said, we are talking about a massive industry that accounts for billions of pounds each year, and we underestimate that at our peril. It is a key player in the global provision of energy. Perhaps that has not been made clear so far. We can feel rather proud about the way in which we are working with the Americans through Westinghouse and the new ABB link-up. Within the industry, we have an opportunity to influence what is happening in the developed world and in the less well developed world.

The debate is about how we can take BNFL to PPP. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil, the Chairman of the Select Committee, made it clear that PPP has been delayed, but not indefinitely. I am sure that the Minister will talk about timetables. We need to make that clear, if for no one else, for those who are linked to the company: the work force and other stakeholders, one of whom are the Government themselves.

There is another issue that has not really been brought out: the Government are not only the owner of the company, but the regulator of the industry. It is not crucial to this debate, but it is important that we again put on record that there are not many industries that have two regulators: in this case, the Health and Safety Executive and the nuclear installations inspectorate. There are occasions when tensions between the regulators can grow. One of the things that the Minister might want to comment on is: if we move towards the PPP, what will be the regulatory outcome and how will the regulator work in relation to the new company?

Quite simply, the industry needs to be carefully regulated. We know already that a degree of argument has been advanced—I think that it is fair—about the need for greater transparency. We must build on that, but that can be done only if we have an effective relationship between the company, industry and regulator.

Increasingly, there is a debate about what way forward we take our energy policy. I feel strongly that one of the things that the Government could do—this was a failure of the previous Government—is to make clear what our energy policy is, and what the different component parts should be. Again, I pay tribute to the Trade and Industry Committee. In one of its earlier reports, it intimated how crucial it was that we took that debate forward and were clear about the different component parts.

We cannot have it every which way. We must be clear that, if we are going to move from the current component parts—approximately speaking, one third is nuclear, one third is fossil fuel via coal, and one third is fossil fuel via gas, with a small amount made up of renewables; thankfully a growing amount—and to look forward to the next 20 to 30 years, we must make up our minds. If we are not going to be able genuinely to get renewables into some acceptable framework, so that they are a genuine contributor of some size to energy provision, we will have a massive shortfall. The advantage of nuclear is that it gives head room, not just in this country, but in the wider world, on how to think our way through the way that we need to go.

I totally oppose the idea that gas alone can pick up the shortfall. There are projections that, if we do not get it right, gas will grow to potentially 60 per cent. of provision. For all sorts of reasons, it will not deal with the global warming problem or, more particularly, with the problem of our misuse of a valuable resource. We need to recognise how—if can move forward—nuclear has an important part to play, but we need to link that with renewables.

I would like to see the day—I have mentioned it to the company, so it is nothing new—when, alongside nuclear provision, we have wind turbines and perhaps some biomass not far away, linking that with solar energy, so that we can genuinely see that energy can be provided efficiently, effectively, safely and in an environmentally acceptable way. If we can do it in this country, it can happen elsewhere.

From the company, we are looking for a clear statement of its strategy. In its last report, it provided that. It has begun to reveal the ways in which it wishes to take things onward. As has been mentioned, it has a new chairman and a new chief executive. It is restructuring itself, so that it can move forward in such a way that it achieves not only the trust that needs to be built, but the efficiency that it needs to be able to prove. In that way, it can show that the industry has a future.

This is also about the way in which the Government have to respond. As I have said, the Government wear several different hats. They are not just the owner of BNFL, but BNFL's regulator and the employer of many thousands of people. That puts many obligations at their door. As I have intimated, they must also look at their international obligations.

We can be critical about some of the things that have happened in the nuclear industry, but one of the things that we have done that is pleasing—again it is not widely known—has been to help the Ukrainians, formerly the Soviet Union, through the disaster of Chernobyl. I know that the Government have made available considerable sums of money to help the industry there to work through its obvious difficulties.

We cannot pretend that, if we do not get our energy policy right, the rest of the world, particularly the less developed world, can do anything other than copy our mistakes. Therefore, it is important that we have—as we are having today—a full and fruitful debate and look at the ways in which we can genuinely move the debate forward, not just here, but internationally.

I want us to have high environmental standards. The whole point about the industry is that, although it can be criticised in many respects for some of the things that have gone wrong, anyone who goes on to a nuclear site can never fail to be impressed by the degree of safety, the security and the way in which it takes seriously its environmental obligations. We must recognise that we must meet the obligations under the Ospar—Oslo and Paris—convention. We must deal with the problem of technetium and so forth, but that can be done only if the industry is given time and space to move forward appropriately, rather than being continually pushed down and out.

That is the obligation that we have. It is an obligation that we should have to the work force and to the rest of the stakeholders. That is why it would be useful if the Government, even if they would not go as far as to say that they would consider new build, looked at the options—in the next 20 to 30 years, we must get an effective policy together in terms of energy provision. That is something that we can begin to do now. I am sure that the Minister will think hard about that and make an appropriate response.

8.27 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to your new appointment.

I found the Select Committee report extremely interesting. It reflects great credit on my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and his colleagues on the Committee. I pay tribute to him, to the way in which he introduced the debate, and to the measured way in which he balanced the various arguments that must be considered.

My first point is little to do with the BNFL PPP itself; it is to do with the process by which Parliament has considered the issue of BNFL and the whole nuclear industry over many years. I find it remarkable that, given the size of the industry, the number of people employed in it and the economic impact in many parts of the United Kingdom, particularly the north-west, where my constituency is located, there has been so little debate about and scrutiny of BNFL and the rest of the nuclear industry in the past 30 years.

I think that the rot set in—it must be said—in 1979. In the 1970s, under Governments of both parties—the 1970–74 Government and the two Labour Governments who followed—there was considerable debate about the industry, but once we got into the 1980s it was almost as if Government and Parliament abdicated their responsibility completely. That is important. It says something about the way in which we as a nation and as a Parliament deal with questions of science. I would draw analogies with the way in which we have dealt with BSE, and the way in which we are struggling to deal with GM technology, and perhaps even with stem cell research.

There are serious lessons for the Government—who are, I know, taking the matter seriously—for Parliament and for all of us as Members of the House about how we deal with scientific issues. We have tended to find them difficult and to run away from them. We have tended to assume that science was best dealt with by the scientists. That has been the root cause of many of the problems of public policy in recent years—certainly in the case of BSE—and of many of the difficulties that BNFL and the nuclear industry have experienced.

There is a wider issue relating to public policy. In Britain, our tendency is to exclude debate once a line has been agreed. If we look back at the history of BNFL, particularly the history of THORP and reprocessing, there is no question but that a consensus was established, arguably driven by the needs of the Ministry of Defence to generate stocks of plutonium in the earlier years of the cold war. The consensus was established by the figures that mattered—the scientific establishment, the MOD and the sponsored department of the Department of Trade and Industry—that THORP and reprocessing were the way forward.

Because that was an investment of such enormous size and scale, even though other voices were arguing against it, the juggernaut of the political, military and industrial establishment could not be stopped. If we look back now over the past 20 or 30 years, we will see that that was one of the most gigantic mistakes of public policy that any Parliament has made. If we were going back to the 1970s, would we go ahead with THORP and start again with reprocessing? I suspect not. There are serious lessons to be learned about the way that we, as a democracy, handle complicated issues of science.

Representing a constituency in the north-west, I know that this is an important and sensitive issue for many of my hon. Friends, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). I have the luxury of not having a nuclear establishment in my constituency, although I have companies that supply the nuclear industry. That luxury perhaps allows me to be a little more detached and dispassionate about some of the issues relating to BNFL than might otherwise be the case.

There is an enormous paradox about BNFL. As many of my hon. Friends have said, the company undoubtedly contains one of the largest concentrations of scientific expertise anywhere in the world. As a hugely enthusiastic supporter of British science and of the need continually to extend the boundaries of scientific research, I want that body of expertise to thrive. The proposal that we are considering, for a PPP with 51 per cent. of the shares remaining with the Government, is an effective way of achieving that, subject to certain conditions.

However, the industry has been incredibly dishonest, hugely damaging in environmental terms, and hugely profligate with public funds. We must recognise that billions and billions of pounds of taxpayers' money have gone into subsidising the nuclear industry over the years, and will continue to subsidise it throughout the next century. That is an extremely important point. It explains why BNFL has liabilities of £27 billion in its accounts.

[Mr. David Chaytor]

There is, therefore, the paradox of that aspect of the industry, and the enormous technical expertise attached to it, which is vital to the future of this country, to the many employees in the north-west, and, to many countries throughout the world, because nuclear clean-up and decommissioning is a burning issue not only in the United Kingdom and parts of western Europe, but particularly in the United States and, most worryingly of all, in the former Soviet Union. British Nuclear Fuels has the potential to be a leading player in the programme of nuclear clean-up and decommissioning that is getting under way.

I do not believe—in this, I agree completely with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—that the future of the company lies in reprocessing or in the international plutonium trade. The Select Committee report identified some of the assumptions on which the nuclear reprocessing industry was initially established: the need for plutonium because of the cold war—that may not have been specifically mentioned in the report—the expectation that the price of uranium would rise, and a scenario in which nuclear power would continue to expand, possibly because of concern about oil prices after 1973–74.

One by one, all those assumptions have been proved obsolete. In 2000, it is difficult to see the rationale for nuclear reprocessing. Why do we take spent nuclear fuel from power stations at the other end of the planet, ship it across the world, separate it out and store the plutonium in the north-west of England? I understand that that gives us some advantage in terms of foreign currency, and that it creates employment for many people in the north-west, especially in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland, but we must ask ourselves what we are doing it for, particularly now that the consensus is that plutonium is not an asset, but waste.

The end of the cold war changed the value of plutonium at a stroke. That is why the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords last year recommended that much of the British plutonium stock should be declared waste, with only a small strategic reserve being kept.

We have spoken of mountains of plutonium and molehills of plutonium. Let us get the facts right. We currently have a stock of 60 tonnes of plutonium. By 2015, that stock will increase to almost 120 tonnes. It is all in the north-west of England, on the edge of the Lake district, and it is the biggest concentration anywhere on this planet of the most dangerous substance known to human beings.

Dr. Ladyman: I must tackle my hon. Friend on that point, which he has mentioned twice. There is absolutely no objective criterion according to which plutonium can be described in that way. I can give him the name of naturally occurring, growing substances called lectins that are even more toxic than plutonium. He exaggerates. If he wants constructive scientific debate, as he said earlier—and I fully agree with him about that—we must conduct it on the basis of the facts, not on the basis of exaggeration.

Mr. Chaytor: If plutonium is not dangerous, why have all the leading nations signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty precisely to reduce stocks of plutonium and to eliminate the risk of the theft of plutonium and the obtaining of plutonium stockpiles by terrorist groups? Other substances may well be equally dangerous, but plutonium remains one of the most dangerous substances on the planet, which all the leading nations of the world, including the United Kingdom, are determined to ensure is stored safely to avoid proliferation. It is difficult to appeal to other countries to control their stocks of nuclear weapons while we generate more and more stockpiles of plutonium.

Reprocessing does not have a future. The Select Committee's report is right to recommend that the Government make their policy on reprocessing clear. It would have been better had the previous Government done so, in which case we might not have been in quite the mess that we are. On the other hand, it would make sense for the Government not to do that, and simply to allow market forces to take their course. If anything will bring the reprocessing industry to an end, it is the partial privatisation of BNFL.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: My hon. Friend talks as though successive British Governments had somehow been reckless. With regard to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, all the safeguards in respect of that and Euratom are in place at Sellafield and have been for a long time. My hon. Friend also talks as though only Britain did reprocessing, and that if we stopped doing it at Sellafield, reprocessing would somehow go away. He should bear in mind the fact that the Japanese have just awarded 650 tonnes worth of reprocessing business to the French at Cap de la Hague.

Mr. Chaytor: I understand that perfectly well. I understand that only Britain, France and Japan, and possibly Russia, are interested in reprocessing, or see it as a valuable activity. It is significant that the United States withdrew from reprocessing some years ago. In Japan, the question of reprocessing is hugely problematical. The Japanese have been attempting to build their own reprocessing site for many years, and it will be some years before it is completed. Public opinion in Japan, as in western Europe, is steadily turning against the further expansion of nuclear power, and is certainly increasingly critical of the reprocessing industry and the international plutonium trade.

I do not deny the points that my right hon. Friend makes. I simply say that we must put the matter in its international context. At the moment, the United Kingdom and France are the only countries seriously committed to reprocessing. I suspect that market forces in the United Kingdom will gradually lead to the winding down of the reprocessing industry. Part of the evidence for that is the memo from British Energy in its submission to the Committee's inquiry, and the further briefing papers that British Energy distributed before the debate.

There has been some criticism of British Energy. I hold no brief for British Energy, but there has been some criticism to the effect that it must understand that it cannot abrogate contracts. In its defence, that is not what I understand it to be saying. It is saying that it wants to renegotiate contracts. There are perfectly respectable precedents for the renegotiation of contracts, particularly when there are mutual advantages.

That brings me back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil in reply to my intervention, when he said that the comparative costs of reprocessing and storage are matters of opinion, not evidence. I must disagree with him, because there is now a body of evidence, part of which was produced by Dr. MacKerron, who made an important submission to the Committee and whom my hon. Friend mentioned earlier in glowing terms.

Dr. MacKerron's work at Sussex university has demonstrated that the renegotiation of the reprocessing contracts as storage contracts would have a mutually beneficial result. There would be money for British Energy and for BNFL. In that sense, renegotiation of existing reprocessing contracts seems to be a win-win situation. It is a sign of our collective political and industrial inertia that we find it so difficult to accept criticism and to accept that we have made mistakes, so it is difficult to turn policy round, even when the facts are staring us in the face.

I understand the urgency with which hon. Members who support the Sellafield MOX plant want the Government to respond, and the interest in the matter. There have been a number of consultations and inquiries into the viability of the MOX plant. I understand that the Government's position is that approval for the MOX plant, which is the responsibility of the Deputy Prime Minister, will be granted purely according to the criterion of commercial viability. As of four weeks ago, the MOX plant was not commercially viable. BNFL had committed £300 million to building it in advance of obtaining authorisation to operate it.

That in itself raises interesting questions about the provisions of the Radioactive Substances Act 1993. It is astonishing, and I cannot think of a parallel in any other industry. What other industry would allow a company to build such a plant without approval to operate it? The sum of £300 million was committed, but, because of the errors at the MOX demonstration facility, and the falsification of fuel data, we are committed to spending another £100 million to bring fuel back from Japan.

Huge amounts of what are essentially public funds have been committed in advance of any evidence that the MOX plant will be commercially viable. I recollect that the inquiry by the PA Consulting Group argued that there was a commercial future for MOX only on the assumption that the £300 million initial capital investment would be regarded as sunk costs. That is crazy economics, and all too typical of the accounting procedures in British Nuclear Fuels for many years.

I understand the reasons for the company's strenuous efforts to secure the Japanese business, but it would be amazing if it got the 100 per cent. of contracts that it needs for commercial viability. Even if it succeeded, and announced in a few weeks that it had a full work load for MOX, that contracts had been signed and sealed and that the Government should therefore grant approval, there is an overwhelming argument against the international plutonium trade that MOX represents.

The issue should be debated more widely, and the public should be fully aware of the implications of the plutonium trade. We are shipping spent fuel from Japan to the United Kingdom, separating the uranium and the plutonium, mixing them together in ceramic pellets, and shipping it back halfway across the planet so that it can be burnt again in Japan. It then generates more spent fuel and more high-level waste, which is shipped back to the United Kingdom. That is the energy policy of the madhouse. In relation to the environment, or a rational energy policy, there is no argument for constructing such an elaborate, expensive, complicated and dangerous process simply to keep the nuclear industry going.

Let us consider the Oslo and Paris convention, which some hon. Members have already mentioned. Every member of the European Union in the Ospar convention—except, understandably, Britain and France—voted for the recent recommendation that reprocessing should be phased out. We should bear in mind the strength of feeling against reprocessing in all the other European countries. It is not surprising. Countries such as Iceland and Norway depend to a large extent on the purity and clarity of the waters of the North sea, because so much of their economy is based on fishing. When they find that, hundreds of miles north of Sellafield, technetium-99 is contaminating their fish stocks, it should not surprise us that they support an end to reprocessing. All the parties in Northern Ireland, and Ireland itself, also support that, because of the impact on their waters and fish stocks.

Let us consider the BNFL response to Ospar. When the Ospar conference at Sintra in Portugal reported its decision to aim for discharges that were close to zero by 2020, the management of BNFL issued a statement that that would be no problem. It said that it was possible to achieve that through abatement technology, and that it intended to meet the target. However, I understand that more recently, the BNFL position has changed, and that its submission to the current Environment Agency consultation on discharges takes a more hawkish line. It claims that it cannot possibly meet the Ospar requirements on discharges. I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Minister could comment on that; if she cannot do so now, perhaps she will say something later. The BNFL view of Ospar is important. Can the company comply, and what will it cost to do so? If it says that it cannot, where does that leave reprocessing?

Several hon. Members have argued that we should continue, or expand, the use of nuclear energy because of the Kyoto protocol and because burning uranium does not directly lead to CO_2 emissions. That is perfectly true, but the fact that there is no direct link does not mean that the nuclear industry is not responsible, through its other processes, for a considerable volume of CO_2 emissions. We need to view the situation in a wider context.

I am sceptical about the sudden conversion of BNFL and other parts of the nuclear industry to being clean and green. The industry's history shows that different justifications have been used in different decades to defend the industry's future. As each decade passed and the initial justification was undermined, it was quietly dropped and a new justification emerged. Arguing that nuclear power is needed to meet the Kyoto targets is the latest of those justifications.

Interestingly, when the conference of the parties to the Kyoto protocol meets next week and the week after in The Hague to discuss the precise ways in which the protocol will be implemented, the EU position in the negotiations on the clean development mechanism, which is supported by the UK Government, will clearly state that nuclear energy has no role whatever in that mechanism. I welcome that and hope that our and the EU negotiators will stick to it. It clearly demonstrates that the understanding throughout the EU is that although the

[Mr. Chaytor]

nuclear industry provides fewer direct CO_2 emissions, it does not represent a solution to the problem of reducing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions.

We briefly discussed the renewable nature of nuclear energy. Some people argue that nuclear energy is renewable, but they forget that its renewable dimension involves the fast breeder reactor. Research on the fast breeder reactor stopped in Britain in 1994 and in France shortly thereafter. Worldwide, only Japan continues with such research. Conceivably, the fast breeder reactor could, perhaps in many decades' time, produce a completely renewable form of nuclear energy.

When it is argued that renewables cannot take the place of nuclear energy, we should remember that nuclear energy currently provides 20 to 25 per cent. of our electricity. The Government have a target of getting 10 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2010, by which time the closure of the Magnox stations will be reducing the total proportion of power generated by nuclear energy. The likely scenario in 2012 or 2013 is that there will be no reason why we cannot meet our renewables targets. In view of the enormous increase in renewables technology in recent years, I suspect that those targets will be easier to meet than was previously thought. By the early years of the next decade, the proportion of electricity generated by nuclear energy and that generated by renewables could be more or less the same.

We must accept that nuclear energy has a role to play, but that it is likely to be significantly smaller. The growth in energy use will unquestionably involve renewables, hydrogen, photovoltaics, biomass and the exploitation of wind and waves. To defend, or to justify an expansion of, the nuclear industry on the ground that renewables cannot replace the existing proportion of electricity generated by nuclear energy is simply not sustainable.

I support the Government's approach to BNFL. They deserve enormous credit for advancing the PPP plan, which is not revolutionary—it was envisaged when the company was established under the Atomic Energy Authority Act 1971. The 51-49 per cent. split meant that primary legislation was not necessary to establish such a partnership, which meant that the matter could be approached slightly more secretively than would otherwise have been the case. I hope that our Government will not do that, and that there will be ample opportunity to debate the details of the partial privatisation in the months ahead.

The key question is: what is going to be privatised? My concern is that when the PPP is constructed the taxpayer should not be left with all the liabilities. The temptation, especially if there is little interest in the City because of the enormous liabilities attaching to BNFL, will be to do some hiving off and separation. The taxpayer will pick up the liabilities and the new PPP company will gain all the assets and lucrative work for the future. In my view, and in the view of an increasing number people across a wide spectrum, the future for BNFL is not in reprocessing, the international plutonium trade or attempting to expand what is rapidly becoming obsolete technology, but in the massive task of nuclear clean-up and decommissioning across the world.

If I may come back to where I started, I believe that there will be a reduction in nuclear energy in the years ahead. I do not want nuclear technology to be shut down—far from it; keeping all scientific options open is far too important for that. Prolonging the life of 50-year-old nuclear reactors will not significantly increase our scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, I want to maintain those high level skills in Britain and I want British scientists to work on ways of finding more efficient and safer forms of nuclear power, if that is possible. I am sceptical about that, as there have been 50 years of nuclear power, and unlimited public funds have gone into it. Although I want to keep that option open, I recognise that the way forward for the company is to focus on clean-up and decommissioning work.

Finally, I shall comment briefly on one or two details in the report and ask for a response from my right hon. Friend the Minister. First, paragraph 45 on page xix states:

> In the course of our abbreviated inquiry, we have not sought to explore the relationship between BNFL and the Ministry of Defence . . . and its agencies.

That is an enormous pity, as the original driving force for BNFL was the relationship with the Ministry of Defence, which is one of the most interesting and secretive areas of public life. Sooner or later, someone should cast a little light on that relationship. The MOD's imperative of generating a national plutonium stockpile, long after that was justified by the demands of the cold war—if it ever was—has led us into an enormous error of public policy through the focus on reprocessing.

Secondly, paragraph 47 on page 20 refers to the study by Touche Ross in 1993, which was supposed to be among the evidence that led to the approval of THORP. As I recollect, the Touche Ross study did not exist, and nobody has proved that it did. People working under the auspices of Touche Ross may have considered such matters, but there was no written report that could conceivably be described as a study. I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend would comment on that.

Paragraph 72 on page xxvi states:

> Reprocessing of Magnox fuel—to which it is now . . . generally accepted that there is no safe alternative.

I do not think that that is true, as a number of scientists accept that it is possible to store Magnox fuel, although not indefinitely. I understand that Magnox fuel is stored on at least one of the nuclear sites in Britain—presumably safely.

I am interested in a contradiction in the report. Section C, on page 81, mentions the THORP order book and refers to

> over half of the second decade quantity contracted,

whereas on page 103 it says that that amounts to a

> little over 40 per cent.

I think that the "over half" reference is the figure from the company, and the "little over 40 per cent." figure is from Dr. MacKerron of Sussex university. It would be helpful if at some point—I am sure that my right hon. Friend will not be able to deal with it tonight—that contradiction between the exact quantity of fuel contracted could be resolved.

The report has done a service to the cause of open debate about energy policy in the United Kingdom. It has done a service to the company, because the secrecy in which it has operated for some years has done it and the industry no good. I echo the call by other hon. Members for greater transparency and openness in the future.

The report is a substantial and measured document. It forces the Government to announce their policy in various key areas. We cannot merely leave matters to drift, and I

welcome the fact that the Government have now taken their shareholder responsibilities seriously. I hope that my right hon. Friend will give detailed responses to all the points that have been raised when she replies to the debate.

9.2 pm

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): I add my congratulations to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I enjoyed listening to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill). I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate because I have strong feelings about these issues, and because I have been vilified in many BNFL internal memorandums concerning the protracted fight about the parking of carriages containing spent nuclear fuel in Cricklewood in my constituency.

I shall make a few introductory comments to explain my views about the proposed public-private partnership. BNFL does four things: cleaning up and decommissioning, storage, research and nuclear reprocessing. The Committee's ninth report spells that out. It is good at cleaning up and decommissioning and research—it could be a world leader in that highly profitable area of its work. It could do better and more on storage. However, it is without doubt guilty of covering up errors in some of its work on nuclear reprocessing. It treats the public with contempt; it has compromised safety and security; it cheats and worse; it is secretive; and it suffers from a corporate arrogance that has no match in this country or abroad. It is also apparent that the nuclear installations inspectorate—the industry's regulatory body—is weak.

BNFL's public affairs department, which advises the board on how to pull the wool over the public's eyes—and, I believe, over the Government's eyes—has a budget of £18 million a year. I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) disagrees with me, but I believe that the jury is still out on any real improvements in management.

If I had to declare an interest, it would be that I am a lifelong member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and I am proud of it. However, it may come as a surprise to learn that I wish an open and accountable BNFL the very best, but only on condition that it stops nuclear reprocessing at the earliest opportunity. In other words, if that condition were met, I would vote in favour of a public-private partnership for BNFL, but, if it were not, I would vote against it. I believe that, although it is the Government's responsibility to have total control over nuclear reprocessing, fundamentally—as we heard earlier in the debate—there is no rationale for nuclear reprocessing.

My entanglement with BNFL started in late summer 1998. I was informed through the grapevine—not directly—that BNFL would start parking spent nuclear waste in trains in sidings in Cricklewood. I was alarmed about that, as were those who lived there and would see the trains parked 30 yd from their homes. I therefore contacted BNFL at its stall at the Labour conference and I invited its representatives to come to a meeting in my constituency for discussions.

BNFL's representatives came to the meeting, on 13 October 1998. However, they came not to discuss the matter, but to railroad it through. I told them exactly what I thought of them, and I had the full support of a very angry meeting. Since then, thousands of residents have become involved in the matter, under the magnificent leadership of Mrs. Linda Hayes, a local resident who has worked tirelessly on the issue for many years. The anger was enhanced because clearly we had not been told the truth.

I shall explain how I believe that events developed, and, later, I shall ask my right hon. Friend the Minister some questions on some details. The English, Welsh and Scottish Freight Rail Company—EWS—was born of the chaos created by the Tories on privatising rail freight. EWS won the contract to transport spent nuclear waste via its compound in Willesden, in north-west London, to Sellafield. Some time later, BNFL set up a wholly owned subsidiary company—Direct Rail Services, or DRS—which, most surprisingly, won the contract to transport spent nuclear waste, beating EWS.

The EWS board must have smelt a rat, because it suggested to BNFL and to DRS that it was minded to throw DRS out of the controlled compound in Willesden. BNFL panicked and, in a hurry, found wholly unprotected, massively large railway sidings in Cricklewood. BNFL thought that it could just walk over the people in Cricklewood, and merely informed the wrong Member of Parliament—the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who is now London's Mayor—of what it was going to do. To this day, the hon. Gentleman denies that he was informed by BNFL.

Residents in the area established Cricklewood Against Nuclear Trains—CANT. After feverish activity led by Mrs. Linda Hayes, and with exceptional support from many others, including me, BNFL panicked again and asked us if we would agree to discuss matters with an intermediary green group, the Environment Council. We agreed to discussions, but we were not going to give in. After a year and a half of meetings, in March 2000 BNFL withdrew its plans to park spent nuclear waste trains in Cricklewood. Cricklewood Against Nuclear Trains was renamed, Communities Against Nuclear Trains.

BNFL withdrew to the former EWS compound in Willesden—about which I shall ask a question in a moment. I do not know what price BNFL had to pay to EWS to persuade it to allow it back into the Willesden sidings. However, to my mind, no community should have to put up with the fear of such trains being parked in densely built-up urban housing areas. Those trains should not be allowed to pass through London, or, for that matter, through any urban area. Better still, we should get rid of nuclear reprocessing, which is totally unnecessary. BNFL would be a healthier and more profitable company if, over time, it were to abandon all reprocessing. There are now national negotiations to reach agreement on how to improve BNFL's environmental performance.

Both BNFL and CANT learned a lot, and, after the Cricklewood saga, we parted much wiser, friendlier and relieved. Therefore, it was with surprise that, a few months later, I received a whole wad of internal BNFL memorandums, which were probably leaked by a concerned BNFL employee. I was mentioned many times in those memorandums, and not in a very flattering way. It is now my particular pleasure to record the contents of only one of those bizarre memos in *Hansard*. It was sent by Mr. Rupert Wilcox-Baker, the public relations head of BNFL, to the then BNFL chairman, Sir John Guinness. It is dated 16 March 1999. It is, as I have said, only one of many: I have them all.

[Dr. Rudi Vis]

I shall have to make one change when I read out the memo. A Member of Parliament is mentioned by name, so I shall have to refer to him by his constituency.

The memo reads:

Thank you for your memo dated 15 March concerning Rudi Vis MP.

We have had a number of meetings with Rudi Vis and he has made it very clear that he is determined to get us out of Cricklewood and to stop us transporting spent fuel.

The memo goes on to say that the "insight" of my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller)

into Vis's rationale is interesting but I suspect what he is seeing is a hangover from Vis's "old Labour" background. He is a long-time member of CND and has stated privately to us his abhorrence of all things nuclear. Regarding the suggestion that we try to get a senior local Jewish figure on side and then arrange a meeting, I have some doubts. However valid our arguments and those of the potential third party advocate I suspect Vis will find it hard to alter his position. All we might hope for is perhaps the development of a more respectful hostility!

Whilst Rudi Vis is not himself Jewish his father helped Jewish families during the last war in Alkmaar, Holland, where Vis was born in 1941. Therefore, with that in mind and the make up of his constituency the Jewish influence will be strong. I would propose that we ensure that this section of the local community is fully represented in the dialogue process and I will check this point with the Environment Council which is managing the process. In this way, if we can satisfy the local community representatives, through the dialogue process, then this should have included all important sectors of that community.

Will the Minister tell me why BNFL seems to need £18 million annually for its public affairs department, and whether the Government can call in internal memos from that department? Will she also tell me whether she can look into why Direct Rail Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of BNFL, won the contract over EWS—without having had any way of carrying out the work before—to transport spent nuclear waste? Finally, will she tell me what BNFL/DRS now pays to EWS following the return to Willesden?

I am not the only Member of Parliament whom BNFL has secretly tried to undermine. I wonder what the costs of such activities have been to BNFL, but I am not annoyed. I wish BNFL the very best—with the proviso that, if we had come to the end of the line in regard to nuclear processing, we would become a much safer country in a much safer world.

9.15 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I, too, welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Perhaps I should begin by declaring an interest. I have no constituency interest, but in my younger days I was a radiation biologist, and my PhD is in radiation in the environment; so I think I can claim some technical knowledge of some of the issues we are discussing.

My hon. Friends the Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) were right to speak of the need for openness and debate, but we must have that debate on the basis of the facts, without exaggeration, and ensuring that everyone knows all the issues. I do not know about the shunting of trains in Cricklewood, but I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green that the moving of radioactive material through his constituency poses zero risk to any of his constituents. I can also tell him that radioactive materials have been transported for more than 16 million miles over the last few years without causing one serious life-threatening incident.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North spoke of the threat posed by technetium in the North sea. An eminent Danish scientist has calculated that if a Danish fish-lover ate 50 kg of fish and 20 kg of shellfish each year that had been caught in the Danish seas, where the concentration of technetium is highest, he would experience an annual radiation dose of 0.14 millisieverts. One is exposed to 0.3 mSv of radiation by staying in a Danish house for one hour. That is the relative risk from technetium in the seas around Scandinavia.

Mr. Chaytor: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Ladyman: No, I am afraid that there is too little time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North said that plutonium was the most toxic chemical known, but that is simply not true. I can extract from kidney beans a compound that is more toxic than plutonium, but people will still be happy to eat kidney beans with their chilli con carne in the restaurant tonight.

There is no doubt that plutonium is toxic, but for people to be affected they need to be near it, or ingest it, or breathe it in. Alpha radiation has such a short range that it cannot even pierce skin. If we are to have the rational debate that this matter deserves, we need to place such facts in the public domain.

Before I go on to the main points in my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I apologise to the House on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown)? Parliamentary business means that he cannot be here tonight, but his constituents at Chapelcross are very anxious that new nuclear capacity be built there, as the local Magnox station is licensed only to the end of the decade.

I want to focus on the environmental issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North said that there were no environmental justifications for nuclear power. I completely disagree, and a look at the royal commission report into climate change will show why. The report presented four ways in which we might address the problem of global climate change by 2050.

First, the report suggested that this country hold energy consumption at 1998 levels for 50 years. That would be a huge task, but it is the easiest of the four scenarios that the report postulates. Even so, it requires that nuclear power be used to generate some of the energy that would be needed in 2050.

Two of the other three scenarios would require a reduction in energy consumption of 36 per cent. from the 1998 level. No one has any idea of how that might be done. One of those two scenarios proposes that, if we did not use nuclear power to provide the needed energy, we would have to increase the use of renewables by a factor of 18—and no one has a clue about how to do that.

As an environmentalist, I can tell the House that such an increase in the use of renewables would have environmental consequences. Tidal barrages create huge environmental problems: silt settles and fish die when the energy is taken out of waves.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Ladyman: I am afraid that there is too little time left.

The royal commission's fourth scenario does not require nuclear power, but it does call for a reduction in energy consumption of nearly 50 per cent., and even the commission said that it could not see any way to achieve that.

Anyone who has studied global warming has accepted that, on the balance of probabilities—and some scientists believe that the matter is beyond reasonable doubt—global warming is caused by greenhouse gases. We can meet our Kyoto reduction targets only by retaining a significant nuclear element in our energy production.

Mr. Savidge: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Dr. Ladyman: No. I am sorry, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North spoke for 34 minutes. That is why I must rush now.

The simple fact is that, if we want to tackle global warming, we have to have a nuclear element in our energy mix for the foreseeable future. That means that we need new nuclear build.

So far as the public-private partnership is concerned, we have in BNFL a world-leading team. I am the first to say that it has made some huge mistakes. I have been saying for the past two years that its watchword should be "openness". BNFL should tell us everything in future. If it tells us that it has made a mistake, that is bad; if Greenpeace or some other environmental group finds out and tells us, that is a disaster. BNFL has to be open in everything that it does. We have to get the private discipline into that organisation so that we have some real, solid, good management techniques to make sure that it is building for the future.

Not only do we need BNFL's expertise if we are to replace our nuclear capacity, but there is a huge task to be performed in the former Soviet republics. There is a bill to be picked up for cleaning the former Soviet countries of £1 billion. By that I mean a British billion, because when I was little I was told that a billion was a million million and then the Americans said that it was a thousand million. Well, I am talking about a million million pounds worth of clean-up to be done. We have only just scratched the surface. The only company in the entire world with the expertise to show us how to do that and to capitalise on it is BNFL.

For goodness' sake, let us start moving on building the public-private partnership. Let us accept that many of the errors discovered at BNFL were discovered because of the preparations for the PPP. Let us make sure that BNFL is equipped for the future, to make sure that we really can have the option of new nuclear capacity, because I believe that it is the only way to address global warming.

Global warming will not kill the environment of the world. It will happen because we leave environmental policy either to the ostriches, who would like to pretend that global warming is not caused by greenhouse gases, or to the witch doctors, who refuse to accept that science and technology is the way to think ourselves out of this problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Gibb.

9.22 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I should like to add my welcome to you to the Chair.

As the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) pointed out, he and I, and other members of the renewable energy group, went to Denmark recently to see wind energy at its best. We went at the expense of National Wind Power, a subsidiary of National Power. Denmark produces 13 per cent. of its power by wind. I also spent two days recently at Sellafield, where I received from BNFL the same briefing as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell).

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and other members of the Trade and Industry Committee on an excellent report on BNFL. It was both balanced and well informed, and follows other reports by the Select Committee focusing on energy issues. The report published in June 1998, in particular, focused specifically on energy policy.

It is commendable that the Select Committee is taking energy policy seriously. These issues matter. They go to the root of our industrial competitiveness and to the heart of our environmental policy. That is in sharp contrast to the Government, whose energy policy is in complete disarray. Their only major pronouncement on policy was the 1998 energy White Paper. Everyone knows that that was simply an exercise in trying to justify—albeit unsuccessfully—the gas moratorium, a decision now reversed, which was motivated entirely by internal Labour party considerations. It has cost industry millions of pounds in higher electricity prices and will lead to millions of tonnes of additional CO_2 emissions.

Nuclear power today provides 30 per cent. of our electricity consumption. It does so without emitting CO_2 and is thus a highly environmentally friendly source of energy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), whose constituency includes the Sellafield site, pointed out, nuclear energy saves 79 million tonnes of CO_2 being emitted into the atmosphere every year.

The concerns about nuclear energy are focused on safety and on what to do with nuclear waste. We share those concerns.

The Select Committee recognised in its earlier report on energy that it would be wrong to allow those concerns to lead to a dogmatic abandonment of nuclear power. As the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) explained well, if we are serious about our international commitments under Kyoto to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a level 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

by 2008–12 and—this is the important point—to keep them at that level beyond 2012, it would be foolish to rule out nuclear energy.

Our goal must be to have a balanced and secure energy policy, which enables us to meet our carbon dioxide targets. At present, 30 per cent. of our electricity comes from nuclear sources, 30 per cent. from gas and 30 per cent. from coal. The switch from coal to gas in the past 10 years will enable us to achieve a 15 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions by the end of this year. From this year onwards however, the Government's figures show an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. From 2010, the increase will become steep.

The key factor, as other hon. Members have said, is the decommissioning of the old Magnox power stations in the next decade, as they account for about 8 per cent. of electricity production. Replacing that plant, even with gas, will still result in significantly higher carbon dioxide emissions.

Huge increases in the demand for electricity are also expected. Any notion that we can reduce our demand is nonsense. The increases will principally be caused by the internet. The *Financial Times* recently reported that demand for electricity in London alone would increase by 20 per cent. in the next four years, solely due to the building of 10 internet hotels there.

The draft climate change programme published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions showed that, far from our achieving a 12.5 per cent. or a 20 per cent. reduction, CO_2 levels would be at or just below 1990 levels by 2020, which would represent a significant increase compared with the present level.

Therefore, we have a significant problem to tackle—a problem that is made worse by the decision to delay for three years the building of new gas-fired plant. It is encouraging to note that in a written answer on 30 October the Government abandoned any pretence that the gas moratorium was linked to reforms in the electricity market, when they said that the stricter consent policy would be lifted this month, notwithstanding the fact that the new electricity trading arrangements would not be up and running until March next year.

We need a serious and considered energy policy from the Government—one that is balanced and secure, taking into account the decommissioning of the Magnox stations, recent hikes in the price of gas and new developments in clean coal technology such as integrated combined cycle gasification, and tackling the nuclear issue without any ideological baggage.

The core of the debate is that if we as a nation are serious about fulfilling our long-term international CO_2 obligations, we have a choice between pushing up the proportion of electricity generated from renewable sources to way beyond the Government's present targets, which would result in significantly higher electricity prices, and dealing with the nuclear issue.

Mr. Savidge: Members of the Environmental Audit Committee asked a number of leading experts from this country, such as the Round Table on Sustainable Development, and from Europe—for example the European environment committee—for their views on what is most environmentally friendly and economic. They put energy efficiency first, followed by renewables and fossil fuels in order of carbon burning, and they regarded the nuclear option as the worst from both points of view.

Mr. Gibb: That is their opinion and they are entitled to it. It is an opinion that we should hear in this debate, although it is not necessarily one that is shared by many people. It is not realistic to assume that we can make up for the 8 per cent. of electricity that will be lost as a result of the closure of the Magnox stations through energy efficiency—3 per cent. is the maximum that that would save—and demand for electricity is increasing hugely. The figures do not stack up.

The Government's policy—to the extent that they have a coherent policy at all—appears to be, by default, abandoning their Kyoto targets after 2012. That lack of coherence has infected the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in its equivocation over the decision to approve the commissioning of the main Sellafield MOX plant. That facility has been ready for more than two years, but still no decision about full commissioning has been made.

Paragraph 70 of the Trade and Industry Committee report cites a report by the PA Consulting Group, noting:

> It warned that "any significant delay to the commissioning start date" could affect customer confidence and "place BNFL at a competitive disadvantage".

The PA Consulting Group report was published in 1997. In November 2000, a decision has still not been made. The Select Committee report concluded:

> The delay in deciding on whether to permit full commissioning of the Mox plant has gone on long enough.

So it has.

Delay, dither and incompetence are the hallmark of policy making by Ministers on this issue—never more so than in the mishandling of the whole MOX data falsification affair by the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe. The House is aware that the matter first arose in September last year—as the right hon. Member for Copeland pointed out—when it was discovered that data records of secondary safety checks on a batch of MOX fuel pellets for a Japanese client had been falsified. As a consequence, operations at the facility were suspended—rightly so.

Despite initial statements to the contrary, it was later discovered that the pellets had already been shipped to Japan by the time the data falsification became known. As the House is also aware, the pellets were in fact perfectly safe. The secondary safety check was just that—an additional check on the size of the pellets, requested by the client. As the hon. Member for Ochil pointed out, the issue was one of contract compliance and not one of safety.

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): It is important to make it clear to the House that the checks that were carried out were for quality assurance; safety has never been in question. Indeed, the nuclear installations inspectorate made that absolutely clear. It is most important that the hon. Gentleman gets his facts right; jobs are riding on this matter—as is the reputation of an important industry.

Mr. Gibb: It is very important that the right hon. Lady listen to what I am saying. My point was precisely that: it

was not a safety issue—solely one of contract compliance. The right hon. Lady repeated what I said; I have no disagreement with her on that point.

However, the issue became one of how not to treat our most important business relationships. In February this year, just before the nuclear installations inspectorate report into that incident and into other management matters at Sellafield, a team of DTI officials visited Japan with a copy of the draft NII report to discuss the incident with the Japanese Government and the Japanese electricity industry. After those consultations, the British embassy in Tokyo—whose officials were closely involved with the negotiations—was firmly of the opinion that the MOX fuel that had been shipped out to Japan would have to be returned to Sellafield.

The advice from the embassy stated that

> we feel that we have no choice but to look very seriously at the option of agreeing to return the fuel. And agreeing sooner rather than later so as . . . to avoid serious long-term damage to our relations with Japan in the nuclear field.

My understanding is that the advice from the embassy was strongly in favour of returning the fuel and warned Ministers of the consequence of not doing so.

Mrs. Liddell: Will the hon. Gentleman help the House to get to grips with how factual his position is? On which date was that advice given?

Mr. Gibb: The date of the advice was 14 February. It states:

> Grudging agreement to return of the fuel after half-hearted attempts to find alternatives could be very damaging to BNFL and more widely. The most effective—possibly the only—way of restoring confidence and securing business for BNFL in a reasonable time scale would be to agree soon to return of the fuel.

Clear advice was given in February. Why did the Minister not accept that advice? Even without the advice, it was perfectly clear that the fuel would have to be returned. There were clear signals from the Japanese that they would not—indeed, could not—accept that the fuel remain in Japan.

Mrs. Liddell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gibb: I shall give way to the right hon. Lady in a minute, after I have asked a few questions. Why did she and her officials continue to refuse to allow BNFL to take back the fuel? Why did it take until July before the decision was changed and it was agreed that BNFL could take back the fuel? Will she reply to those questions?

Mrs. Liddell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene because it gives me an excellent opportunity to set the record straight. The House will recall that the hon. Gentleman said that the alleged document to which he has referred was published on 14 February. I regret the fact that he has not done his homework, because on 10 February, Mrs. Anna Walker, the director-general of energy at the Department of Trade and Industry, issued a press release following her discussions on the return of the fuel with the Japanese authorities. The hon. Gentleman should have gathered from our debate that this is a serious issue, so he should get his facts right and do his homework. This is not rocket science; it is common sense.

Mr. Gibb: It is rocket science, and I have got my facts straight. The advice from the embassy is absolutely clear and it was not from Anna Walker. The British embassy in Tokyo told Anna Walker on 14 February that it was its firm advice that the MOX fuel should be returned to Sellafield from Japan at the earliest possible moment. BNFL was stopped from allowing the fuel to come back. It was only in response to pressure and in July this year that the fuel was allowed to come back. It was that grudging acceptance to take back the fuel in July that caused the damage to our relations with Japan.

Conservative Members understand the great importance to BNFL of its relationship with its Japanese customers and attach enormous importance to the UK's relationship with Japan. Japanese utilities have been an important factor in BNFL's commercial success, particularly the operations at Sellafield, which is the biggest employer in west Cumbria. BNFL is a world-class company with 23,000 highly skilled and competent employees worldwide with a proven track record in dealing with waste management and decommissioning. There are huge markets for those services here and overseas.

The right hon. Lady has done nothing to address my points other than to say that the DTI issued a press release on 10 February—so what? All that she has achieved so far is to misjudge totally the handling of the MOX falsification issue and thereby damage the relationship with BNFL's principal customer. Therefore, for the benefit of the House, will she tell us what will now happen to the returned MOX fuel from Japan?

The right hon. Lady and the Secretary of State have also managed to criticise the management of BNFL in public and in such a way that it has caused further damage to BNFL's reputation overseas, particularly in the United States, a crucial market for BNFL's decommissioning skills and experience. The Secretary of State's comment in *The Independent* on 17 February that

> there is a fundamental flaw in the management at BNFL

has done incalculable damage to the company's reputation overseas.

Despite such language and the other statements by the right hon. Lady about root-and-branch reform of management, is she confident that all the managers and senior managers with direct responsibility for the data falsification issue have been moved and that the inherent problems that led to it happening in the first place have been dealt with? Indeed, my understanding is that one particular senior manager, with direct responsibility for this matter, was actually promoted, with the right hon. Lady's assent, to the board of BNFL. Is she confident that the Sellafield culture that many felt was at the root of the data falsification problem has changed? Those concerns echo the comment in paragraph 80 of the Select Committee report, which says that

> the extent of change in managerial arrangements is rather less than appears.

The Government's track record on energy matters is lamentable. They have disastrously handled the Utilities Bill, which was incompetently drafted and badly taken through Parliament. That is an appalling policy basis that will burden our energy sector with millions of pounds of unnecessary costs, as will the disastrous climate change levy and the hefty duties on fuel. The Government have no coherent energy policy to deal with rising CO_2 levels, and now we have the crass incompetence of their handling of the problems facing BNFL. They could so easily have been sorted out—indeed, they still could.

[Mr. Gibb]

If the right hon. Lady had understood the validity of the advice from the British embassy in Tokyo about taking the fuel back; had used more considered language in responding to the NII report; and had understood the management issues at Sellafield and tackled them as a senior Minister should, BNFL would undoubtedly have ridden the MOX storm by now and established new and lucrative contracts with the Japanese. As it is, the *Japan Times* reported on 16 October that 10 Japanese electricity companies had recently awarded a £500,000 reprocessing contract to COGEMA, BNFL's French competitor. That is the legacy of the right hon. Lady's stewardship.

These are serious matters and this has been a serious debate. I hope that the Minister will address the issues raised by all Members with that seriousness in mind.

9.40 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): As this is the first time that I have participated in a debate before you in your present capacity, Mr. Speaker, may I say what a great pleasure it is to see you in the Chair? I will try very hard to avoid incurring your wrath for as long as possible.

I have often thought that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) inhabits a parallel universe, and tonight we have had proof of that. He made spurious allegations that he punted in *The Times* this morning before the debate. He admitted that the date on the letter that he claims to have received is 14 February, although the issues were dealt with on 10 February. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was an accountant; perhaps I should ask him to do my tax returns.

Mr. Gibb: Will the right hon. Lady publish all the advice that she received from the embassy in February, to put the matter straight?

Mrs. Liddell: Some of the advice given to me is of a commercial nature.

Mr. Gibb: Ah.

Mrs. Liddell: Well, the hon. Gentleman has pointed out that other companies are involved. I am interested in securing the jobs of people at BNFL, and the hon. Gentleman should have taken into account the points made by the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) about the significance of those issues for continuing employment in an important industry. The hon. Gentleman has altogether missed the point of the debate and completely failed to take into account the serious issues that we are addressing.

I shall seek to respond to all the points that have been made, but contributions have been lengthy and time is limited, so I will write to hon. Members about points that I do not have time to tackle.

This has been an excellent opportunity to debate BNFL and the proposed public-private partnership. I have listened with great interest to the views that have been expressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) set the issues in context when he introduced the debate. It is important to note that openness was a recurrent theme of the debate for Labour and Liberal Democrat Members. The key to the future of British Nuclear Fuels in a PPP is the opportunity for openness that will be provided.

There is a wide range of views on nuclear power and reprocessing, but there is consensus in the recognition that BNFL is a major UK company, playing a unique role in some of the most challenging areas of the United Kingdom energy scene. Following the acquisition of Westinghouse and ABB, BNFL is now a global company operating in 15 countries and employing 23,000 people worldwide. BNFL's fuel manufacturing and service business, which includes fuel manufacturing sites in the United States, and the highly regarded Springfields site to which the right hon. Member for Fylde referred, has the expertise to supply fuel solutions to the world's nuclear reactors. I should point out that the right hon. Gentleman has apologised for his absence; I understand that he has another engagement.

The right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil spoke about the future of Sellafield and Springfields, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). Few Members of Parliament have shown a greater commitment to a major employer in their constituency than my right hon. Friend has demonstrated for many years. His advice to me has been extremely important in enabling me to get to grips with the complexity of the issues, and I should like to put on record my gratitude to him.

The future of the sites depends on BNFL getting contracts with its customers. The critical issue was summed up by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil: it is not about taking on some of the more spurious attacks on BNFL, but about restoring its business integrity. That has been the main aim of the Government and the companies throughout the challenges and difficulties that have beset BNFL. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) pointed out, the company often operates at the very forefront of science, it is a major export earner, it makes a significant contribution to the United Kingdom economy and it is the dominant employer in west Cumbria. It is extremely important that we get our policies right.

The last year has been difficult and the outlook remains challenging—everyone acknowledges that. However, I commend the substantial efforts and real progress that have been made throughout the company at every level in recent months. Led by the company's new management team of Hugh Collum and Norman Askew, a wide range of actions has been taken to get the company back on track. When we got to grips with what had happened, we realised the significance of the MOX data falsification issue, so I commend the speed with which Hugh Collum, the new chairman, took charge and responded to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and me by making the necessary management changes. The report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry is an important part of getting BNFL back where it belongs.

The public-private partnership is not a Treasury-driven means of raising finance. It is designed not to raise money, but to bring into the company private sector commercial disciplines to help it to arrive at sound commercial judgments about business opportunities and investment decisions, to introduce sound business practice and to end the cosy relationships to which my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil referred. The hon. Member for

Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) spoke about the lack of openness and transparency, and other hon. Members mentioned BNFL's accounts appearing impenetrable—now, they are far more transparent. It is for those reasons that we want to introduce the PPP.

I was asked why we had decided on a PPP, not full privatisation. One of the reasons is that we want to proceed with consensus, and a consensus surrounds the idea of a PPP—the need to introduce private sector disciplines is recognised and the proposal has been warmly welcomed by the company's management, its staff and their unions.

Mr. O'Neill: My right hon. Friend says that the exercise is not Treasury driven, but I imagine that it will involve the new partners bringing some money to the table—a sum that the Treasury will not have to underwrite through the public sector borrowing requirement. Therefore, there is an aspect of Treasury involvement, although we do not yet know how much money will be involved.

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend's second point is the more significant. Now, the important thing is to get BNFL back on track as the significant global player that it should be. In view of BNFL's problems, let me emphasise that there will be no PPP before the second half of 2002, at the earliest. It is also important that no rigid timetable is connected with the PPP, because we have to ensure that we get the fundamentals right.

The report mentions the Government's role as an effective shareholder prior to the introduction of the PPP. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I, when dealing with BNFL from day to day, are highly aware of the importance of that role. In the past, under the previous Administration of whom the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton is so proud, the policy was largely that of absentee landlordism. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said, occasionally scientific principles were used to divert attention from some of the significant issues that there was a need to grasp because of the technical complexity.

I believe that it is critical that the Government be an intelligent shareholder, but it is not the task of the Government to run the business. Governments do not run businesses. That is the responsibility of the new management. However, we do not have carte blanche to operate as an absentee shareholder.

There have been references to British Energy and contracts between it and BNFL. These are commercial issues between the companies. If we insist that BNFL operates in a proper commercial manner, we cannot dash in and intervene. That is important.

Mr. Stunell *rose—*

Mr. Chaytor *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I shall take two more interventions. I must then make progress.

Mr. Stunell: The Minister has talked about a commercial decision. Would the move to a PPP be a commercial decision, or would the matter come back to the House?

Mrs. Liddell: The issue of a PPP is some way away, because there are many fundamentals to get right first. It cannot be earlier than the second part of 2002. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that it is not necessary to have a crystal ball to know that we shall be discussing BNFL much more in the House between now and then. The House must be confident that BNFL has met important safety targets as well as its financial and other targets. I, or whoever is the Minister with responsibilities for energy, must be confident of that on behalf of the Government.

Mr. Chaytor: Does my right hon. Friend accept that when one party is the sole shareholder, it is difficult to argue that these are commercial issues with which we have no involvement? In any ordinary company, the sole shareholder would be involved in commercial decisions.

Mrs. Liddell: Part of the difficulty that we face is in encouraging BNFL now, and encouraging the two significant business lanes that lie ahead of it. We must encourage BNFL to operate as a commercial entity. That means that those who deal with BNFL must also be prepared to deal with those matters.

I believe that we have a much greater understanding of the company now as a consequence of the PPP process. I said before the Select Committee on Trade and Industry that I wanted to shine a light into every corner of the company. I am not confident that I have yet got into all the dust balls. However, a light is being shone into every part of the company. I have a regular schedule of meetings with the chairman and the chief executive. I have also met the new non-executive directors who are being appointed to the board, and there is on-going contact.

Our objective is to focus on the major strategic issues and to ensure that we work together on specific problems, such as the difficulties with the data-falsified fuel shipped to Takahama. We are a much better informed and much more intelligent shareholder.

As a shareholder, we want to see the new management team at BNFL succeed in getting the company back on course. We want BNFL to make the most of the scientific and engineering excellence within the business, but that must be allied to real commercial acumen. That is why I am so encouraged by the position that senior management takes on examining its strategy, thinking forward, asking questions and being realistic about the answers.

I have been asked about the strategic review. I imagine that it will be the spring of next year before the company will be in a position to come forward with it. Many difficult issues have to be addressed, not least of which is getting customers back.

I have also been asked about targets. The Government have a key role in encouraging target setting and target meeting. As we did last year, we are setting the company a range of targets in key areas of operation. Safety, health and environmental performance remain paramount. We want the company to achieve improved standards in all those areas. Norman Askew is monitoring the company's performance against four key measures: conventional safety, nuclear safety, environmental performance and dangerous occurrences. That will capture events that were not tracked under the former environmental, health and safety index. The company intends to publish an annual assessment of its performance on those issues in its environment, health and safety report. That is a big move forward and it is the sort of openness for which right hon. and hon. Members have been asking.

[Mrs. Liddell]

Those targets, which are being discussed with the regulatory authorities, will help the Government to track the improvements. They will complement, but not substitute for, normal regulatory processes. I assure the hon. Member for Hazel Grove that the introduction of a PPP will in no way change the relationship with the regulator. The regulator must continue to have a strong influence on performance in BNFL.

I say to the work force at BNFL that their skills and productivity have a crucial part to play in the company's future. BNFL and the trades unions representing the work force have agreed to work together to develop a competency framework to measure the performance of individuals and to identify and meet particular training needs. We will monitor that and check the implementation of the programme.

There was a realistic response from the trades unions when the MOX data falsification issue arose—a more realistic view of the situation than was displayed by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. Such involvement is critical. I want real improvements in relationships throughout the company. I believe that something has been created that can be built on to create a company that has the potential for excellence, but that company must be prepared to be realistic about some of the challenges that it faces.

Specific financial performance targets are in place. Part of the issue for BNFL is the effective management of liabilities, which is central to its business. Therefore, we have set it a target based on effective delivery of several significant decommissioning and waste management projects to time and to cost.

I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove about BNFL seeking the opportunity to move into different sectors. Several hon. Members have talked about new build, and that is why ABB and Westinghouse are so important. Their purchase gives the company access to the technology and expertise. However, the Government believe that it is for the generators to decide the nature of the future generating capacity. That will be based on whether that technology can meet the expected high safety and environmental standards at an economic cost. Once again, that comes back to the need to ensure that decisions are taken coherently and effectively.

Several hon. Members spoke about the Sellafield MOX plant. That matter will be resolved by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health. I cannot say when that decision will come, but I make a straightforward, common-sense point. Giving authority for the Sellafield MOX plant also requires knowing that there are customers.

BNFL is working hard to restore Japan's confidence in it—it is essential that that happens. I met the president of the Japanese utility, Tokyo Electric Power Company—TEPCO—last Thursday to discuss the issues. A very good co-operative relationship exists, but it is for BNFL and the utilities companies in Japan to come to contractual arrangements. I understand that BNFL and Kansai Electric are discussing the next steps, including practical arrangements, for return of the fuel. The issues involved are not easy to address and the Government will do what they can to assist.

We have had a long debate tonight about the corporate strategy and reprocessing. As a shareholder, the Government are committed to reprocessing, but there must be a proper analysis of the prospects for the company. The debate has been useful. There are many issues still to be resolved, but we have made a start, and one of the greatest achievements is the recognition on the part of the company that openness must be all.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Indebtedness and Poverty

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

10 pm

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about poverty and indebtedness.

Poverty

is the biggest scar of a civilised society.

So said the Secretary of State for Scotland in evidence to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs in its report entitled "Poverty in Scotland". That was appropriate, because we cannot allow it to be thought that poverty and debt are problems only for people far away.

In Scotland, one of four households live in poverty, on incomes below half the average income. In June this year, the United Nations Children's Fund published a report that placed Britain in the bottom four of a league table measuring child poverty in industrialised countries. Child poverty in Britain has tripled over the past 20 years, and on average one in five children in Britain now live in relative poverty—in an environment where national income has doubled and redoubled since 1950. In a climate in which most of the population are becoming richer, the material and social deprivation of a quarter of the population is unacceptable.

I know that the Government are serious about their pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020, and I commend the work of the social exclusion unit, which has devised strategies to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Clearly, the prevailing social and economic conditions are part of a long-term inheritance and cannot be reversed at once.

However, there is no room for complacency. Poverty in the United Kingdom must remain at the top of the agenda. Urgent and far-reaching reforms are needed if Britain is to improve its appalling record on child poverty. The work of the social exclusion unit has made some important contributions so far, as has the Department of Social Security through its two annual poverty audits. It is crucial that that work continues to be developed and prioritised. Furthermore, if the Government's strategy is to be coherent and effective, it must address the various dimensions of poverty and social exclusion, and ensure that policies are properly co-ordinated and implemented across Departments.

I have called the debate tonight to highlight one of the faces of poverty in the UK which I believe needs to be more central to the Government's strategy. Evidence suggests that there is a growing crisis of indebtedness in the UK, particularly among people on low incomes. That is borne out by a recent report by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which revealed that in England and Wales, 1.5 million people approached their local citizens advice bureau for help with debt problems last year. Scottish CABs have reported similarly critical levels of indebtedness, with debt problems amounting to about £60 million handled in 1999.

My own CAB in Dumbarton has recorded in the past 18 months an increase of more than 50 per cent. in the number of debt and consumer inquiries. I pay tribute to the local manager, Joe McCormick, and his dedicated team for their many years of service to the community. These volunteers should be assisted by a legislative and statutory framework that supports, rather than hinders, their work.

Progress has been made through the work of the social exclusion unit in identifying some of the causes of financial exclusion in the UK. It has rightly identified that the Post Office and high street banks have an important role to play in widening access to mainstream services. It has also made some important recommendations about how the Government should encourage credit union development.

However, the social exclusion unit needs to develop a more comprehensive interdepartmental strategy. That should address not only access to financial services, but ways of tackling the serious debt problems which result from financial exclusion, and which increase the burden of poverty on the country's most vulnerable citizens. In particular, such a strategy would need to address issues relating to door-to-door lending and the inadequate provisions of the social fund. More attention also needs to be given to assisting credit unions in reaching the poorest in society.

Take the issue of extortionate lending—in a climate where, according to Bristol university, 29 per cent. of households have no access to mainstream credit, it is not surprising that more and more people turn to high-cost private moneylenders to pay for essential items. They are then subject to excessively high interest charges and irresponsible lending practices.

Provident Financial, the largest home credit company, has seen its customers grow by more than 300,000 since 1995. In 1999, it charged its 1.5 million customers a typical APR of 164 per cent. and, from a turnover of £422 million, it made a pre-tax profit of £155 million.

Earlier this year, as I said, the Scottish Affairs Committee published a report on poverty in Scotland. It found that a £500 loan from a Glasgow consumer credit company could generate interest amounting to £310—but the same loan from Cranhill Credit Union Ltd. would cost £18.60. The Committee also found that the company in question encouraged people to take out further high-cost loans in order to pay off existing debts. Further examples of moneylenders targeting the poorest, offering loans without taking proper account of ability to repay, and abusing the regulations on cold calling by offering shopping vouchers, are increasingly evident.

Problems of extortionate lending have been on the agenda for some time. In 1991, the Office of Fair Trading carried out a report into unjust credit transactions, and it found that

the extortionate credit provisions of the Act—

the Consumer Credit Act 1974—

have not effectively dealt with the problems to which they were addressed.

It made a series of recommendations which were referred to the Department of Trade and Industry in February 1999, and research was commissioned into the extent of extortionate credit lending.

The research was concluded in June 1999, but the findings were not published until April 2000. The DTI then announced its intention to restrict action on extortionate credit to just one of the 18 recommendations contained in the findings. It would appear that there has

[Mr. John McFall]

been a failure to act in the interests of low-income households. In the meantime, lenders have continued to prosper.

My CAB refers specifically to breaches in the Consumer Credit Act. It says that a significant trend is a move towards passing on costs to clients. The OFT issued guidance on debt collection agencies and, specifically, on look-alike letters and collection charges, but it fails organisations such as the CAB time and again, as they are staffed by trained volunteers and it is up to them to collect the evidence on which to base a report on the unscrupulous behaviour of creditors.

To give one example, client A in Dumbarton CAB had a credit card managed by Clydesdale Financial Services, a subsidiary of Next plc. The bureau had been managing the client's repayments, and it negotiated with all creditors. The client was making regular repayments as agreed. Despite that, in July this year, Clydesdale levied a charge of £387 as an administration fee because the account was in arrears. There was no provision in the contract for such a charge, but despite repeated requests Clydesdale has refused to explain its actions or withdraw its charge. The matter has now been reported to the OFT. It has failed the CAB and the individual in my constituency. Several measures need to be taken.

First, the Department of Trade and Industry should publish all 18 recommendations contained in the Bristol university research. It should also publish a response to the consultation on consumer credit licensing that took place in May. A further consultation process should be undertaken with organisations that directly represent the concerns of vulnerable consumers. That could be achieved through the debt task force or another appropriate body.

It is time for the Government to take a serious look at the activities of licensed credit brokers, especially the practice of banks, credit card companies and other financial institutions of offering unsolicited credit facilities to vulnerable people, thereby encouraging them to incur financial commitments that they cannot sustain. They are thus caught in a cycle of deprivation. A clear timetable for implementing recommendations should also be drawn up. Urgent consideration should be given to setting statutory maximum interest rates, with reference to successful models in other European countries.

The Commission on Social Justice, which the late John Smith set up in 1994, stated:

> Perhaps the most soul-destroying aspect of Income Support is the Social Fund.

Many people and non-governmental organisations believe that the inadequate provisions of the social fund constitute one of the reasons for the rapid growth of the private credit industry. The current system, which offers mostly loans, replaced the single payments system in 1988. At the outset, the budget was reduced by 0.5 per cent. It seems a small amount, but the effect on families was devastating. Research that the Conservative Government initiated found that 70 per cent. of those repaying loans experienced difficulties in meeting the costs of fuel and clothes when the money ran out.

Despite increases in benefits for children and other initiatives, the current level of social security is not always sufficient to enable families to meet all basic needs. Families at some time need access to a cash safety net. Furthermore, no United Kingdom Government have carried out a proper assessment of the minimum income needed to maintain health and dignity, and meet essential needs, since before the introduction of the welfare system in 1948.

Several key reforms of the social fund should be undertaken. First, a minimum income standard should be researched and established by government as a target for setting benefit rates. Secondly, the budget for grants should be increased considerably. Thirdly, new grants should be introduced to help families to meet specific needs. They should be paid at particular stages of a child's life. Fourthly, an in-depth review of the workings of the social fund, and its impact on some of the most vulnerable sections of the community, is long overdue and should be undertaken.

The fund should be part of an interim programme of assistance to be phased out in 2020, when the Government meet their poverty eradication targets. Grants should be perceived as a means of ensuring that children have the right to an adequate standard of living, in accordance with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child.

I commend the work of the social exclusion unit and the Treasury in supporting the growth of the credit union movement. However, groups such as Debt on our Doorstep, which has petitioned me, are worried that the new regulatory framework that the Financial Services Authority is drawing up is in danger of excluding those whom it most needs to reach. Greater consideration should be given to methods of ensuring that credit unions' community and social functions are preserved and prioritised.

Credit unions in some areas have set up debt redemption schemes with local authorities. Those schemes provide funds to buy out debts held by companies such as Provident Financial. Their success has been proven by independent evaluation. As well as enabling credit unions to play a vital role in tackling financial exclusion, greater investment in debt redemption schemes would also help to ensure that funding for regeneration remains in the community rather than being turned into profits for big business.

Greater emphasis should be placed on ways in which local authorities can support credit unions in their areas. As the Scottish Affairs Committee stated, the best antidote to debt, next to an adequate income, is decent advice about money, which is properly resourced and capable of development. How about establishing a money advice hotline run by local authorities, which would enable people to get ready advice?

What action should the Government take? I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that, to support the growth and effectiveness of credit unions, the following is necessary. First, the Financial Services Authority should be encouraged to recognise the unique volunteer control of credit unions and to work closely with all sections of the movement to develop a distinctive framework that serves the business and community functions of credit unions. Secondly, central Government should make significant investment to fund redemption schemes through local authorities. Thirdly, local authorities should be strongly encouraged to offer a range of services to support credit unions, including help to fund debt redemption schemes.

The lethal combination of inadequate incomes, lack of affordable credit alternatives and extortionate interest rates means that low-income families are quickly trapped in a spiral of unsustainable debt. Debt will no longer be such a pressing issue when the Government's poverty eradication targets are met in 2020, the incomes of the poorest are raised to such a level that those people will be prevented from falling into desperate poverty, and community finance initiatives are universally accessible. We live in hope, but, as the Rowntree Foundation recently reported, a quarter of the population cannot afford to save even £10 a month. Therefore, in the meantime, improving access to affordable sources of credit would provide a lifeline to low-income families.

Furthermore, measures to respond effectively to high indebtedness must include greater protection against unscrupulous lenders and a radical review of the social fund. Initiatives to tackle debt and financial exclusion need to be more effectively joined up across Departments. The social exclusion unit, or another cross-departmental body, should work with the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security to draw up a comprehensive plan to address the areas that I have outlined. Failing that, a key Department should be appointed to take the lead in producing an interdepartmental strategy.

The 10th anniversary of the United Kingdom's ratification of the UN convention on the rights of the child falls in 2001. Article 27 refers to the right to an adequate standard of living. If the UK's ratification of the convention is to have any meaning, and if Britain's appalling record on child poverty is to be improved, urgent action must be taken to set people free from the prison of debt. I commend the Government for the work that they have done, but I urge them to become more involved with the NGOs and others who are pushing the issue so that we can reach our target—before 2020, I hope.

10.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) on his success in obtaining tonight's debate and on his choice of subject. As his serious contribution to this on-going debate showed, indebtedness and poverty are extremely important issues. When my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said today that we wanted all our citizens to share in the growing prosperity of the nation, he was definitely addressing many people who are in the situation that my hon. Friend described so vividly.

My hon. Friend discussed in detail the shameful legacy of the previous Government, who created a divided society in which many were left behind to face a lifetime of poverty with little opportunity to escape. Worse, the previous Tory Government claimed that the poor would always be with us. When Conservative Members discuss such issues across the Floor of the House, it is clear that they still believe that. They take the view that Governments cannot make a difference—and the legacy that we inherited was that one household in five including adults of working age was workless.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, there was a huge growth in the number of children living and growing up in poverty, despite a 90 per cent. real terms increase in social security expenditure. The bills of economic failure had to be paid, and everything was left to the market, which forced everyone, including the elderly, the weak and the disadvantaged, to fend for themselves. In turn, that weakened or removed the safety net, which was so full of holes that people fell through it.

As my hon. Friend eloquently set out, the results of the careless indifference of that approach to society are stunted life chances, loss of opportunity, waste of talent and lives made narrower and undoubtedly shorter. As he indicated, the Labour Government reject that counsel of despair and believe that Governments can make a difference. I welcome my hon. Friend's acknowledgement of the work that the Government have done so far to tackle poverty and the lack of opportunity and fairness in our society, which we inherited.

I agree that that is a huge and challenging agenda, and much work remains to be done. The Prime Minister has set us the tough target of eradicating child poverty in 20 years. By the end of this Parliament, we will be on course to have lifted 1.2 million children out of poverty, which is a good beginning. My hon. Friend mentioned "Opportunity for all", the Government's annual publication of their anti-poverty report, which charts our progress against a wide range of indicators, including levels of income, length of time on benefit, widening educational opportunities, access to health services, child care and other issues. As my hon. Friend said, poverty is multi-faceted and the cure for it is not simple. However, as he pointed out, the cure relies on a multi-dimensional cross-departmental approach, which we are putting in place. I am not claiming that it is perfect yet, but we are working on it. I certainly welcome my hon. Friend's contribution to the debate tonight.

The latest report highlighted the progress made in the three short years in which we have been in power and the two years for which we have published "Opportunity for all". The number of lone parents on income support has fallen by more than 100,000 since May 1997, and the proportion of children in workless households fell to 15.8 per cent. in spring 2000, which is down from 17.9 per cent. in spring 1997. That means that 250,000 fewer children are living in workless households and 300,000 fewer children are in families who claim out-of-work benefits. That is a start, and we are getting somewhere.

The number of children whose parents have been claiming benefit for more than two years has fallen by nearly 200,000 since 1997. Educational standards, which represent the way out of some of these difficulties, are already improving, and the proportion achieving the expected numeracy standard at age 11 is up from 62 per cent. in 1997 to 72 per cent. in 2000. In literacy, 63 per cent. achieved the standard in 1997—a figure that rose to 75 per cent. in 2000. The number of permanent exclusions from school has gone down dramatically.

That is a start, and demonstrates that Government action can make a difference and, indeed, has done so. The national minimum wage has helped 1.5 million people, and there has been a 26 per cent. real terms increase in child benefit in three years. Even before today's very welcome announcements by the Chancellor, all families with children were better off by £850 a year on average as a result of changes in the social security system and the tax system. Working families tax credit is

[Angela Eagle]

a key aim, and will make a real difference to many people who now have a real prospect of work for the first time in many years.

My hon. Friend vividly described the problems of indebtedness, and many of us recognised those problems from our constituency case loads. We have seen shady people who give out family allowance books to mothers and collect them back after they have come out of the post office and handed their money over. We know what goes on. Problems of indebtedness and financial exclusion exacerbate the problems that are faced by the poorest in our society.

My hon. Friend discussed the role of credit unions and the social fund in providing some answers, and raised the important issue of extortionate lending. We know from our own research that low income families are as likely to use credit as high income families, but use it for necessities rather than luxuries, and get a much worse deal than those who borrow higher up the income scale. We want to tackle those problems. My hon. Friend mentioned the 44 recommendations of the 14th report of the social exclusion unit policy action team, to which we shall shortly be responding in detail.

I have considerable sympathy with what my hon. Friend said about extortionate lenders, and I recognise many of the tactics that he described. Loan sharks are a curse. This matter has been taken up by my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of Trade and Industry, and I shall pass on my hon. Friend's comments to them, as they follow up the recent debt summit. They are examining how to update the Consumer Credit Act 1974 to limit the power of extortionate lenders, and deciding on their future policy.

My hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of credit unions. As providers of low-cost credit to people on low incomes or with a poor credit history, they have the potential to make a significant contribution to the fight against financial exclusion. The movement as a whole needs to grow. Credit unions serving deprived communities must be central to that growth, and we are taking steps to support their development.

By 2002, we want to extend the maximum loan repayment periods allowed, give credit unions greater flexibility on disposal of repossessed collateral, remove the maximum membership limit, and ensure that members receive protection as depositors similar to that received by users of other lending institutions. When a credit union works well it is fantastic, but if it is dodgy it can create enormous problems. We must ensure that with the growth of credit unions comes an assurance that they are above board and that money put into them is safe.

My hon. Friend mentioned the changes to the social fund. We have already introduced changes, which have been widely welcomed, to the way in which the budgeting loan system works. Independent research has shown that the change to the budgeting loan scheme has made it easier to use, quicker, more easily understandable and less intrusive for applicants.

Other changes to the social fund in the past three years have included two increases in the amount of money allocated to the grants budget since 1997. Those were the first increases since 1994. There has been a 15 per cent. increase in expenditure on budgeting loans, which is up to nearly £400 million, with a 9 per cent. increase in the number of successful applicants, and only a 5 per cent. increase in the number of refusals. We should contrast that with the Tories' plans to decimate the fund by taking £90 million out of it to pay for their spurious pension proposals, which will hit women, children and people with disabilities, who are the main users of the social fund, far harder than anyone else in society. As my hon. Friend said, they would hit the poorest and most vulnerable harder. It is a cruel policy.

I am not saying that the social fund is perfect. I should like to send my warm wishes to the Debt on our Doorstep campaign, whose representatives I met at the recent party conference. We had a long discussion about some of the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. He is right to say that we need a cross-departmental approach. I promise that I will consider the suggestions that he made and will pass them on to the relevant Departments. I assure him that poverty and its alleviation will remain at the top of our priorities. I welcome his interest in the issue, and the fact that we have been able to have this short but important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 November 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Working Families Tax Credit

1. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): What his latest estimate is of the number of families benefiting from the working families tax credit. [135947]

13. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): What his estimate is of the impact to date of the working families tax credit in reducing child poverty. [135961]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The working families tax credit was launched in October 1999. It is already benefiting more than 1.1 million low and middle-income working households with children—about 300,000 more than received family credit, which the working families tax credit replaced—and, on average, those families receive £30 a week more than they would with family credit. The working families tax credit is one of the measures that we have introduced to tackle child poverty. We estimate that, during this Parliament, our measures will raise more than 1 million children out of poverty.

Mr. Griffiths: Does my right hon. Friend realise that thousands of families in Edinburgh and more than 1 million nationwide receive, on average, £76 a week from the allowance, and that they live in fear of the Tory proposals to scrap the allowance because the shadow Chancellor is more concerned about Tory hard-right policies than with hard-working families?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. In his constituency, 1,044 families benefit from the working families tax credit and there has been a 49 per cent. fall in unemployment, in part as a result of the measures that we have taken to make work pay. In the shadow Chancellor's constituency, unemployment has also fallen by 49 per cent. and, no doubt, the right hon. Gentleman will want to congratulate the Government on that. As for the future of the working families tax credit, we are determined to expand the benefits to more people by getting more people back into work. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, not only would the Conservatives abolish the new deal, but they would abolish the working families tax credit. The shadow Chancellor said, on 20 September 1998, of the attitudes of his party to such matters, that Conservatives have become inextricably connected with uncaring social attitudes. That is exactly the position that the abolition of the working families tax credit would represent.

Mr. Connarty: Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be aware that in the Falkirk district, more than 2,000 people receive the same average sums through the working families tax credit. Will my right hon. Friend send a clear message to the people of the district that, at the election, they can choose a Labour Government who are committed to getting people back into work through the new deal and paying them a supplement through the working families tax credit, or they can choose the abolition of both schemes, which will put them back on the dole and back into poverty?

Mr. Brown: The choice is between stability, steady growth and employment creation under the Labour Government, creating rising living standards, and a return to stop-go, boom-bust under the Conservatives, who would abolish the new deal and the working families tax credit. I believe that when people see that under the Labour Government, even in the constituencies of Conservative Members of Parliament, there has been a huge reduction in unemployment, they will not want either the new deal or the working families tax credit to be abolished. I realise that there are divisions within the Conservative party on such matters, but, no doubt, they are being resolved within the No Turning Back group, albeit without the presence of the shadow Chancellor, who has given up membership of one extreme right-wing faction in the hope of leading a rather larger extreme right-wing faction: the Conservative party.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): Will the Chancellor confirm that he quite wrongly counts the working families tax credit as though it were a reduction in tax, which it is not, and that he does that for one simple reason, which is to massage the tax burden figures? Will he also confirm that, even on his own figures, which were revealed yesterday, the tax burden has risen from 36.9 per cent. last year to 37.3 per cent. this year? On what basis, therefore, did the Prime Minister tell the House of Commons last week:

the tax burden this year is falling.—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 703.]

at a time when he must have known what the new figures were? Will the Chancellor now correct the Prime Minister and apologise to the House?

Mr. Brown: The figures are published in the normal way in the pre-Budget report and the Budget. Perhaps the shadow Chancellor will answer for what happened under the Conservative Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] That is interesting: none of them want to defend the last Conservative Government, especially the shadow Chancellor, who introduced VAT on fuel and the fuel escalator. Tax and national insurance, as a share of gross domestic product—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I am just about to give the information. The figure was 37.3 per cent. in 2000–01. That is the figure that we announced yesterday. Under the Conservative proposals

and projections published before the election, the tax take in 2001 was not 37.3 per cent. but 37.6 per cent, so if there had been a Conservative Government, there would have been a higher tax burden now.

Mr. Portillo: It is notable that the Chancellor does not wish to defend what the Prime Minister said last week. I do not know whether that is because he knows that the Prime Minister got it wrong and there is no defence, or whether the right hon. Gentleman is at fault for not having told the Prime Minister that the tax burden is rising, leading him—inadvertently no doubt—to mislead the House.

Will not working families be concerned about the total national burden of tax? Will the Chancellor confirm that that burden has risen by 2.6 percentage points since he came to office, which is about the equivalent of £25 billion, which is about the equivalent of 10p on the standard rate of income tax? Will he explain why the Prime Minister promised us before the election that he had no intention of raising taxes?

Mr. Brown: We have cut the basic rate of income tax. The right hon. Gentleman should be congratulating us on cutting it. We have introduced a 10p starting rate of income tax. We have introduced the working families tax credit, which is a tax cut for ordinary families. In the Budget in March, we shall be raising the children's tax credit. Perhaps the shadow Chancellor will tell us whether he will continue with the children's tax credit or whether—like the new deal and the working families tax credit—he will abolish it. Sooner or later the Conservative party will have to do what it promised it would do, which is to publish the figures and tell us exactly which cuts, which changes, and which services are at risk.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the great success of the working families tax credit and on bringing 1 million children out of poverty? I know of his personal deep care and concern in that regard. May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on the sheer brilliance of his pre-Budget report, which has demonstrated yet again the remarkable success of his management of the economy—a success which has enabled him to make great steps forward in areas of social justice while continuing incentives for industrial enterprise?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is the balance between enterprise and fairness that is essential for the future of the United Kingdom. It is by matching enterprise to fairness that the Government have created 1.1 million jobs. We have seen youth unemployment fall by half. Long-term unemployment has fallen by more than half. We have more women in work than ever before, with 70 per cent. working. At the same time, unemployment is falling in every region. Unfortunately, if we were to return to a Conservative Government, they would abolish the new deal and return to the policies of stop-go and boom-bust. Unemployment would again rise, as happened under the Conservatives.

Fuel Taxation

2. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What recent representations he has received from families on the level of taxation of petrol. [135949]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Government have received representations from many different organisations and groups as well as many letters from members of the public.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Will the Minister confirm that in the past two and a half years the Chancellor has increased the tax on petrol by more than a third? Is not yesterday's announcement an admission that he has been unfairly and grossly taxing motorists? Why was it that until yesterday Ministers were saying that any reduction in fuel taxes would put in jeopardy public spending and the economy?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman would do well to recall that the biggest increase in fuel duty, both in absolute terms and in percentage terms, happened under the Conservatives. Whereas they imposed the fuel duty escalator, we have removed it. Moreover, the measures announced and being consulted on in yesterday's PBR bring great help to those who have been most under pressure through high oil prices. We should hear from the Conservative party whether it will start supporting what we have done.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): May I inform my right hon. Friend of representations that I received from families living near the Stanlow oil refinery, who were afraid as a result of the risk posed to them by the physical blockade? May I also inform him of representations that I received from constituents of mine who manufacture cars, who said how pleased they were by the Budget provisions that reduce the cost of car ownership while maintaining sound environmental principles? Keep it up!

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and his help during the difficult situation at Stanlow. He and his constituents are right—yesterday's measures are a balanced response to public opinion and to the situation that we faced. They prove that the Government listen, and that we listen to all the people of this country—to the ordinary families who were not protesting and to those who were blockading oil refineries and conducting their protest in other ways. By listening, we have been able to introduce an affordable package that is consistent with financial discipline and sound public finances. It will bring help to motorists, help to hauliers and help to farmers in ways which are consistent with our environmental principles and which keep the economy on course for stable and sustainable growth.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Given that rural garages in Wales are closing down at an alarming rate and that no low-sulphur petrol is available there, how will the low-sulphur package help rural Wales?

Mr. Smith: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says on behalf of his constituents, but low-sulphur petrol is widely available throughout the country. I did check, and during the first two weeks of October, no less than 30 per cent. of petrol sold was low sulphur. The whole point of the duty differential that we are introducing is to give people an incentive to switch to that petrol, and for that effort to be accompanied by proper branding, marketing and

promotion by oil companies. On that basis, we are satisfied that such petrol will be available everywhere next year, including, of course, rural Wales.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Following on from that point, can we ensure that supplies will reach garages in rural areas throughout the rest of the country, which are of concern to all hon. Members, and that we shall all reap the benefit of yesterday's welcome news?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed, and we are working with the oil companies precisely to that end. That effort will be reinforced by the duty differential, on which we are consulting.

Taxation

5. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What estimate he has made of the extra tax payable since May 1997 as a result of his Budget measures. [135952]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The figures are set out in successive Budget reports, which are, of course, available in the Library of the House.

Mrs. Lait: I assume that the Chief Secretary is aware that yesterday's PBR indicated that the tax burden has increased even this year, since the figures were announced in the Budget. I assume that he is also aware that stealth taxes have been increased by the higher rate in the national insurance threshold that was announced yesterday. On which page of the Labour party's election manifesto can we find the promise to increase taxes by £26 billion a year?

Mr. Smith: Our manifesto promise was about fair taxation and sound management of the economy. We promised that we would not put up the higher or basic rates of tax, and we did not do so—in fact, we cut the basic rate of tax. We said that when it was prudent to do so, we would introduce a 10p starting rate of tax, and we introduced that rate. We said that we wanted competitive and fair corporate taxation, and we have cut corporate taxes to the lowest level among our European competitors. When Conservative Members were in government, they imposed VAT on fuel as part of their 22 tax rises—their broken promises. We cut VAT on fuel to its lowest possible level. That shows how the Labour party keeps its promises and the Conservatives break theirs.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the only people paying less tax in 1997 than in 1979 were those earning more than £64,000 a year? Do not people want fair taxation? Is it not the case that the Labour party is delivering fair taxation and the Conservative party is opposing it?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was indeed the £64,000 question under the Conservative Government, with their record of broken promises and economic instability. We will take no lectures from the Tories on taxation or management of the economy, given that they not only broke all their promises, but led us into boom and bust. Now we hear from the shadow Chancellor that he has no rules for stability in the economy and no inflation target. All he has are tax promises that he cannot fund and spending cuts that he cannot name. Those are the politics and economics that previously led us to boom and bust. Given the chance again, that is precisely what the Conservatives would do.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): After yesterday's acrobatics, will the Minister focus on the simple fact that, hidden away in yesterday's upward revisions of the tax take, is the fact that living standards are falling? Tax receipts—*[Interruption.]* Well may hon. Members on the Government Benches laugh. Tax receipts are rising by 6.4 per cent. per annum, versus a 2 per cent. increase in earnings. In simple terms, that means that the tax paid by the average family is increasing faster than the rise in average earnings.

Mr. Smith: In the shadow Chancellor's extraordinarily feeble response to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's statement yesterday, he said that real disposable incomes had not been growing. He is wrong. Each and every year the Government have been in office, real disposable incomes have been increasing. Moreover, people have the benefit of £1,000 on average, thanks to the lower mortgage interest payments that they are making, because we have kept interest rates down, whereas the Conservatives had them high.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Is it not the case that as well as working to reduce the share of tax in national income, we are bringing down the share of debt in national income? Is it not right that, as well as reminding the British people of the 22 tax rises under the Tories, we should remind them of the massive and uncontrollable levels of public debt? Were not those levels of public debt a massive monument to Tory mismanagement of our economy? Were it not for Labour, levels of debt would remain high.

Mr. Smith: Indeed. Debt doubled under the Conservatives. They left a millstone of debt for the country and for the Government when we came in, with their unsustainable £28 billion-worth of borrowing. The level of debt was 44 per cent. of gross domestic product when we came in. We have reduced that to 33 per cent. and, as the pre-Budget report shows, we are on course to get it down to 30 per cent. and keep it there, consistent with firm and disciplined fiscal rules, which we are applying and which the shadow Chancellor does not have. Because we have reduced the debt, are responsible with the public finances and have strong and sound public finances, interest rates are lower, and individuals with mortgages, as well as businesses, see the consequent benefit.

Single Currency

6. **Mr. Christopher Gill** (Ludlow): What estimate he has made of when the UK will join the single currency. [135953]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The determining factor underpinning any Government decision to join the single currency is

whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. The Treasury will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Mr. Gill: Is the Chancellor prepared to allow a further depreciation of sterling against the United States dollar, to the point at which the supposed overvaluation of the pound against the euro is eliminated? In view of the brevity of the question, will he simply answer yes or no?

Mr. Brown: I do not have an exchange rate target, which is what the hon. Gentleman's question implies. I thought that the Conservative party had learned the lessons of the 1980s, when they took us into the exchange rate mechanism at the wrong exchange rate and caused enormous problems. We will make a decision on the single currency based on five economic tests, but we will not return to the situation to which the Conservatives brought us by running a dual inflation and exchange rate target. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would be sensible enough to realise that that is not the way forward.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): While the rate of sterling is high, in some industries, such as the steel industry, it is also true that exports are growing by 8 per cent., as my right hon. Friend said yesterday. He did not labour that figure. Why are Britain's exports increasing on that scale at a time of high sterling?

Mr. Brown: Despite the difficulties with the exchange rate—I have always understood the resultant problems that many manufacturers face—manufacturing industry is responding and growing. It will grow next year. Exports have increased this year by 5 or 6 per cent., and they will grow by 6, 7 or 8 per cent. next year. Those are our projections based on the information that we hold. That is another example of how, despite the difficulties of the exchange rate, we are creating the stability in the economy that is necessary for investment and growth.

The contrast with the previous Government is all too clear to businesses. Under the Conservatives, with interest rates at an average of 11 per cent., interest rate costs would have been nearly £2 billion higher for business at this stage. Under Labour, average interest rates are 6 per cent.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Will the Chancellor confirm that, in anticipation of Britain joining the single European currency, the Treasury and the Bank of England have since 1 January 1999 bought large amounts of euros? It has been estimated that the operation losses so far amount to approximately £2,000 million, or treble the loss on the dome. Is the Chancellor in a position to tell us the official Government estimate of the losses on those euro operations?

Mr. Brown: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is so out of date because we publish the figures for the interventions in the exchange rate market and he can consult them. His figure is wrong. He should compare our sensible approach to such matters with the huge losses that the Conservative Government incurred when we had to leave the exchange rate mechanism and the shadow Chancellor was in the Treasury.

Sir Peter Tapsell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. After questions. I call Mr. David Taylor.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Despite the rampant and terminal europhobia that habitually grips the Conservative Benches, does not my right hon. Friend agree that the British economy diverges dramatically from the eurozone and that, without convergence, a common language, interstate transfers and mobility of labour, the prospect of joining the euro in the next decade is thankfully remote?

Mr. Brown: We have set out five economic tests, which will be assessed early in the next Parliament. However, the difference between me and the Conservative party is that I see the benefits in principle of joining the single currency, whereas Conservative Members are divided about whether they are against it in principle or simply against it in principle for one Parliament.

On 1 May 1999, the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said that a single currency would mean giving up the government of the UK. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] No British Government can give up the government of the United Kingdom. That is impossible. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is a Front-Bench spokesman, agrees with the shadow Chancellor. When the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea was asked the same question on "Breakfast with Frost" on 27 February, he said that he would not say that he was a never man. What sort of position does the Conservative Front Bench take?

Fuel Taxation

7. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): What was the yield to the Treasury of tax on petroleum in 1997–98; and what is the anticipated yield for this financial year. [135955]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): Fuel duty receipts are forecast in the pre-Budget report 2000 to be £23.2 billion this financial year. That compares with £19.5 billion in 1997–98.

Mr. Baldry: Will the Chief Secretary confirm that, notwithstanding what was said yesterday, Britain will still have the highest fuel duties and the highest petrol prices in Europe? Given that we will have different rates of duty on diesel, low-sulphur diesel, leaded petrol, unleaded petrol and low-sulphur petrol, would it not be in the interests of consumer transparency to have the different rates of tax take per litre clearly displayed at the petrol pump so that everyone knew the exact amount of tax they were paying the Government for the fuel that they use?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman was a member of the Government who were responsible for a bigger increase—in absolute and percentage terms—in fuel duties, to which I have already referred. The truth of the matter is that, through the introduction of the fuel duty escalator, the previous Government were responsible for propelling prices towards the very level about which the hon. Gentleman now complains. We took away the fuel duty escalator and, moreover, in the measures that we

announced yesterday to freeze duties from next year's Budget and to consult on the cut in duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol of 2p a litre—and a further cut of 3p on ultra-low sulphur diesel—we are bringing forward measures that address the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is my right hon. Friend aware how expensive it is to motor on the continent? The Conservative lot are so anti-European that they should take their cars and pay the motorway tolls in France and Spain. If they are in business, they should pay the social security costs. The plain fact is that running a business and driving a car are cheaper in this country than in most European countries. Will my hon. Friend look at the idea of varying taxes as and when that is needed? We need to get away from the one size fits all fuel duty and road licence charges, which were continually going up under the Tories. The measures that were introduced yesterday are a start, but we must continue to be flexible on fuel duty and road licence charges to help rural motorists, family motorists and hauliers.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is quite right. Moreover, the general level of taxation is considerably higher for our European neighbours than it is here. One must also assess and take account of the overall burden of taxation and its effect on families and businesses. My hon. Friend is right about the level of tolls that are paid by many of our European neighbours and about the benefits that will result from the year-by-year assessment that the Chancellor announced in place of the automatic fuel duty escalator for which the Conservatives were responsible.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Why have productivity rates collapsed in this country from about 2.5 per cent. at the beginning of the 1990s to 1.5 per cent. since the Government took over? Does that have something to do with rising taxes, especially fuel taxes?

Mr. Smith: That question is perhaps a little remote from the question of fuel duty, but I shall answer it anyway. As the Chancellor pointed out in his statement yesterday, crucial to a platform for improving productivity are economic stability—which we are delivering—lower interest rates than those under the Conservatives, which we are also delivering, and a high level of investment in manufacturing and industry, which is equivalent to more than 14 per cent. of GDP business investment and which continues to grow. Coupled with the measures that we introduced on skills and on promoting regeneration in some of our most deprived areas, as well as further measures including the £1 billion package spelled out in the pre-Budget report yesterday, that will help us to build on the gains that we have already made and continue to promote competitiveness and generate productivity as we all want to do.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will my right hon. Friend look at fuel taxation not only in 1997, but right the way back to 1987? Is he aware that in the 13-year period since 1987, the increase in the cost of running a car in this country has been only 5.6 per cent., which is less than 0.5 per cent. a year in real terms? Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, in all the measures that he and his colleagues in the Treasury are introducing, they will do nothing to jeopardise the Government's environmental commitments on running cars, even though the cost of running a car has been relatively cheap in that 13-year period?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon Friend. He is right, as the total cost of motoring has barely increased in the period that he described. The reason for that is technical advance in design and manufacture in the motor industry. The measures on which we are consulting in the pre-Budget report, notably in relation to ultra-low sulphur petrol, will help to stimulate further developments, given the benefits of that petrol's engine efficiency and the new generation of engines that will subsequently come on to the market. We have acted consistently, having regard to the needs of motorists and listening to public opinion. We have also acted consistently on our environmental principles, which are advanced by each of the measures that we announced yesterday.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): As the Chief Secretary was not keen to answer the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), would he give the House a categorical answer to a simple question about petroleum revenue tax? When Ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, met representatives of the oil industry, did they or any other Minister give any explicit or implicit assurance to the oil companies that PRT would not be raised?

Mr. Smith: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor met the oil companies on Tuesday, and the matter was never discussed.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): May I raise with the Chief Secretary a question that I asked yesterday on a matter of serious concern in my part of the world? The petrol industry in Northern Ireland has suffered most from the fuel crisis. A litre of petrol costs 85p on our side of the border, whereas it costs 60p a litre on the other side, so the petrol industry in Northern Ireland is being totally wiped out. Would the right hon. Gentleman seriously study the problem to see what he can do to help?

Mr. Smith: As ever, I listened attentively to the hon. Gentleman. The Government perpetually keep the situation closely under review, specifically to address the abuses to which he refers and the links with paramilitary activity. Resources for tackling smuggling have been substantially increased, and we are confident that that will have an effect on the situation. We shall, of course, maintain close liaison through the Northern Ireland Office with the devolved Administration to ensure that further steps are taken whenever possible.

Business Taxation

8. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): What representations he has received from the business community on business taxation in advance of his pre-Budget report. [135956]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): We have received a number of representations on a variety of business tax topics, including representations from the Confederation of British Industry, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The Chief Secretary has just told us that on Tuesday the Government gave no assurances to the oil industry on petroleum revenue tax. In the past three to four months, has the Financial Secretary or any other member of the Treasury team given any assurances to the oil industry about the level of petroleum revenue tax? If so, could he share with the House what those assurances were?

Mr. Timms: No such assurances were given.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Would my hon. Friend give particular consideration to businesses in rural areas such as Scarborough and Whitby, which have had many difficulties in recent years? Looking forward to the forthcoming rural White Paper, would he explain to the House what help may be available to areas that are in need of special assistance at this time?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend will be aware of the favourable business reaction to the announcements that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made yesterday about a more than £2 billion reduction in transport taxes and the package to make VAT easier to administer for small businesses. Both those measures will be welcome to businesses, particularly to small firms in my hon. Friend's constituency. He is right that the rural White Paper will also make important announcements. We are concerned to ensure that businesses in rural areas have the benefits of a competitive economy, building on the stability that we have achieved in the past three years.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Is the Minister concerned that yesterday's Treasury estimates show that business investment is slowing dramatically, from a 7.5 per cent. growth rate last year to 1.75 per cent. this year and 1.5 per cent. next year? How does the Minister explain this lamentable business investment performance? Is it to do with the increase in business taxation or the Government's failed exchange rate policy?

Mr. Timms: We have a good record on investment in the economy. In the past, instability was a major cause of problems with investment, but the new stability that has been secured in the past three years is leading to a substantial improvement. Business investment reached record levels, at 14.5 per cent. of gross domestic product, last year. Investment as a proportion of GDP is now higher in the United Kingdom than in the United States. The UK receives 40 per cent. of all US and Japanese investment in the European Union. The picture on investment is actually very good.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Does my hon. Friend agree that present planned investment in transport infrastructure can make a major contribution to increasing productivity in the economy? That was suggested this week by the Director-General of the CBI, who dismissed the transport infrastructure spending plans of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo).

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Sustained public investment not only in transport but in education and science is vital if we are to build on the success achieved over the last three years. We now have a stable platform, but we need investment in infrastructure—and, as my hon. Friend says, our spending plans will deliver that.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Should we not set what the Minister says, and what is in the pre-Budget report, against the fact that the Government have imposed an additional £10 billion worth of tax and regulation on business? Should we not also set what the Minister and the pre-Budget report say about tax changes against what the director general of the Institute of Directors—one of the bodies cited by the Minister—has said about what happened yesterday? He said:

> One day we may see a simplification of tax, but it wasn't today.

Now that the Chancellor has been forced to eat humble pie as a result of his treatment of motorists and pensioners, is it not time the Government began to address some of the problems that they have created for business? Those problems are reflected in the fact that our growth rates are slipping behind, in productivity difficulties, and in the fall in our share of world exports.

Mr. Timms: It is hard to know where to begin in responding to all those erroneous points. As far as I recall, the hon. Gentleman supported the 22 tax increases introduced by the previous Government. He asked about simplification of taxes. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor made an important announcement yesterday about easing the burden on small businesses with regard to the administration of VAT, which has been widely welcomed. The Federation of Small Businesses said yesterday that the measures would

> reduce tax headaches for millions of small enterprises and encourage them to grow.

I would have expected the hon. Gentleman to welcome that.

We have cut the main rate of corporation tax from 33 per cent. to 30 per cent., and the corporation tax bill for small businesses benefiting from the lower rate has fallen by about 25 per cent. I would have expected the hon. Gentleman to welcome that as well.

Illicitly Obtained Funds

10. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will review the regulations governing the access available to foreign Governments and overseas law enforcement agencies to information about, and retrieval of, funds illicitly obtained abroad which are deposited or invested in United Kingdom financial institutions and companies. [135958]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue.

Well established provisions are already in place to enable foreign Governments and law enforcement agencies to access information, and also to retrieve the proceeds of crime that enter the UK financial system. However, we continue to keep such matters under review. The Government are committed, when parliamentary time permits, to tabling legislation to implement many of the issues raised by the recent performance and innovation unit report "Recovering the Proceeds of Crime", published this June.

Mr. Mackinlay: What the Minister says seems to ignore extensive press reports that show the frustration and irritation of the Nigerian Government, who are trying to trace and relocate moneys laundered and deposited in London by the former dictator Sani Abacha. Is it not clear that there is a problem in the application of the rules that do exist, and does not the specific case of Sani Abacha demonstrate that there is a deficiency in our rules and regulations?

We go round the world dishing out views about transparency and the need to resist money laundering. Should we not put our own house in order?

Miss Johnson: The financial action task force has commended the UK's system, stating that

the United Kingdom anti-money laundering system is an impressive and comprehensive one, which has been subject to consistent review and improvement, which meets the FATF forty Recommendations and indeed in many areas goes beyond them . . . The active system of supervision, co-operation, education and training in the financial sector are complemented by strong and effective penal legislation.

Notwithstanding that, I understand the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. It is difficult for me to comment on investigations when we have received requests for co-operation, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 makes more provision for us to deal with such issues. It makes financial crime objectives statutory, and gives the Financial Services Authority a greater enforcement role. It also gives the FSA specific rule-making powers with regard to money laundering.

As I said, when parliamentary time permits, the Government wish to pursue the policy set out in the PIU report, which looks at further reform of the money laundering laws, improved arrangements for the seizure of suspect property, including cash, a new national confiscation agency, and enhanced international co-operation.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Given all the rules and regulations that the United Kingdom financial services industry has to keep to, can the Minister confirm that there is a level playing field for offshore so-called tax havens? People in those areas are concerned because they believe that money laundering often happens in New York or London, yet they get the blame for it, and people are trying to impose different rules on them, which do not apply to London.

Miss Johnson: We have made it clear in all the international settings in which such matters are discussed that it is crucial that everybody be on the same level playing field, that we should adopt the rules we advocate, that transparency and the exchange of information are very important, and that we must apply to ourselves the same rules that we wish others to apply to themselves. That is what we have argued in all the international arenas in which such topics crop up, and I believe that we have made good progress on all those points.

Pre-Budget Report

11. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): What representations he has so far received on his pre-Budget report. [135959]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The pre-Budget consultation will take place in every region of the country. Ministers will visit every region and listen to the representations that are made, including those that come early from my hon. Friend.

Dr. Palmer: I am grateful to the Chancellor for that answer. As he is aware, I have conducted a survey among my constituents, and the great majority of the respondents called for a reduction in vehicle excise duty, and for assistance for disabled drivers. They will be very pleased with the response, but will my right hon. Friend review whether disabled drivers can be given additional assistance in next year's Budget, because vehicle excise duty is already zero rated for them?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because not everyone is rushing to respond, as he is. We will look at the measure that he suggests for disabled drivers as part of our pre-Budget consultation. I agree with the point that his constituents made to me through the survey that he sent me: the reduction in vehicle excise duty for cars was an advantage that people welcomed, and given that we have extended a £55 reduction to 8 million cars, I believe that he will receive even greater support from his constituents both now and at the next election.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Chancellor has received representations from the Liberal Democrats making clear our proposals to increase pensions substantially beyond the amount that he announced yesterday, and the Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen have made their policy clear—they wish to abolish the Christmas bonus, the winter fuel allowance, and even the age addition and free television licences. Can the Chancellor confirm that, as of yesterday, the Government's policy is to have interim real-terms increases in the pension for the two years in which the general election may fall, but thereafter to return to the mean-minded policy of limiting any increase to the inflation rate, which delivered a 75p increase this year?

Mr. Brown: At the general election, the Liberal Democrats stood on the following policy: first, pensions should be raised in line with inflation, not earnings; secondly, tax and benefits should be reformed to get more money to the people who needed it most. However, when it became convenient for their spokesman on Treasury matters to do so, he decided that he would reverse that policy and urge that pensions be raised for ever in line with earnings.

Mr. Taylor: That is not our policy.

Mr. Brown: Ah, the hon. Gentleman's policy is not to raise pensions in line with earnings. The Liberal

Democrats stood at the election on a policy to raise pensions in line with inflation. They stood yesterday on a policy to raise them in line with earnings. Tomorrow they will go back to raising them in line with inflation. I suggest that he goes back to the drawing board.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I congratulate the Chancellor on his fuel duty package yesterday, which addresses the problems of hauliers, farmers and the general motorist, but does he accept that a rural dimension has still not been addressed? I understand that the Treasury considered reducing the duty to £45 for rural postcodes, but that that was dropped. There may be other options, such as using the community council precept, or using post offices to administer a rural transport rebate based on the electoral register, because of the lack of public transport in rural areas. Will the Chancellor stay in listening mode on the particular problems of rural areas?

Mr. Brown: I know that my hon. Friend speaks up for his constituents, many of whom live in rural areas. Next week the Deputy Prime Minister will publish our rural White Paper, and my hon. Friend knows that the rural transport fund has been increased twice under the Government to help with transport in rural areas. He will also agree that the proposal to extend the licence fee concession to cars of 1,500 cc, providing a licence fee that is £55 lower, will give people in rural areas greater choice—they can take up that lower licence fee and therefore receive £55 back. The £55 reduction for cars between 1,200 cc and 1,500 cc starts today. It will be paid in July, but it will be retrospective.

Industrial Competitiveness

12. **Mr. William Cash** (Stone): If he will make a statement on the impact of his economic policy on the competitiveness of UK industry. [135960]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): Economic stability is a sound base for competitiveness. That is why the Government have cut public borrowing, ensured that inflation is low and stable, and achieved the lowest long-term interest rates for more than 30 years. We have introduced structural reforms to help to boost business productivity, and policies to encourage industry to invest for the long term in the skills and infrastructure that it requires to succeed.

Mr. Cash: Does the Minister accept that one of the greatest disincentives to competitiveness is regulation and over-regulation? What are the Government doing to reduce the burden of regulations on British industry, on farming and the agricultural industries, and on many others? What would be the position if, in line with the economic policy of the Chancellor and the Prime Minister on going into economic and monetary union, we went into the exchange rate mechanism? What effect would that have on competitiveness in the UK?

Mr. Timms: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are not planning to enter the exchange rate mechanism, and that the United Kingdom has consistently scored highly in various competitiveness surveys. In the World Economic Forum assessment of business perceptions of corporate tax systems, the UK's is ranked the best in the world.

We are aware of concerns about regulation. We have introduced the better regulation task force and the Small Business Service. We are working to challenge excessive and complex regulations, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced yesterday an important package to reduce the burden of VAT administration and to improve cash flow for small firms—precisely the sort of firms that the hon. Gentleman asks about. Therefore, we are making the changes that are needed to help.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): In the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement yesterday he pointed out that the Exchequer had made Britain the best place in the world for multinationals to locate. When it comes to multinational companies investing in this country, will the Chancellor ensure that action is taken to see that that is not done in ways that destroy existing United Kingdom companies, especially those involved in the export trade? That is what has happened with St. Gobain investment and the takeover of Biwater in Clay Cross, where it is possible that 700 jobs might soon be lost and the export trade will be considerably damaged. It would be good if the Treasury would discuss that with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to ensure that some strong action is taken under existing regulations.

Mr. Timms: I am not familiar with the case to which my hon. Friend refers. We welcome investment into the UK, and the high levels of inward investment that we have seen in recent years. We want the United Kingdom to be the best place in the world for multinationals to be based, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made some important announcements yesterday about corporate taxation in that respect, which have been warmly welcomed. If my hon. Friend wants to drop me a note about the case that he mentioned, I shall be happy to take it up with the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Yesterday, the Chancellor said:

> We are tackling the productivity gap.—[*Official Report*, 8 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 332.]

As productivity performance since May 1997 has been so disappointing, could the Financial Secretary enlarge on those six words?

Mr. Timms: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to an informative graph in the pre-Budget report published yesterday. It shows that there has been good progress on productivity in the past couple of years, particularly in manufacturing. However, we are still not matching the United States—there is still a 40 per cent. productivity gap. There is a great deal more to be done, and that is why the Chancellor's announcements yesterday were so important. Stability in the economy is vital, as is sustained public investment in transport and education. Those things would be drastically and savagely cut under the spending plans of the Conservative party.

Private Finance Initiative Projects

14. **Dr. Lynne Jones** (Birmingham, Selly Oak): If he will make it his policy to ensure that the public sector comparator for PFI projects *(a)* contains a statement of the risks which have been quantified and included in it and *(b)* includes an independent element in its construction and in the evaluation process. [135962]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The public sector comparator is intended to provide an objective benchmark to test value for money, and contains a quantified statement of risk. In our response to the Treasury Select Committee's fifth special report, we have undertaken to consider how to improve further the clarity of the treatment of risks and benefits in the construction of the public sector comparator and the assessment of value for money.

Dr. Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, but I would have hoped for more detail by now. Does he agree that unless the construction of the public sector comparator is seen to be fair and transparent, doubts will remain about the value for money in private finance? Does he agree that with so much Government debt now being repaid, if public procurement is shown to be the better buy, there should be no barrier to a project, such as the new hospital in south Birmingham, going ahead as a result of Treasury-imposed constraints on the availability of public capital?

Mr. Smith: Yes, and further details are available in the Treasury task force technical note No. 5 on how to construct the public sector comparator. I agree with my hon. Friend that transparency is important. I can reassure her that, as the Government have made consistently clear, we will approve PFI projects only if it is demonstrated in a full business case that the PFI option offers better value for money to the NHS and the taxpayer when compared with a publicly funded alternative. I think that that is the assurance my hon. Friend was seeking.

Taxation (Self-Assessment)

15. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the arrangements for self-assessment of personal income tax for the 1999–2000 tax year. [135963]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hooray.

Dawn Primarolo: This is just to prove that I am here—the opportunity to answer is always the luck of the draw.

I am confident that the arrangements for self-assessment for the tax year 1999–2000 are as robust and effective as they have been for the previous three years. A total of 4,400,000 tax returns had been received by 30 September this year, compared with 4,500,000 at the same point last year, showing that self-assessment is on course.

Mr. Heath: Will the right hon. Lady confirm that the software known as "TaxSaver 2000 Lite Version 1" proved to be light in one particular respect—it did not work? How did that happen? How much did the software cost? What recompense is available to those who wasted their time and energy in trying to make it work? Moreover, if we want tax simplification, why have most of those who tried to fill in self-assessment forms this year found them more confusing and difficult to fill in than ever before?

Dawn Primarolo: It is true that some difficulties were experienced with internet filing. However, the software is now working, and is increasingly being used by taxpayers. The whole self-assessment process is continually under review. There is now, for example, only one set of instructions, rather than four, on how to fill in self-assessment forms. A recently completed review by the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Inland Revenue will soon be published, and I am sure that it will make fascinating reading for every hon. Member.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give the business for the forthcoming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [20th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on London Underground public private partnership followed by a debate on the millennium dome. Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

Motion on the Energy Act 1976 (Reserve Powers) Order 2000.

TUESDAY 14 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER—Supplemental motion relating to the Transport Bill.

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Transport Bill

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Insolvency Bill *[Lords]*.

FRIDAY 17 NOVEMBER—There will be a debate on embryology on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Motions relating to Westminster Hall and Thursday sittings.

THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER—There will be a debate on European affairs on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for her statement. She will be aware from the just-completed Treasury questions that many hon. Members are very anxious to have much more information on certain aspects of the pre-Budget statement made yesterday by the Chancellor, particularly in relation to ultra-low sulphur petrol. Will she ask, please, whether a Treasury Minister—preferably the Chancellor—could find time for a proper statement and debate on that specific aspect of the statement?

Last night, in television interviews with Treasury Ministers, it was very clear that the Government were ill-prepared to answer questions on the availability of ultra-low sulphur petrol, and on whether the new discounts will be treated in the same way as current ones—particularly the 1p discount that is being retained by the oil companies. There has also been a discount on ultra-low sulphur diesel which has not been passed on to hauliers. The question being asked in Treasury questions today was: what precise arrangements are there to ensure that the discounts will benefit consumers and hauliers? Were those arrangements discussed in September at No. 10 Downing street when the Prime Minister met the oil companies? It is a very important matter that merits more of the House's time, so that Opposition Members can question Treasury Ministers on it.

On 26 October, I asked the right hon. Lady whether we could expect the Prime Minister to make a statement to the House on the conclusion of the Biarritz summit. She said that she expected that there would be a statement. However, the summit was held on 13 and 14 October, but a statement has not yet been timetabled. It is very important that the House should discuss the summit, not least because—as we have learned in the media—key discussions were held on the charter of fundamental rights, which will feature in the Nice treaty, among other things. We feel that it is incumbent on the Prime Minister not to break the habit of reporting to the House on summits. I hope that the right hon. Lady will convey urgently to the Prime Minister the fact that the House deserves a statement.

The right hon. Lady has just announced to the House that on Friday 17 November there will be a debate on embryology. I assume that it will include the Government's response to the Donaldson report. I hope that she will identify for us how the proposals in that report—if the Government accept them—will be put into legislation. I understand that there would need to be an amendment to the Embryology Act 1990, presumably in secondary legislation. The right hon. Lady will be aware of the strength of feeling on both sides of the debate, and right hon. and hon. Members—not just those who serve on the relevant Committee—will want to be assured that they will have the right to vote on the matter, particularly in respect of the findings of the Donaldson committee.

Mrs. Beckett: First, the hon. Lady asked for information about the availability of ultra-low sulphur fuel in the aftermath of the pre-Budget report. Off the cuff, I would have thought that it was a matter for Ministers at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions rather than for Treasury Ministers, as we are talking here about the availability of supplies rather than the price that is charged for them, but no doubt there will be a variety of forums in which the issues can be explored. The hon. Lady will not have forgotten that what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced yesterday are proposals for consultation. She asked about aspects of the proposals that no doubt will be explored in that consultation.

If I understood her correctly, the hon. Lady asked the Treasury to account for whether or not oil companies pass on any reductions in the price which might flow from the Chancellor's decisions. That is certainly a very interesting question. I am not entirely sure that anybody has ever said that the Government or the Treasury can take responsibility for that. We can all make our views known and heard, but the public should clearly be aware that if potential price cuts resulting from Government decisions are not passed on, they should direct their strictures to others than the Government.

The hon. Lady then, quite correctly, referred to our previous exchange on the Biarritz discussions. I am glad that she did so because she has reminded me that on this matter I definitely owe the House an apology. She asked me to confirm that the Prime Minister would maintain the previous pattern of statements on these matters, and of course he will, as he always has. The hon. Lady will know that the pattern is to make a statement after formal Councils. There has never been a pattern for the present Prime Minister or any other coming to the House to make a statement after an informal Council, such as the one at

Biarritz. I owe the hon. Lady and the House an apology, as when she asked about the Biarritz Council it had gone out of my mind that it was an informal discussion and the formal Council will take place at Nice. So the proper reporting conventions will indeed be observed, but they do not apply to the discussions at Biarritz.

The hon. Lady then asked about the Government's response to the Donaldson report. Again, I am grateful to her for giving me the opportunity to make the issue entirely clear, particularly because she asked me for an assurance that hon. Members would be able to discuss the important issue of embryology and have an opportunity to vote on any proposals that are made. Let me at once stress to the hon. Lady and to the House that we envisage that debate as a preliminary stage in those discussions. There is no suggestion that the Government will put forward their response during the debate on Friday 17 November. We regard these as profound and serious matters which should be thoroughly aired, not least in the House, without a commitment being made or framework being set. Of course, when orders might be made and the content of those orders is for discussion and can be looked at in the long term. The Government fully recognise that there is a need for a thorough, on-going debate and examination of these delicate issues, and we see the forthcoming debate as the opening discussion and nowhere near its closing stages.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Will my right hon. Friend consider having a debate to consider the hidden costs of road transport, such as the cost of treating children with asthma, the cost of improving flood defences and the cost to local authorities and the Government of helping flood victims, such as my constituents at Stockbridge last week and others throughout the country?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. She will know that a report was published recently by Transport 2000, I think, or some such body, drawing attention to the full costs of road use and the need to be as environmentally sound as we can. She will also have noted the various measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor yesterday, such as those to encourage the provision of new and more environmentally effective road haulage, which were all designed to lead to the same end. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on these matters in the near future, but I suspect that she may find an opportunity to raise them in the debates that will undoubtedly flow from the proposals advanced by my right hon. Friend yesterday.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Leader of the House investigate urgently and report back to the House next week on the extent of the pre-briefing by the Chancellor's staff before his pre-Budget statement yesterday? It appears that certain journalists had details of what was to be announced 72 hours ahead of the statement, whereas the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokesmen saw the details only seven minutes before it was delivered. That is a reflection on the relative importance that the Government attach to the House and to the media.

Will the Leader of the House please listen carefully to the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) on the real confusion about the so-called "green fuels"? This has all the aspect of a quick idea that has not been properly thought through. If it is to be an important part of Government policy, surely we should have some more details.

May I suggest a couple of candidates for the two empty spaces in our diary for the week after next, on Tuesday 21 and Wednesday 22 November? I wonder whether the Leader of the House has seen the article in *The Times* today by the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), headed "How many more jobs must be lost while we stay out of the euro?", in which he says:

> Ten years ago Geoffrey Howe stood in the House of Commons and issued a stark warning that those who feared Europe and economic and monetary union would lead Britain into isolation and "scrambling to join the club later, after the rules have been set and after the power has been distributed by others to our disadvantage. That would be the worst possible outcome."

May I suggest a debate on five sectors of British industry that have been badly affected: manufacturing; export industries; the holiday industry—devastated this summer by the discrepancy between the value of the pound and the euro; the fishing industry; and farming, which has been the worst affected of all?

Finally, do the Government believe that the electoral system in the United States is preferable to our own?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman asked me to investigate and report back, but it is not entirely clear to me whether he has seen a specific report suggesting pre-briefing, or whether he is merely drawing on some of the material that appeared in the press. It is certainly within my memory, and I am sure within his, that for many years, under the previous Government, there was a series of what some would call leaks and what we regarded as trailers—balloons sent up to test the reaction and see whether the policies were popular or unpopular. That has been, I fear, a characteristic of these discussions.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that many journalists make all kinds of prognostications and, even when they turn out to be completely wrong, they are never willing to admit that any of it was guesswork. They always assure us that it was based on the soundest information. During my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's statement, I observed, and I saw many of my hon. Friends observing, how much of it was different from, and additional to, what had been pre-reported. That came through very clearly.

On green fuels, I repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), that these are proposals for consultation. This is the pre-Budget report, and when we come to the Budget itself, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will report back to the House the outcome of that consultation. I am sure that all the issues about the use of more environmentally friendly petrol will be explored in the consultation period.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's reference to our lack of detailed announcements for provisional business. He called them empty spaces, but he will know as well as I that, at this stage in the Session, such a description is pretty inaccurate. We confidently expect that any spaces will be filled with material returning from another place.

The Gentleman is right to identify the interest in the remarks by the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), and in the case that he makes. I am not sure whether the article makes clear how little the decision about whether to advocate entry into the euro was

[Mrs. Beckett]

anticipated by the previous Government, but the hon. Gentleman may recall that they confidently asserted that the euro would not be launched—certainly not in January 1999. As a result, even the most basic preparations had not been made, which was certainly to Britain's disadvantage. However, the hon. Gentleman will have noted that there is to be a debate on European affairs on 23 November. I feel confident that he, or someone else, will manage to raise the matter then.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me to comment on the outcome of the American election, whatever it might be. I do not wish to intrude on private grief, but the situation was summed up admirably by the present President, who said that the people had spoken, but that it would take a while to determine what they had said.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Could my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the mis-selling of endowment mortgages by the financial services industry? I declare an interest in that I have one of those mortgages, but Members of Parliament are more fortunate than many of our constituents who cannot afford to increase payments. Those people are the victims of a real rip-off by an industry that was largely unregulated by the previous Government. Should we not have time to debate the matter?

Mrs. Beckett: I, and I am sure many other hon. Members, have a great deal of sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. I can assure her that she is not alone in having taken advice that she now wishes she had not taken.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Did you?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) is also right to say that Members of Parliament are perhaps placed more fortunately than many other people when it comes to dealing with the consequences of taking such advice. Although time is at such a premium during this part of the year that I fear I cannot undertake to find space for a debate on the matter in the near future, I recommend to my hon. Friend the vastly increased opportunities for such a debate that the Government have provided in Westminster Hall.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): In our debate on 13 July on strengthening Parliament, the Prime Minister promised a free vote on the report from the Select Committee on Liaison entitled "Shifting the Balance". That report is the welcome subject of today's debate on a motion for the Adjournment of the House, but can the right hon. Lady promise that there will be an opportunity to have substantive votes on specific resolutions?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman will be well aware that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have always said that any votes on House matters are always free votes. He will also know—because, as shadow Leader of the House, he raised the matter often at business questions—that the motion on which such a report is debated is always left in the balance. I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, but that is not how we will discuss the matter today.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate as soon as possible on Mr. Justice Coleman's report published yesterday into the reopened inquiry into the sinking of the MV Derbyshire? The report exonerated those who died from any blame, but it also contained some worrying findings about safety standards at sea. In the 20 years since the Derbyshire went down, bulk carriers of a similar design have continued to sink at regular intervals. I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend could facilitate an urgent debate on how safety standards can be raised and lives saved in the future.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter, on which she has long campaigned. All those who have campaigned will feel that the report offers some vindication and justification for their efforts. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a specific debate on the matter. My hon. Friend may find that opportunities may arise to discuss safety matters in general, although I appreciate that she may consider maritime safety to be a special subject in itself. May I therefore recommend Westminster Hall to her, too?

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): In the light of what the Leader of the House has said, can we have an early debate on the mis-selling of Government policy? She has told us today that the Chancellor's statement yesterday about low-sulphur fuel being available at every garage from the Budget next year is contingent upon the machinations of the Deputy Prime Minister, consultation and so on. Yet yesterday, the Chancellor said:

> When the excise duty cut is introduced at Budget time, motorists using any petrol station in Britain should be able to benefit from the duty cut.—[*Official Report*, 8 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 322.]

Clearly, the Chancellor was misleading the House if—

Mr. Speaker: Order. No one was misleading the House. The hon. Gentleman should withdraw that remark.

Mr. Chope: I was going on to say that I am sure that the Chancellor was not misleading the House, which is why I should like the Leader of the House to explain the difference between what the Chancellor said yesterday and what she has told us today.

Mrs. Beckett: I did not say that the measure was contingent on the work of the Deputy Prime Minister. I said that the proposals will be subject to consultation and that the background to them is the express view of the oil companies as to what can be provided. The hon. Gentleman will know that the AA's policy director said yesterday that the key question was whether the oil industry would deliver on the timetable and to the price suggested by the Chancellor.

On whether we should debate the mis-selling of policies, that is always an attractive proposition. Given that the hon. Gentleman has just been reminded of the mis-selling of endowment policies under the previous Government and given the scandal of the mis-selling of personal pensions that hangs round their necks, I am surprised that he even suggested such a thing.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Could we have an early debate on how far countries

that are signatories to the Hague convention on child abduction are implementing its provisions? I say that with reference to my constituent, Caroline Taylor, who has been separated from her son Stidi for more than a year now, despite verdicts of the Greek court. Although Greece is a signatory to the convention, it is not ensuring that the provisions of the convention are complied with. That has to end.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sure that everyone in the House understands and sympathises with my hon. Friend's concern about the case of Caroline Taylor, which he has pursued. I sometimes think that these are the worst cases that come before Members of Parliament, because we all understand the difficulty with regard to the child involved and how vulnerable children are to exploitation in these circumstances. I understand his concern that the Greek courts have taken some decisions on the matter, but that it remains unresolved. He will know that my noble Friend Baroness Scotland raised the subject with the Greek Minister of Justice when she met him over the summer. I know that the child abduction unit has been involved and has done what it can to help. I believe that there is a further hearing in the very near future. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a specific debate on the matter, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to look for opportunities to raise it in this House.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House will recall that I have been pressing on different occasions for a meeting of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee in Northern Ireland, according to the Standing Orders of this House. This has been thwarted time and again by one party, which finds it difficult to attend even when the Committee is held here. Can the commitment that the Grand Committee would be held from time to time in Northern Ireland be now met, because four years have passed without it having been met?

Mrs. Beckett: I entirely understand the seriousness with which the hon. Gentleman raises the matter. I will draw his views to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who I know will give them serious consideration.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Can we have a debate on rape and the way in which the law is working—particularly in the light of the fact that a number of men have been released from prison because the women they were supposed to have raped have changed their evidence and gone back to the police to tell the truth? Has not a huge injustice been perpetrated against some men, and should not Parliament debate the matter?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend has, quite correctly, identified a matter of great concern. There is continual debate to and fro about how best to handle those issues. We want to ensure that people are willing to come forward when they have a serious accusation and also that people who have been unjustly accused can be helped. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter in the very near future. However, it is Home Office questions on Monday, and my hon. Friend might have the opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): May I remind the Leader of the House of my private Member's Bill, which sought to extend fuel rebates for community bus services, and which the Government blocked? Since then, however, the Government have included the proposal in their 10-year plan. Will the right hon. Lady arrange for the Deputy Prime Minister to come to the House and tell us exactly when he intends to implement this? A lot of people would welcome such a scheme, but are still waiting for the details to be announced.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot, I fear, provide a special slot for the Deputy Prime Minister to deal with that specific subject. However, the hon. Gentleman will know that we hope to have the urban and rural White Papers in the not-too-distant future, and he may well find an opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): As the Parliament of a country in which a young woman was recently dragged through the courts for using cannabis medicinally, a chief constable has said that he would not arrest a person for using cannabis recreationally and heroin deaths are the highest in Europe, should we not debate urgently the self-admiring report by the drugs tsar, which is filled with vacuous irrationality?

Mrs. Beckett: Policy on this area is raised and discussed continually. Indeed, one reason for providing the opportunity for extra scrutiny in Westminster Hall is to allow some of the issues about the work of individuals and non-departmental public bodies to be scrutinised. All I can do is draw my hon. Friend's attention to that opportunity, which I know he will make use of.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): At 10.45 this morning, the Vote Office received copies of the National Audit Office report into the operation and financial management of the millennium dome. Now that we have had the opportunity to study the report, it is clear that the information that the Prime Minister gave the House yesterday, suggesting that all decisions had been taken by the previous Administration, is wholly false, and that the key decisions on the content and management of the dome and on transport for the dome were all taken following a review of the dome by the Government in 1997—in May, once they had taken office. It is also abundantly plain from the report that the go-ahead for the dome was given by the Prime Minister himself.

As all that is so, and as, to date, no Minister has offered to come before the House to make a statement on the report, and as no Minister has yet been honourable enough to offer a resignation, could the Leader of the House say when we will be able to debate that report in full, and can it please be before the House is prorogued?

Mrs. Beckett: First, the hon. Gentleman may have had the opportunity to study the report, but I do not suppose that the rest of the House has. Secondly, I am afraid that what he said about the Prime Minister's statements yesterday is entirely wrong. The hon. Gentleman cannot possibly have been listening to what the Prime Minister said—although, to be fair, there was a lot of noise, as there tends to be at Prime Minister's Question Time, so I shall be charitable and assume that he did not actually hear what the Prime Minister said.

[Mrs. Beckett]

The Prime Minister was specific and clear. On more than one occasion he said that he was at no point attempting to suggest that the full responsibility for all the events that led to the building of the dome rested with the Conservative party. He was very clear that he had expressed regret, that he had said on behalf of this Government that we recognise that errors were made and that we are perfectly willing to acknowledge that and say it to the public. However, we are not prepared to take all the blame for a project that began three or four years before the Conservative party left office.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the visit to Rome last weekend by many Members from both sides of the House to take part in the worldwide parliamentary assembly to mark the jubilee holy year? More than 1,500 parliamentarians in more than 90 delegations attended, and several important issues were discussed, including international initiatives to cancel the foreign debt of some of the world's poorest countries. It was widely recognised that Britain has played a leading role in those initiatives.

Will my right hon. Friend arrange for the Secretary of State for International Development to come to the House to receive congratulations on the work that has already been done and to report on further initiatives, particularly to bring more international pressure to bear on the International Monetary Fund and the World bank?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development has a good record of campaigning on that matter. There is an encouraging attitude to third-world debt and its importance and to the Government's attempts to have others join us in taking the steps that we believe are necessary to help to alleviate some of the worst poverty in the world. I cannot undertake to find time on the Floor of the House for a special debate on that, although I recommend Westminster Hall to my hon. Friend, but he will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be answering oral questions before the end of the month, and he may find an opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Pursuant to the right hon. Lady's answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) concerning substantive motions on the Liaison Committee report, does she think it reasonable for the House to regard her report as a paraphrase of her earlier quotation from President Clinton: "The Leader has spoken. It will take some time before we can work out what she has said."?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall be extraordinarily surprised if it turns out that anybody in the House is in any doubt as to what I said.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): In view of the extremely important conference on climate change in The Hague, which will begin next week, will the Government publish their climate change strategy before entering into negotiations at The Hague on the precise mechanisms by which the Kyoto protocol will be implemented? Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Deputy Prime Minister will, on his return from The Hague, make a statement to the House about the decisions reached there, as well as a statement on the climate change strategy?

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly cannot tell my hon. Friend at the moment precisely what are our plans for publishing such information, but I shall certainly draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who I know will take them very seriously.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Leader of the House will recall that, on Tuesday 7 November, the Parliamentary Secretary said of the so-called "modernisation" proposals that they

> should not be at the expense of proper examination of legislation.—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 272.]

I very much welcome that.

Will the right hon. Lady therefore give an absolute undertaking that, in the next few days and weeks, when business from another place comes here with many—in some cases several hundred—amendments attached, the House will be given enough time to, in the Parliamentary Secretary's words, examine the legislation properly? Will she further assure the House that there will be no question whatever of the Government seeking artificially to truncate or limit proper debate and scrutiny of their many amendments to legislation coming from another place?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I do recall my hon. Friend's words, and the right hon. Gentleman will know that the whole tenor and tone of that debate related to the processes that we shall use in the new Session. He will know also that the Government consider the issues that return to the House and what time can be provided for them. However, he knows that no matter how much time the Government provide, we cannot ensure that the House uses it to best effect.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Next week, on 17 November, 150 jobs are due to be lost at Biwater at Clay Cross in my constituency. The plant will then be closed at the beginning of December, when another 550 jobs will be lost. Could we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about whether he will refer the matter to the Competition Commission under the powers that he has under the Fair Trading Act 1973? I assure the Leader of the House that my right hon. Friend is not short of information on which he can base that judgment.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that my hon. Friend has raised the issue with my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will reply as soon as he can.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we have an early debate on support for teachers who are under attack from their pupils? Given the worrying increase in the incidence of such attacks, does not the right hon. Lady agree that it is imperative that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment comes speedily to the House and introduces new guidelines on the legitimate use of physical restraint in such circumstances? Does she also agree that those guidelines should reflect the

common-sense instincts of the majority of the British people, not the politically correct fetishes of the liberal establishment?

Mrs. Beckett: It was my understanding that fresh guidelines had recently been issued. The hon. Gentleman will know that his concern for the safety of teachers is shared throughout the House, but I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Previously, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has given an assurance that there will be a full debate on the Phillips report on the BSE tragedy. Can she tell the House when that debate is likely to take place? Will she look into the possibility of incorporating in that debate an assessment of the report, just out, of the Leicestershire team that investigated the Queniborough cluster? The team included the CJD surveillance unit at Edinburgh, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Dr. Philip Monk, the team leader.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that there would be a debate on the Phillips report, but that he wanted to give Members of Parliament and those outside enough time fully to absorb the recommendations of that very substantial report and give the matter careful thought before returning to the House. I know that my hon. Friend has on several occasions voiced the interests of his constituents, especially those at Queniborough, and I have no doubt that the results of the work there will form part of the background to the debate, but I shall certainly draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): With reference to Monday's debate on London Underground and the Government's proposed public-private partnership for it, will the Leader of the House ensure that the Deputy Prime Minister comes to answer that debate, so that he has the opportunity to justify the extraordinarily abusive personal remarks that he made about Mr. Kiley, the former boss of the New York metro who has come to advise the mayor on how the tube might be improved; and so that he can justify his disgraceful withholding from the Greater London Assembly of the necessary financial information on which it can evolve a strategy for the improvement of London's underground system?

Mrs. Beckett: I can certainly undertake to draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. As for who is to handle the debate to which he refers, I do not have that information before me.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I am sure that many hon. Members share the concerns felt by fisheries communities in Whitby and Scarborough and along the North sea coast about the meeting with marine scientists that is taking place in Europe today. Will my right hon. Friend say whether there will be an early opportunity to consider not only the environmental impact of the failure of the cod fishery in the North sea, but the socio-economic impact on communities such as Whitby, which has been in decline since 1960, but is faced with an even steeper decline in its local economy if cuts are made?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend takes his responsibilities to his constituents extremely seriously and is strongly interested in their concerns. He will know the importance of balancing the environmental consequences and the economic impact of any action. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter in the near future. He, too, might want to look into the opportunities offered by Westminster Hall, but he will be aware that Agriculture questions take place next Tuesday.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Thank you, Madam— *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Mr. Speaker. I will never be called by you again.

May we have an early debate on yesterday's pre-Budget statement, given that yesterday's package of fuel price reductions is larger than that which any political party has proposed? Any return to the disruption of food and fuel supplies would run the risk of provoking a significant public backlash. May we therefore have an early opportunity for all political parties—including, I hope, the Conservative party—to make clear their unequivocal opposition to any further disruption?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have already said that there will undoubtedly be many occasions, as further details emerge on the issues on which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is consulting, during debates and question times when these matters can be explored. I understand my hon. Friend's suggestion. There is a great temptation to arrange a special debate so that Opposition Members can make it plain that they accept that my right hon. Friend has gone further than they intended and that they would be unlikely to be able to support any further action. However, I suspect, given past precedent, they will attempt to find a way of wriggling out of that.

Social Security

1.11 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement—first, on the annual uprating of benefits, and secondly, on pensions and the new pension credit.

First, on uprating, subject to the following exceptions, most national insurance benefits will rise by the retail prices index, which is 3.3 per cent., and most income-related benefits will rise by the Rossi index, which is 1.6 per cent., in the usual way. Details of the uprating will be placed in the Vote Office and will be published in the *Official Report*.

Secondly, the Government believe that it is right to do more to help people with disabilities and carers. We know that it is particularly hard for families on low incomes who are bringing up children with disabilities. I am therefore proposing to increase the disabled child premium by £7.40 a week, on top of the normal uprating. So as part of our drive to end child poverty, about 80,000 children will see a rise in the disabled child premium—from £22.25 a week to £30 a week, over and above their basic entitlement to benefit.

Just as we are committed to abolishing child poverty, we are determined also to provide greater security for those who are unable to work. That is why I announced in 1998 that we would introduce a disability income guarantee from April next year for people with severe disabilities. When it was first announced, we set the guarantee at £128 a week. However, today I can announce that when it is introduced in April, it will be not £128, but £142—that is £14 more a week. For couples, it will be £186.80.

Thirdly, we want to do more for carers. We all owe a debt of gratitude to people who give up so much to care for their relatives. That is why in September I announced that we would extend the invalid carer's allowance to people over 65, raise the earnings threshold and extend payments for eight weeks after the death of the person being cared for. I also announced at that time a £2 a week increase in the carer premium, which is the extra supplement for carers on income support.

Today I can go further. I have decided that the increase in the carer premium will be not £2 a week, but £10 a week on top of the normal uprating. That means that the premium will rise from £14.15 to £24.40, helping more than 200,000 carers on low incomes. In total, the Government will be spending nearly £200 million more next year on supporting carers and people with disabilities, and every year thereafter.

I now turn to pensions. I confirm that the basic state pension will rise by £5 for a single pensioner next year, and by £3 the year after. For married couples, the figures are £8 and then £4.80.

I can also tell the House that the widows and bereavement benefits, which will go to men and women equally for the first time next year, will also rise by £5 next year and £3 the year after.

For this winter, I can confirm that pensioners will start to receive their £200 winter fuel payment from Monday.

Today, I am also publishing a consultation paper on the new pension credit. Copies will be available from the Vote Office following my statement.

There is a fundamental fault in the system we inherited. Saving should be rewarded, not punished. So the pension credit will, for the first time, reward the thrift of millions of people who have worked hard to save for their retirement.

The credit builds on the long-term reforms the Government have already made. We are building, block by block, a coherent and sustainable strategy for pensions.

For tomorrow's pensioners, we are reforming the state second pension, giving greater security in retirement to 18 million people on low incomes. For moderate and higher earners, we are introducing the new stakeholder pensions from next April.

The pension credit will not only help millions of today's pensioners on modest incomes, it will also complement those long-term reforms by rewarding people for saving. The message is clear: whatever one can afford to put by, it will always pay to save.

Our aim is both to end pensioner poverty and to ensure that all pensioners share in the rising prosperity of the nation.

When we came to office, the inequality in pensioner incomes had grown dramatically under the previous Government. That means that the old approach—an across-the-board increase, whether linked to prices or earnings—is inadequate. It would not do nearly enough for the poorest pensioners, and it would not do enough to reward thrift. A new approach is required to deal with the reality of pensioner incomes today.

First, there are now many more pensioners retiring on very good pensions, thanks mainly to occupational pensions and, of course, the state earnings-related pension scheme. One in six pensioner couples are now retiring on £20,000 a year, and that proportion will grow steadily over time.

Those pensioners are sharing in the rising prosperity of the nation. For those who come within the scope of the tax system, we are determined to give them a fairer deal. We have already halved the rate of tax on savings income from April 1999 and increased pensioner tax allowances. Today, I can announce further proposals to raise those allowances.

At the moment, most pensioners have no income tax to pay, but for those who do, in 2003 the Government propose to raise the age-related allowances by £240 that year over and above indexation. On current forecasts, that will take the allowance to £6,560 a year for those aged 65 to 74, and to £6,850 for those aged 75 or more.

Throughout the remainder of this Parliament, we propose to carry on raising those allowances in line with earnings. As a result, more than 3 million pensioners will gain from that.

Secondly, we inherited a situation in Britain—the fourth largest economy in the world—in which there were too many pensioners living in poverty. Poverty has no place in a civilised society. That is why the Government were right to make ending pensioner poverty their first priority. It is also why we introduced the minimum income guarantee, which is already helping nearly 2 million pensioners.

Now we want to go further to tackle pensioner poverty. As the Chancellor announced yesterday, we are increasing the minimum income guarantee over and above the planned earnings increase, so that from next April,

no single pensioner need live on less than £92.15 a week. For 285,000 of the poorest pensioners in this country, that is a rise of £14 a week between now and next April.

When we introduce the new system in 2003, the minimum income guarantee will be set not at £92 but at £100 a week—that is £22 a week more than today. For the first time, a single pensioner will be guaranteed at least £100 a week. For every subsequent year in the next Parliament, the guarantee will be raised in line with earnings.

The next stage of our reforms, however, is to help the millions of pensioners who worked hard all their lives, saved for their retirement and rightly believe that they are being punished, not rewarded, for their thrift.

All of us are familiar with pensioners who feel let down by a system that has not rewarded their thrift. A pensioner with £20 of occupational pension on top of her state pension can sometimes find herself just a pound or two better off than someone who had saved nothing. That is unfair and unjust, and it will stop. That is why we are introducing the pension credit—to help pensioners with savings or a modest income in retirement. For the first time in the history of the welfare state, saving will be rewarded, not punished.

I can confirm that when it is introduced in 2003, the credit will reward all those with weekly incomes up to £135 for single pensioners, or £200 for couples. Today I can tell the House that 5.5 million pensioners—that is, half the pensioner households in this country—will be better off as a result of the new credit.

Not only will the new system ensure that pensioners are better off when they retire, but crucially, it will ensure that the support that they get from the state will keep up with the rises in family incomes over their retirement, because not only will the minimum income guarantee rise in line with earnings, but so will the new pension credit.

Let me explain how the credit will work. First, we will guarantee a minimum income, which by 2003 will be at least £100, or £154 for couples. Secondly, on top of that, for every pound saved, pensioners will receive an additional cash credit. That will mean extra cash on top of the basic state pension: sums of between £1 and £23 a week. The amount of that reward will depend on the amount of savings and other income.

Take, for example, a pensioner in 2003 who is on the basic state pension, which we then expect to be £77, and who has income from savings or an occupational pension of, say, £20 a week—in other words, a total weekly income of £97. With the credit, her income will be raised to the minimum income guarantee of £100, but on top of that, she will receive a credit of £12 extra for her saving, so her income will be not £97, but £112. The pension credit will mean that she is £15 a week better off because of her saving.

The changes that we are making will be of particular advantage to women, because on average, women have smaller occupational pensions than men, and of course they are likely to live longer. They are therefore more at risk from the falling value of their pension income over their retirement. As a result, more than two thirds of those who will benefit from the credit are women.

The credit also allows us to make a number of other changes. First, we have always recognised the unfairness of people losing out simply because they have modest savings in a bank or building society. We have already announced that from next year, as we prepare for the pension credit, we are raising the capital limits for the first time in 10 years. As a result, 500,000 pensioners will get an average of £5 a week more, and many will find themselves entitled to extra support for the first time.

From 2003, we are going further. As part of the credit, we are scrapping the capital limits completely. Instead, we will look at the income that pensioners receive from their savings. Not only are we abolishing the capital limits, but we are getting rid of the rules on tariff income for pensioners, so we will no longer assume that pensioners can get a ludicrous 20 per cent. return on their savings.

The second change is that we will make it easier for pensioners to get the money to which they are entitled, and get rid of the weekly means test. Now, there are some who weep crocodile tears at means testing for pensioners, but who did nothing about it for 18 years. We will.

At present, we ask all taxpaying pensioners to tell us about their income just once a year, if that. However, we ask poorer pensioners to tell the benefits system about changes every week. There is no good reason for that. The credit will be based on an income assessment that is more like the tax system.

When one retires, a calculation has to be made about one's basic state pension, based on the contributions that one has paid. In the future we will be able to work out at the same time how much a pensioner is entitled to under the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit. We know that most pensioners have stable incomes, so after the initial award at retirement, adjustments will need to be made only when circumstances change significantly.

We are making it easier for pensioners to claim their entitlements, by introducing a dedicated new service for pensioners. People will be able to claim by phone, which will give pensioners the better service that they want.

Although most pensioners have stable incomes, there are pinch points during the year when they need to meet the costs of lump-sum bills. That is why pensioners have welcomed the extra help that they receive from the winter fuel payment and the free TV licences for over-75s. They constitute more help when it is most needed.

We promised to make sure that all pensioners would share fairly in this country's rising prosperity, and the measures that we have announced fulfil that promise. As a result of our reforms, all pensioners will gain. We are spending £8.5 billion more on pensioners over this Parliament—that is £5 billion more than an earnings link would provide. We promised to do more for those who most need it most. That is why, next year, the poorest third of pensioners will get five times more than they would have received under an earnings link.

We promised to do more to reward saving. That is why, under the tax changes that I have announced today, 3 million pensioners will be better off. The new pension credit means that 5.5 million pensioners will be better off.

Next week, the £200 winter fuel payment will be provided. Next April, the £5 and £8 increases in the basic state pension will be introduced, and the minimum income guarantee will increase to £92.15. The following April, a further £3 and £4.80 will be added to the basic pension, and from 2003, we will provide the guaranteed income of at least £100, the new pension credit and higher tax allowances to reward saving.

[Mr. Alistair Darling]

There is therefore a clear choice for the future. We are increasing the winter fuel payment, not abolishing it. We are building on the basic state pension, not undermining or privatising it. We are tackling pensioner poverty, not ignoring it, and we are rewarding saving, not penalising it.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the scale of the proposals that he and the Chancellor have set out for the tax and benefits system in 2003.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will abolish the working families tax credit, which he launched only last year? Will he further confirm that he will abolish family premiums in income support, and that he will introduce a new integrated child credit, a new employment credit and, for good measure, a new pension credit? That is ambitious for a Government who recently lost 1 million tax files and cannot pay the correct pension to people who are retiring today because of the continuing problems with the national insurance computer system.

On Monday, the Minister of State, whose frankness on the subject is often refreshing, said that the benefit computers "are rubbish".

Hon. Members: They are yours.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Please let the hon. Gentleman speak.

Mr. Willetts: We will accept our share of responsibility. *[Interruption.]* However, Labour Members should do something in return. They should reflect on the implications for the incredible set of changes that they propose to implement in the next two years. All the policies about which we have heard yesterday and today will put the tax and benefits system under yet more strain. It is no good devising fancy schemes if they are unworkable. The Minister of State's words show that they are unworkable. Even the Chancellor recognises that.

Last weekend, the Chancellor gave briefings to say that he was furious that his pension plans had been undermined by a series of administrative disasters at the DSS. Other Ministers are the poor bloody infantry, who will take the blame when things go wrong, as they surely will when the Chancellor tries to change the working families tax credit, the employment credit, the child credit, and the pension credit in one year.

When it is a matter of defending the measly 75p on the basic pension, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are safely ensconced in a chateau miles away from their lines, while the Secretary of State and his colleagues spend a year trying to defend the indefensible. But now that headquarters has decided on a retreat or, as it calls it, special transitional measures, the Secretary of State and his colleagues get to make the announcement. All the Secretary of State is left with is his complicated pension credit, which is overburdening a system that is already far too complicated. Complexity with a purpose is used to disguise the abandonment of the Government's failed policies. We want sensible measures that reward saving, and it is no good Ministers claiming that they are helping pensioners with their savings, when the money to finance those measures and others comes from the £5 billion a year tax on pensioners' savings, which is the biggest stealth tax of the lot.

We have heard a lot about joined-up government from Ministers. Why does the Secretary of State not join up the different, inconsistent policies pursued in his own Department? May I ask him about the position of two single men aged 65 with a basic state pension? One has his pension topped up with an occupational pension of £30 a week. The other pensioner tops up his pension by doing part-time work that earns him £30 a week. He might even have been encouraged to carry on working, with all the urging from Ministers. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, after today's proposals, for the first time the net income of the man with the occupational pension will be higher than the income of the pensioner with part-time work? That is not joined-up and is not even fair. How do the Secretary of State and Labour Members defend that direct consequence of the proposals that have just been announced?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the changes will mean a massive extension of means testing? The proportion of pensioners on means tests fell from 57 per cent. to 37 per cent. under the Conservative Government, but millions more families and pensioners now face a combined rate of tax and benefit withdrawal of 40 per cent. or even more. In tackling one grievance, the Secretary of State is creating another. We all know that pensioners do not want to have make complicated claims for means-tested benefits, even if they are given fancy new names such as the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit. Ministers are sending out 2.3 million letters to try to get more pensioners to claim the minimum income guarantee but, in spite of all their take-up campaigns, have had to admit that, so far, only 24,000 more pensioners have got the MIG. Ministers ought to learn the lessons of that failure rather than invent another complicated means-tested benefit.

How will the benefit work exactly? Will it be claimed through the tax return or through a benefit claim form? It is no good the Secretary of State saying that everything can be done on the telephone, because the experience of those making phone calls to try to claim the minimum income guarantee is that that leads to complicated paper-based transactions. We need to know how that benefit is to be claimed.

The Secretary of State talked about abolishing the capital limits and got a cheer from some of his colleagues. However, do they realise that every £1 of income from savings will now be taken into account as part of the minimum income guarantee? Does the Secretary of State agree with the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), who only in June said in a written answer that the current arrangement

> provides a straightforward method of calculating the weekly contribution which people with capital in excess of the lower limit—

which the Secretary of State is abolishing—

> are expected to make from those resources to help meet their normal living expenses. Because no tariff applies to savings below the lower limit, the rule is most generous to people with relatively low savings.

The Secretary of State is getting rid of that arrangement, claiming that there is a supposed 20 per cent. notional rate of interest in the current rules. However, the Under-Secretary of State said:

> The system is not based on any imputed rate of return—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 653W.]

The Secretary of State is abolishing that and today is perpetuating the myth that the Government's problems somehow arise because they have put so much money towards helping the poorest pensioners.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that most of the money has gone not into the minimum income guarantee or the basic pension, but into complicated and indiscriminate special payments such as the winter fuel payment? Does he not realise that pensioners find these allowances patronising and intrusive? They would far rather have that money as part of their guaranteed weekly income, and that is what we offer them.

We would implement the Government's uprating and add our reforms on top. *[Interruption.]* Our uprating would give all pensioners under 75 an extra £9.50 a week if they are single and £13 a week if they are married. Older pensioners would receive £11.60 a week if they are single and £16.10 a week if they are married, with no extra tax and no loss of means-tested benefit. That would be financed by consolidating all the special payments and providing extra money on top, so that pensioners would be better off. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is far too much shouting.

Mr. Willetts: I shall quote Baroness Castle, because she understood our package. She said that

> the Conservative leader, William Hague, is no fool.

She is very shrewd.

> He has put forward the idea of taking the fuel allowance and the TV licence allowance and turning them into a cash increase on the basic pension. In my opinion, that would be an absolute vote winner.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 June 2000; Vol. 614, c. 546.]

I agree with the Secretary of State on carers: we need to do more to help them. We welcome the measures for carers that he has announced today, just as we welcomed them when he made a virtually identical announcement on 3 October. We welcome them particularly because of their striking similarity to proposals that we put forward almost a year ago. We look forward to the Secretary of State implementing other constructive proposals that we make for reforming social security.

People look to the social security system to help them through the vagaries of life. They have a choice: they can either have the Government's approach of gimmickry, upheaval and confusion, or the Conservative alternative, which is simple, straightforward and comprehensible. Today's statement shows that the Government are creating a yet more complicated tax and benefit system that is like a passable imitation of Hampton Court maze, and millions of decent families and pensioners are trapped in it.

Mr. Darling: Let me start with the point that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) made about carers. It is good to hear that the Conservatives support us. However, he is wrong on one aspect. The Conservatives would never have been able to promise £200 million more this year and every year afterwards, because they have never had the resources available to devote to disabled people or anyone else. It is only because we took tough decisions at the beginning of this Parliament that we now have money available to help disabled people and pensioners.

It is incredible that for the first five minutes of the hon. Gentleman's response he chose to talk not about the increase in pensions or the pension credit, but about our computer systems. He sounded as if he wanted to sell us a secondhand computer to work everything out. He has had some experience of this problem. He rightly complains about the national insurance recording system computer, but he has conveniently forgotten that the Conservative Government signed the contract for that rotten system. We are having to pick up the pieces, as we are having to do elsewhere.

There is another difference between us and the Conservative party. Again thanks to the decisions that we took at the beginning of this Parliament, we now have additional resources to replace the complete computer system for the Department of Social Security. It has been waiting for that for the past 15 or 20 years.

I shall now deal with the substance of the statement, which one would have thought the Conservatives were interested in, and that is the pension credit. It is reasonably clear from what the hon. Gentleman said that he is against the pension credit. So the Conservative party will go into the next election opposing a measure that will benefit 5.5 million pensioners. He has made it very clear that he is against the pension credit for the reasons he stated. The pension credit deals with a fundamental problem in the social security system that has existed for years. If people do what successive Governments have told them to do and save for their retirement, they are punished for doing so. The credit means that those who save for their retirement will be rewarded. That strikes me as a pretty straightforward and, dare I say it, commonsense proposition, and one that is long overdue.

The hon. Gentleman asked me a specific question about two pensioners, one with an occupational pension and one who goes out to work. Presumably he received the copy of the pension credit document that I sent him an hour or so ago, in which we make it pretty clear that we take all income in retirement into account when calculating credit. There is no discrimination in that regard.

As well as rewarding saving and thrift, the credit ensures that we can continue our drive towards eradicating pensioner poverty. The hon. Gentleman says that fewer pensioners were on means-tested benefits under the Tory Government. That is because the Tories did absolutely nothing to help the growing number of pensioners who were living in poverty. When we came to office there were millions of pensioners living in poverty, and the Tories did absolutely nothing about it. If they were returned to office, they would do nothing about it again.

The pension credit deals with two, fundamental objectives: to take pensioners out of poverty both today and in the future, and to ensure that the millions of pensioners who have saved a little for their retirement—who have put a little in the bank or the building society, and have a small occupational pension—will be given additional help. We want them to be rewarded for their thrift, rather than being punished for it as they would be under the Conservative party.

[Mr. Darling]

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the minimum income guarantee and the Government's take-up campaign. He is right. We have written to 2.5 million people who we thought might be eligible for the guarantee. So far, we have received 600,000 responses to our comprehensive search. That suggests to me—I say this to Tory Members, and also to some of my hon. Friends—that the main problem is not reluctance to claim on the part of pensioners, many of whom are asking whether they are entitled to the guarantee. The reason why, according to our analysis of claims, only half the applicants have been successful so far is quite interesting—

Mr. Willetts: How many people are involved?

Mr. Darling: Sixty thousand people are now, on average, £20 a week better off than they would otherwise have been.

In fact, there are two principal reasons for the failure of some people to qualify. One is that they have too much income; the other is that they have too much in the bank. That is precisely the difficulty with which the pension credit is designed to deal. I believe that people should be encouraged to save for their retirement—that we should encourage thrift. The credit complements the changes we have made in both the state second pension and the funded sector of stakeholder pensions. People will now be rewarded rather than punished for their saving.

The hon. Gentleman criticised the winter fuel payment, saying that it was complicated. I do not think that there is anything complicated about a payment of £200 going into every pensioner household next week—and I am evidently not the only person to think that such one-off annual payments are a good idea. Some years ago, when he was in charge of the Christmas bonus, the shadow Chancellor—responding to similar criticism—said:

> The bonus is something to which the majority of the elderly look forward very much. What other people call fringe benefits are a substantial help to the poorest . . . in our society.

That is what the shadow Chancellor believed in 1987, and presumably it is what he believes today—unless, of course, the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security shares Lady Thatcher's—correct—view that the shadow Chancellor is confused about these matters.

The hon. Gentleman attempted to tell people that pensioners would be better off under the Tories. It is, perhaps, a sign of his desperation that he should pray in aid Lady Castle: I do not think that she has reached the conclusion that she will ever vote Tory.

Let the hon. Gentleman reflect on this. He is proposing to take away from pensioners the winter fuel payment of £200, the free television licence—which is being sent out this week—and the Christmas bonus. All those amounts will be taken away from pensioners. The hon. Gentleman proposes that they should then be returned to pensioners, and expects pensioners to be grateful. Pensioners know to beware of Tories bearing gifts because all the evidence shows that the Tories will con them again, as they did for 18 years.

It is evident that unless the hon. Gentleman makes substantial additional public expenditure available, about 1.5 million people will lose out as result of ending these direct payments because they are tax free and benefit free at the moment. *[Interruption.]* Let us remember that 1.5 million people do not receive either any state pension or the full state pension. If money were taken away from them and then given back, the hon. Gentleman would have to spend more money than he would have.

I am entitled to have such proposals costed, and official figures show that the hon. Gentleman would have to spend £5 billion to restore and remove the benefit and tax penalty that would otherwise exist to ensure that the poorest pensioners—those 1.5 million people—did not lose out. Of course, the shadow Chancellor has told us that there is no new money, so the hon. Gentleman could not deliver that proposal. That comes on top of the Tory proposal to begin the privatisation of the basic state pension by encouraging the under-30s to opt out; and their plans, which they keep leaking to the *Daily Express* and others, to cut £6 billion from housing benefit would cost those on housing benefit about £25 a week on average. People do not believe the Tories because of their previous 18 years in government, and, given today's performance, they are unlikely to believe them at the next election.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): To what extent does my right hon. Friend think the pension mis-selling scandal of the 1980s has contributed to pensioner poverty, and who does he think should apologise for that?

Mr. Darling: There is no doubt that the pension mis-selling that took place in the late 1980s—largely in response to the public advertising campaign that the Tory Government ran, which encouraged people to opt out—represented a huge knock to the pensions industry. When we were elected, we spent considerable time persuading pension companies to offer redress to people who had been wrongly sold pensions—but, of course, the difference between us and them is that we have a strategy. We have the state second pension—a reform that will benefit 18 million low earners—and we are introducing the stakeholder pension and taking other action because we want people to save. Of course, under the pension credit that I am announcing today, people will be better off as a result of their saving, no matter how much they save. That reform is long overdue.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy with regard to the statement. I welcome his announcement of additional support for carers and disabled people. Can he confirm that, even after his proposals, most carers receiving invalid care allowance who reach state pension age will still have that benefit taken from them because of the continuation of the overlapping benefits rule?

I also welcome the additional, above-inflation pension rises—timed to coincide with the election. Can the Secretary of State confirm that they represent rises in real terms of less than £3 next April and barely £1 the year after? On the pension increase, when will we receive the Government Actuary's report that we have been promised, which the Vote Office has just told me is not currently available?

On the pension credit, can the Secretary of State confirm that it represents a new scheme to solve a problem that is largely of his own making, given that the people with £20 of private pension savings to whom he

referred would have been well clear of income support when the Government took office? It is only his policies that have dragged those people into the means test.

Finally, on pension poverty, does the Secretary of State recall that his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), said:

one can draw only one conclusion: pensioner poverty is contributing to the toll of deaths in the winter.

We were not prepared to stand by and allow that problem to continue growing . . .—[*Official Report*, 17 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 714.]

Can he confirm that under his stewardship that problem has continued to grow? Can he confirm that last night the Government finally released figures, which they have held for six weeks, showing record pensioner debt for last winter, when the winter fuel scheme had already existed for three years? Does he share my view that 50,000 excess winter deaths among pensioners is a disgrace?

Mr. Darling: Of course it is. The rate of mortality among elderly people is far too high, which is why we introduced the winter fuel payment. I noticed that the hon. Gentleman had nothing to say about that. From next week, starting with the poorest pensioners, every pensioner household will receive £200 a year precisely to deal with that problem so that pensioners do not have to worry about turning up the heat.

The hon. Gentleman complains that more pensioners are getting the minimum income guarantee. That is what he said: under the Government, more people are getting the minimum income guarantee. I make no apology for the fact that 2 million pensioners are now getting the minimum income guarantee, some of them getting £20 a week more than they would under the policy that he advocates.

On the subject of the policies that the Liberal Democrats advocate, why was it, if the hon. Gentleman is taking the stance that he is today, that, at the last election, the Liberal Democrats promised that the basic state pension would remain indexed to prices? I assume that the Liberal Democrats' policy in the manifesto was the same in each of the seats that they fought and that there were not the usual regional variations. They said that, in addition to ensuring that the basic state pension remained indexed to prices, there would be an additional top-up pension for pensioners with incomes below income support level. That sounds remarkably like the minimum income guarantee. I note that, on 31 August, as the hon. Gentleman shifted his policy yet again, he said that he wanted to increase the basic state pension by at least £5 a week—that sounds very familiar—yet now he says that that is not enough.

I suggest that the hon. Gentleman has a word with his party leader, who was on the radio yesterday with Jimmy Young. I do not know which one of them conducted the chat show, but they were certainly having a conversation. Mr. Young asked about pensions:

Do you think the proposed increases . . . are fair enough?

The Liberal Democrat leader replied:

Well, undoubtedly it's always easy in opposition to say it could be more.

How right he was. He went on:

But I think that if Gordon Brown is coming out with the kind of across the board, flat rate increases that are being talked about, that of course will be welcome.

I suggest that the hon. Gentleman have a word with his party leader before he comes to the House again.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Does he note that, of all the proposals that he has announced, the two that caused the greatest cheer on the Labour Benches and the deepest gloom on the Tory Benches are the increases to the national insurance pension and the increases to the winter fuel allowance? Does he accept that increases in those universal benefits will be the easiest for us to sell on the doorstep?

Mr. Darling: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Conservative party has now got itself into a position whereby, when Conservative Members knock on a pensioner's door next April, they will say, "Good evening, madam. I'm going to take £200 off you." Call me old fashioned, but I do not think that that makes for good politics.

The other thing that causes the Conservative party gloom is that it could never have increased spending on pensions by the extent to which we have because, throughout most of the time that it was in government, there was a deep financial crisis and it had no money to do any of those things. Conservative Members criticised us in the first two years of the Parliament when we spent considerable time and effort sorting out the mess that they had left behind, clearing up the deficit and all the debts that they had run up. Because we have made those tough choices, we can now make money available for pensioners, disabled people and others, which they could never have done.

Although my right hon. Friend did not ask about it, the other day I heard him on the radio making the point about maintaining the value of people's savings in retirement. Because it is earnings related, the pension credit will help us to do that.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Personally, I do not quarrel with the Secretary of State's proposals on pension credit. Having introduced family credit, I have long advocated an extension of that to pensioners with the aim of helping those who have saved, but who through no fault of their own have been unable to build an occupational pension.

What I do quarrel with is the Government's failure to do anything about the £5 billion a year pension tax. That is making it more difficult and more costly for people to build their own pensions and, unless we are careful, it will lead to those people requiring extra Government help in years to come.

It is right to help the pensioners of today—I make that clear—but surely we should be concerned about the price that the Government are paying. That price seems to be that we are harming the interests of pensioners tomorrow.

Mr. Darling: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the pension credit. He spent, I think, some six years in the job that I have. I have looked at the photographs along the hall outside my office; he seems to have been there longer than anyone else. I do not know what he did to deserve that, but he will know from his experience that one of the big problems in the social security system is that it seems to fly in the face of

[Mr. Darling]

all logic. We want people to save and to put money by, but the system that we inherited did not encourage that. The pension credit will, for the first time in the history of the modern welfare state, reward saving. It is one of the most fundamental reforms that the system has ever seen.

I cannot agree with the right hon. Gentleman's second point. He will recall that we moved away from the advance corporation tax system because we wanted to ensure that decisions on investment were taken by managers rather than in a drive to increase dividends. It allowed us to reduce corporation tax to the lowest rate ever, which has increased company profitability, which is in turn being reflected in dividend levels; and of course, the biggest shareholders in companies are pension funds.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Now that my right hon. Friend has disposed of the Conservative party, will he dispose of the con party—the Liberal Democrats—90 per cent. of whom have not even bothered to turn up for this statement? Will he point out that their policy was a 75p increase this year with no winter fuel payment, no free television licences and wild promises of unsubstantiated increases, which they will make other taxpayers finance without even saying what the income tax increase would be?

Mr. Darling: The Liberal Democrats' pensions policy, as with all their other policies, is to say whatever they think the listener wants to hear. When we compare what they say on different policies in different parts of the country, it is not surprising that they have been Britain's third party for most of the last century and, I suspect, all of this.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join the general welcome for the Secretary of State's announcement. I do not fully understand why people are concerned about the higher mortality rate among older people; that is the law of averages I suspect, as most of us are longing to get home by that stage.

On disability, I welcome the increase, but does the Secretary of State agree that the bureaucracy in the system sometimes hinders people's attempts to obtain benefits to which they are entitled? One of my constituents came to see me this week because he has been off work for six years following an injury. He has been taken off disability living allowance and been advised that he should have claimed incapacity benefit with income support. After claiming, he was told that he would have to wait 40 weeks before receiving any benefit. Surely there is something wrong with a system that holds people back when they should have been advised to claim much earlier.

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about his constituent, I will look into the matter because it does not sound right to me. I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the mortality rate. It is self-evidently true that older people die eventually, but the mortality rate for older people in this country is far higher than one would expect when we compare ourselves with other countries. We know that fuel poverty is a real problem affecting about one third of pensioners in this country, and that is why we have introduced the winter fuel payment on top of everything else that we have done to help pensioners. I suspect that some of the poorest pensioners were most at risk in the past and that is why we are increasing the amount of the minimum income guarantee to over £92 next April.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Over the past few months I have met many pensioners in Aberdeen, South. Although they understand the Government's need to improve the lot of the poorest pensioners and to narrow the gap between rich and poor, the group who felt most aggrieved—there was a real grievance—were those just over the basic state pension level with incomes of between £80 and £200 a week. They felt that the present system discriminated against them and that they were not being rewarded for their thrift and hard work. I am sure that they will be delighted with today's announcement about the introduction of pensioner credit and the lifting of the cap on saving, which was something about which they felt strongly. I do not want to be churlish on a day of good news for pensioners, but I am sure that they will ask why it will take to 2003 before the pensioner credit can be introduced. Why not do it sooner?

Mr. Darling: It will take that time because we need primary legislation and because we have to finish the consultation period so that we get the detail right. Also, we need to change the IT system so that we can deliver the credit—*[Interruption]*—and we have the money to do that.

I certainly remember standing with my hon. Friend on Union street, speaking to pensioners and making precisely the point that she has just made. If I remember rightly, there was a pensioner who had about £10,000 in the bank—which is not that much—and a modest occupational pension, but felt that he was getting absolutely nothing for making those arrangements. Although he did not mind people getting the minimum income guarantee, he said, "I have done what you and successive Governments have told me to do, but I feel that I am getting nothing for it." Now, for the first time ever in the history of the social security system, people will be rewarded, not punished for doing what they believe to be right.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the Secretary of State explain why the Government are robbing pensioners retiring this year of their married couple's allowance—at a time in their lives when they are more financially vulnerable—but making them wait three years, until he introduces the pension credit scheme, for the bit of recompense that they might receive for the cutting of that allowance?

Mr. Darling: The £5 increase in the basic state pension is being made next April, when, for the poorest pensioners, the minimum income guarantee increases to £92. It is therefore not true to say that pensioners have to wait until 2003, which is when the credit is being introduced. As the hon. Lady supports the Conservative party, I am not completely surprised that she has failed to recognise the benefit of the credit, which I think will benefit quite a few of her constituents. Nevertheless, I am a little surprised that she is against it and, at the next

general election, may be campaigning for its repeal. It is unfortunate that she does not recognise that, next year, we are giving more money to pensioners.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the breadth of his statement covering the disabled, pensioners and carers. It has a very broad sweep and is very welcome indeed. He will recall that the parlous state of pensioners started when the Conservative Government abolished the link between wages and pensions. He will also know that that specific matter still greatly concerns pensioners—all of whom recognise the important action that my right hon. Friend and the Government have taken in concentrating on the poorest pensioners and providing the winter fuel allowance. Nevertheless, pensioners still feel that they have paid their national insurance contributions, and, as a body, they cannot understand why they are not at least being promised that the link between wages and pensions will be restored.

Mr. Darling: The reason why we are not going to restore the earnings link is that, having regard to the current diversity of pensioner incomes—which is likely to continue in the future—it would be the wrong thing to do. As I said in my statement, our problem in the United Kingdom is that, although pensioner incomes as a whole have increased quite dramatically—the income of the top fifth of pensioners has increased by almost 50 per cent; and one in six couples is now retiring on £20,000 annually, with that proportion continuing to grow—some pensioners' incomes are very low indeed. Indeed, 1.5 million pensioners do not even receive the full pension, and some people receive no pension at all.

We have therefore decided that we must not only increase the basic state pension for everyone, but do more—far more—for the poorest pensioners. As a result of our proposals, 2 million of Britain's pensioners will have five times more than they would have had if we had only restored the earnings links. If we had implemented the earnings link rather than doing what we are doing, those poorest pensioners would be receiving about £2.35 less per week than they will receive because of our action.

Any pension policy has to take account of the situation that we have today and that we know we will have in the future. We are spending much more than it would have cost to implement the earnings link. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to restore the earnings link, but that would not have solved the problem.

An earnings link and across-the-board increases do not sort out pensioner poverty. Nor do they take account of the fact that in future, because of the success of occupational pensions and SERPs—which my hon. Friend will well remember, as it was introduced when he was an hon. Member—more people will retire on very high pensions.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Secretary of State has said various times today that fair treatment of pensioners' savings is long overdue, and I am sure that we would all recognise that. Next week, my mother will be celebrating her 99th birthday—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] We come from good Cornish stock. May I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman, in answer to the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), that a much quicker way to assist those who have savings is to take more people out of the means test, rather than to put more people in? Why should my mother wait until she is 102 to benefit from his pension credit?

Mr. Darling: The problem with the solution that the hon. Gentleman proposes is that if the present system were perpetuated, we would continue to have the problem whereby a pensioner with a small occupational pension or a small sum of money in the bank will get no reward for that. There is a cliff edge in the benefit system at the moment. Those who have nothing get help, but those who do a little bit to help themselves get nothing whatsoever and those people are by no means financially well off. That is why the pension credit is so essential. I would like to introduce it before 2003, but we need primary legislation and that cannot happen overnight. We also need to change the IT system to deliver the new system, but deliver it we will. When we have made this change—one of the most fundamental, radical changes that the social security system has seen in pensions since it was set up in its present form—at long last the country will have a coherent pension system that encourages people to save. It has options for the low paid and options for middle and higher earners, so that when they save they are rewarded for it and not punished because of it.

Mr. Joe Benton (Bootle): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which will bring joy to the many pensioners of Bootle and Merseyside. Will he clarify something for me in respect of the basic increases in pension that will take place next April? Will they be disregarded in the determination of benefits, such as housing benefit? That is not quite clear in my mind and I should appreciate some clarification.

Mr. Darling: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome. He asked about housing benefit, which has been uprated along with benefits generally. As for the pension credit, we shall make sure that no one currently on housing benefit will lose out when the new credit comes in. If my hon. Friend looks at the uprating, he will see that we have dealt with the point he raises in relation to housing benefit next year.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Does the Secretary of State accept that while his goal of supporting thrifty pensioners is an excellent one, this very complicated scheme is not the best way to achieve it? What proportion of the total cost of the scheme for pensioner credit in 2003 will be spent on administration? Does he not see an echo of the working families tax credit, which has been abolished in Canada after five years of operation—a point that the Government still have not taken on board—and which is already creating huge problems for our tax and benefit offices?

Mr. Darling: When the hon. Gentleman said that the pension credit was not the best way of rewarding saving, I was hoping that he was about to tell me what he thought was the best way of doing that. It appears that the Conservative party is committed to opposing the pension credit and therefore opposing the help that is going to 5.5 million pensioners. If the Conservatives want to go into the election doing that, it is fine by me.

[Mr. Darling]

Clearly, administration costs will depend on the exact shape and form of the system, but the present system also costs money to administer as it is expensive to review someone's entitlement week by week. The forms and the complexity of the present system are also expensive. The simplified system that we propose will be easier to run and, because of the changes that we are making in IT, it will not be so labour intensive or convoluted as it is at present.

To return to the fundamental point, which the hon. Gentleman and his party now have to face up to, we are proposing a measure that will help 5.5 million pensioners; it will reward their saving. If the Conservatives are against that and campaign against it in the next election, they will rue the day that the hon. Gentleman committed them to that course of action.

Ms Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley): I, too, add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that, despite the churlish comments of Opposition Members, the pension credit will effectively remove the means test that so many pensioners find humiliating? Does he also agree that the measures will ensure that the Government's strategy of targeting the poorest pensioners remains, but for the first time pensioners with a few savings or an occupational pension will not be penalised by the system?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right—someone with modest savings or on a modest occupational pension will gain. Let me deal with the point about assessing people's means. That does not happen only in the social security system; we are all assessed on our means to determine how much tax we should pay. When people retire, a calculation has to be made from their contribution records of how much pension they are entitled to, and that is precisely the time to look at their income, too, as I have proposed. If they have saved—one has to disclose that to the Inland Revenue in any case, so there is nothing new in that—they will qualify for the credit. I find it odd that the Liberals are against rewarding saving—they were muttering away while my hon. Friend was speaking—but I do not find it odd in the Tories, because they have never been that bothered about poor people, let alone poor pensioners.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the Secretary of State agree that the greater the complexity of the benefits system, the greater the scope for administrative error? If so, will he kindly agree to investigate the harrowing circumstances of my poor constituent, who is suffering grievously, who is deeply unwell and on tranquillisers, whose husband is registered blind, but from whom an alleged overpayment, innocently received, is now being demanded back by the Benefits Agency? Does he accept that she is being driven to her wits' end by a combination of the crass incompetence and the sheer insensitivity of officials at the Benefits Agency?

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about the case, I shall certainly investigate what has happened. On his general point, the complexity of the benefits system has been a problem, which is why we are simplifying it. The tax credit system that we are introducing is a simplification, but he and his colleagues are against it. One of the problems that bedevils social security administration is the rotten state of our computer systems, which is a direct result of no one investing in them for the past 10 or 15 years. The most modern IT systems in the DSS when we came to power were 10 years old, and they were the ones that worked the least. Some of the systems were nearly 30 years old. As a result of prudent management of the economy, we now have the resources to replace the entire system, which will make the administration an awful lot better.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): I unreservedly welcome the increases in the various disability benefits that my right hon. Friend announced. My calculations on the back of an envelope suggest that the disabled child premium will go up by 35 per cent. and the carers allowance by 75 per cent. He told us that the disability income guarantee will be £142 next year. It is not only a matter of cash. The initials of the disablement income guarantee, DIG, are the first three letters of dignity. This is about dignity, independence and self-esteem for disabled people.

Those who represent disabled people, such as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People—of which I am a trustee—and who, perhaps, have not had the best of relationships with my right hon. Friend over the past couple of years, will, I am sure, spend the afternoon penning their press releases welcoming the generous figures that have been announced today.

Mr. Darling: I wait and see. I am sure that anyone who, like my hon. Friend, wants to ensure that disabled people have a decent standard of living, with security and dignity, will welcome what we have done today. In addition to what he mentioned, for which I am grateful, we have, for example, increased the amount available for severely disabled children by about £27 a week. When I became Secretary of State and looked at the amount that was paid to severely disabled people, I considered it woefully inadequate. I am glad that, this year and next, and in the years thereafter, we can begin to improve many people's standard of living and accord them the decency to which they are entitled.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the Secretary of State clarify his statement that the new system will have regard to the income that comes from capital, and not to the capital itself? Will that principle apply to all those in nursing and residential care who are currently forced to pay their fees out of capital, even to the extent of having to sell their homes?

Mr. Darling: I am not making any announcement today in respect of the regime governing the support of people living in residential homes. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have made some changes. The proposals that I am announcing today are in relation to the pension credit alone.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I welcome my right hon. Friend's proposals. I am sure that Watford pensioners will be very interested to hear that the Conservatives propose to remove the benefits that are due to be introduced. Does he agree that, although there are obvious benefits with a pension credit, many pensioners will need to understand how the process will work and how they will be able to

benefit from the changes over the next few years? What publicity and information does his Department plan to make available to pensioners to explain all the new benefits that are likely to be introduced?

Mr. Darling: We plan next year to increase public awareness of the various options and forms of help that are available. I commend to my hon. Friend the pension credit document, the annexe to which has a ready reckoner to show how much better off people will be, depending on their savings. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) has the document. He has twigged what the Tories are committing themselves to, and they can now see how much their determination to oppose the pension credit will cost every household.

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): I warmly welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has announced. Assuming that we can ignore the Opposition Front Bench—which seems a very reasonable assumption—he will have noticed that there were only six Opposition Back Benchers in the Chamber when he made his statement. That demonstrates the extent of their concern for pensioners and pensions. Can he confirm that, if we rolled up the £200 winter allowance into the basic state pension, as the Conservatives want to do—if they do not want to cancel it altogether—about 1 million pensioners would lose out? Many of those would be likely to be women pensioners, because carers and those with a broken work record, who will not qualify for a full state pension, would be the losers.

Mr. Darling: The problem that Conservative Front Benchers have overlooked is the fact that there are about 1.5 million people who either get no pension or do not get a full pension. Simply to pay them the winter fuel payment pro rata—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) is muttering. A spending commitment is issuing from his lips even as we speak. To make good the removal of the winter fuel payment, the Christmas allowance and the free television licence would cost £5 billion—money that he does not have, because the shadow Chancellor has not let him have it.

On my hon. Friend's earlier comments, there may have been few Tory Back Benchers around, but the one who knew what he was talking about—the former Secretary of State for Social Security—welcomed our proposals, while the one who did not has committed the Tories to opposing them.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Everybody in Wales will be very ready to congratulate my right hon. Friend on his proposals for pensioners and disabled people and their families. He has mentioned for a second time the £5 billion cost of rolling up all the annual payments into the weekly pension. It is highly unlikely that the Tory party would ever find that money. Has he calculated how many pensioners would lose out by that rolling up, because of the tax loss or the benefit loss that they would sustain?

Mr. Darling: About 1.5 million pensioners would lose out. The Conservatives should remember that it is not only a matter of making good the abolition of the winter fuel payment, the Christmas bonus and the free television licence: because of their proposal to encourage everyone under the age of 30 to opt out of the national insurance system, within four or five years, if the policy worked—I assume that they want it to work—there would be another £4 billion hole in the national insurance fund, which would have to be filled either through taxing or through borrowing. This is all very reminiscent of the economic madness that drove this country into such a deep recession in the early 1990s.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that when I spoke to pensioners in my constituency about what they wanted to emerge from this statement, none said that he or she considered the winter fuel payment, the free television licence and other help to be gimmicks? Moreover, not one asked for any of them to be taken away. I can tell my right hon. Friend that they will also very much welcome the changes that he has announced to capital limits and tariff income, which for some elements of income assumed interest rates of well over 20 per cent.

Is my right hon. Friend able to consider going further, as the rules also apply to other groups of recipients? Is it possible that the changes that he has announced today could apply to other recipients, such as hard-working families?

Mr. Darling: On that last point, I have said on a number of occasions that, over time, the benefits paid to pensioners will be substantially different from the benefit regime for people of working age because benefits for pensioners are designed to enhance their security. We are making administrative changes in the Department to set up a separate pensioners organisation. I have always made it clear that pension benefits in the future will look different, and will be more generous and better than what obtained before.

My hon. Friend mentioned the winter fuel payment and the Christmas bonus. I, too, have yet to meet a pensioner who has said, "Please take away £200 from me." However, I dare say that the Tories' focus groups will have told them that there are many pensioners in the country who would want to be £200 poorer. For once, I find myself in agreement with the shadow Chancellor, who said that the benefits are a substantial help to the poorest groups in society. It appears that there is another split between members of the Tory Front Bench.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Is there any intention to abolish the capital rules in respect of disabled people? The Secretary of State wants to achieve consensus in the House on these matters, but will he say how much implementing the new tax credit will cost?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) asked me about the cost of implementation. I made the point that the present system is quite expensive and cumbersome because it contains so many rules, regulations and different rates. We want to simplify the system, and the final cost of the scheme will depend on its exact shape and form.

The hon. Gentleman asked about capital rules elsewhere. I said in reply to an earlier question from a Tory Member that today's proposal relates purely to pensions and pensioners. There is a difference between what the Government want to do in that regard and what we want to do in regard to the benefits system in general.

[Mr. Darling]

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about consensus. It is very difficult to build consensus over pensions. I have announced the pension credit, but the first thing that the hon. Member for Havant, the Opposition spokesman on these matters, said was that he was against it. The Government are going to benefit 5.5 million pensioners, but the hon. Gentleman opposes that. I do not know whether he is in favour of our proposals to benefit 3 million taxpaying pensioners. He did not say that he was. Are we to assume that he opposes that, too?

However, we know that voting Tory will cost pensioners 200 quid. The Tories will take the winter fuel payment away, then give it back in another form and expect pensioners to be grateful. When people look at the announcements made today and yesterday they will see that the Government's prudent management of the economy has enabled us to give more money to pensioners. They will see, too, that the Labour party is the only one that can be trusted to ensure that pensioners are given what they need, and to implement the most radical change in the pension system over the past 50 years. We want to reward saving, not punish it.

Points of Order

2.24 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As our new Speaker, you have made it clear that you propose to make your own decisions and that you will not necessarily be bound by the decisions of Madam Speaker Boothroyd, your predecessor. However, she felt especially strongly about the requirement that hon. Members, and especially Ministers, notify other hon. Members when they are about to visit their constituencies. I hope that you will be equally firm on the matter.

I raise this point of order on behalf of myself, and of my hon. Friends the Members for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). Yesterday, a junior civil servant working for the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food informed us by means of a mobile telephone call that the Minister proposed to visit our constituencies. That telephone call was made at a very late stage—only about half an hour before the visit was due to take place.

This morning, the excuse was given—again by telephone—that the Minister had planned only to visit the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead. However, he had changed his mind at the last minute and decided to visit instead an Environment Agency building that straddles the boundary between my constituency and my hon. Friend's.

That would have been all very well, but no one had bothered to notify even my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, whose constituency the Minister originally intended to visit—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should worry about himself, not the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). I am sure that she is capable of raising a point of order on the matter if she so wishes. I have got the hon. Gentleman's drift. When I was a Back Bencher and a Minister came to my constituency without telling me, I always gave that Minister a telling off. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman does the same, and not ask the Speaker to do it for him.

Secondly, I made a ruling on this matter on 6 November, and I refer the hon. Gentleman to column 32 in *Hansard* for that date. However, if the hon. Gentleman feels it necessary to tell a Minister off, he should do so and not let the Minister get away with discourtesy.

Select Committees and the Executive

[Relevant documents: The Government's response to the First Report from the Liaison Committee, Session 1999–2000, Cm 4737; and Second Report from the Liaison Committee, Session 1999–2000, Independence or Control? The Government's Reply to the Committee's First Report, HC 748.]

Motion made, and Question put, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

2.26 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Over the past 20 years, the role of Select Committees has grown in importance. Of course, we always had the Public Accounts Committee, which I joined in 1965, and other Select Committees. In those days, hon. Members were frequently pressed to serve, as Chairmen virtually ran their Committees. Things have changed, and I understand that recently there has been a scramble to take part in the valuable work that the Public Accounts Committee has always performed on behalf of Parliament.

However, the major change, introduced as a result of the work of John Mackintosh and David Marquand, was the introduction of departmentally related Committees. Those Committees were subsequently refined, and now we have Select Committees that independently scrutinise Government Departments.

That has been an undoubted success. Select Committee members become expert on the activities of the Department with which they are concerned. Questions about the Departments can be pursued and repeated until an answer is obtained—a method that is not readily available across the Floor of the House. I recall that the present Secretary of State for Scotland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), when he was a member of the Committee, pursuing a civil servant again and again until he got the yes-or-no answer that he wanted—in that case the answer was yes.

It is not easy to do that on the Floor of the House. It is therefore possible for Select Committees to supplement the work of the Chamber.

There is a great deal of expertise available to Select Committees. Lord Howe was Chancellor of the Exchequer when the then Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee was looking at monetarism. It had examined a particular matter with great care and it was interesting, when the Chancellor appeared before them, that the Committee's members knew more about that matter than he. With a certain amount of dedication, it is possible for Select Committee members to acquire that level of expertise—albeit in a restricted area—and get suitable answers. That is not always possible on the Floor of the House.

In each Select Committee, there has been a search for bipartisan agreement. Point scoring has a part to play on the Floor of the House, but it has no role in Select Committees. Members of Committees understand that and know full well that indulging in point scoring would be to the disadvantage of the Committee and of their investigations. As a result, Select Committee members form relationships based on trust and co-operation. They judge issues on the facts, rather than according to preconceived lines of argument.

Some people considered that such a state of affairs would be difficult to achieve because Parliament does not have the separation of powers evident in the United States Congress. We understand that the first priority of hon. Members is to support or oppose the Government, but it is possible, in a Select Committee, to move away from that confrontation and look at the facts of a matter. It is interesting that the trust and confidence that grows between Select Committee members means that it is more difficult for them to play the party game at the expense of the investigative role that is their proper task. Some saw the stronger party system as a barrier to achieving meaningful agreement.

In practice, such agreement generally has been achieved to the benefit of the inquiry process and the holding of Ministers to account. The Select Committee system has shown that determined Members can be surprisingly effective. Our Select Committees have to operate without the strength given by the separation of powers. Within the context of the Government and the Opposition, with their own agendas, it is possible to achieve informed and more objective conclusions.

That has shown itself in a number of valuable initiatives, notably the confirmation hearings by the Select Committee on the Treasury, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice). While not dictating the appointments, the Committee offers the opportunity to test publicly—through the confirmation hearings—the suitability of candidates for public office. That has some effect upon people who are put into positions of responsibility without a general agreement that they have the requisite qualifications. There has been some systematic monitoring of recommendations, a practice which is to be more widely used in future. I will deal later with how we can monitor effectively the work of Select Committees and the consequences of their publications.

There have been some outstanding examples of changes to general public perception, as well as the perception of the Government and the Opposition, as a result of certain Select Committee reports. For example, the eighth report of the Public Accounts Committee in the early 1990s showed that the standards of probity and of dealing properly with public money had been abused. The eighth report initially was rubbished, but it came to be accepted by the then Prime Minister, who publicly praised the report.

The Committee examined the many things that went wrong in the Wessex regional health authority, the Welsh Development Agency and the West Midlands regional health authority. In a number of other matters, Select Committee reports have played a prominent part. The Select Committee on International Development has played an important role in alerting us to what could be going wrong on Montserrat. The Trade and Industry Committee reported on BMW, Rover and Longbridge; the Select Committee on Health on the tobacco industry; the Transport Sub-Committee—chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who is always active in these matters—on air traffic control and aircraft safety. There are many other reports which have changed public perceptions and, via public perceptions, have changed Government actions.

The report "Shifting the Balance" is one of the most important reports from the Liaison Committee since it was set up 20 years ago. It arose from a number of anxieties

[Mr. Robert Sheldon]

expressed by Chairmen in the spring of last year concerning certain Government responses. In following that up, other matters were raised and the Committee decided that it would seek to examine the working of Committees. The Committee also thought it advisable to open up the discussion to other interested bodies.

As a result, the Hansard Society became involved and the London school of economics kindly offered to host a one-day session. This took place on 19 November last year, and much of the report reflects that most important session. I would like to thank both the Hansard Society and the LSE for their help and contribution to the debate.

Among the matters dealt with in the report are the way in which the composition of each Committee should be arranged, the manner of presenting the work that Committees undertake to Parliament and staffing and secondments. I shall deal first with the composition of the Committees. Twenty years ago, the Committee of Selection acquired the responsibility of choosing members of each Committee. It copied the method of choosing members of Standing Committees; that is, mainly from a list supplied by the Whips.

Members have been kept off Select Committees—or even, in some cases, removed—because of their perceived lack of party loyalty. The case we must cite is that of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton)—now, fortunately, the Chairman of the Select Committee on Procedure and a Deputy Speaker in Westminster Hall. He was the Chairman of the Health Committee and a novel arrangement was suggested; that, having served for two Parliaments, he was no longer equipped to deal with a third. That was so blatant an affront, but the hon. Member for Macclesfield dealt with it well and regained his reputation as a result.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his generous remarks in referring to this incident in parliamentary development and history. Does he agree that the real nonsense of the proposal—dreamed up by the then Government Whips Office to prevent my reappointment to the Health Committee—was that it referred only to Conservative Members? The real problem was not only that it was a plot by the then Government Whips Office, but that the Opposition Whips Office connived.

Mr. Sheldon: The interesting thing was that I was about to embark on my fourth Parliament as Chairman of the PAC and there was no problem with that. I was criticising all sorts of people, as I have done unfailingly throughout my period in this House.

The introduction of a new system to deal with a problem such as that is clearly wrong and we must find better ways of handling such matters. In light of the current demands for modernisation—a matter discussed on Tuesday, when my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House played a prominent role—it is wholly unacceptable for the Government, through their Whips, to choose the very Members who will be examining aspects of the Government. Nor should the charge be made—however unfairly—that the basis of membership of a Select Committee should be at the disposal of party, rather than the basis being the Member's knowledge, understanding and commitment.

The Liaison Committee proposed that the Committee should be renamed the Select Committee Panel and that it should copy the role of the Chairmen's Panel for Standing Committees. The proposal is that the Chairman would have two Deputy Chairmen. The current membership of the Liaison Committee is 33; it is too large for detailed decision-making. The Panel should have the power to appoint an executive of the Committee and the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen, after consideration with all concerned, would put forward names for the House to consider.

I emphasise that the important point is not the precise formulation by the Committee, but that there should be a firm acceptance that Members examining the Government should not be chosen by the Government; nor should they be chosen on the basis of convenience to the party managers.

The Whips have an important role to play in putting forward names for consideration. They have a detailed knowledge of the interests and concerns of Members, and that information needs to be relayed to the Panel who would put the names of Members to the House to accept, reject or amend. We wish to make the House much more involved in the manner and details of selection.

Paragraph 29 of the report mentions "An alternative career".

> Ministerial office has a powerful attraction for many back-benchers on the government side of the House. But it is a matter of concern when able and effective select committee members—and sometimes even Chairmen—are so easily tempted by the lowliest of government and opposition appointments. We must be realistic about this; many Members understandably aspire to be Ministers, and of course former Ministers bring valuable knowledge and experience to their service on select committees.

It goes on to say:

> What we would like to see is a better *balance* between the attractions of government office and of service on select committees. If all the recommendations in this report are implemented, we think there will be a significant shift in that balance. Members generally (and perhaps especially those relatively new to the House) should then see service on select committees as a career path which, in terms of status and influence, will be a proper reward for their hard work and commitment.

It is probable that a career path is more important now that the House of Commons has 659 Members who have an overwhelmingly full-time commitment to the parliamentary process. This has been an undoubted change over the past five or 10 years—certainly in the many years since I first came to the House. Not only can proper use be made of their time but a proper scrutiny of Government can be undertaken which many members of the Government respect, appreciate and frequently welcome. Civil servants frequently make that point to me.

One of the most useful suggestions to emerge from the valuable meeting that we had last autumn at the London school of economics was from the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). Paragraph 40 says:

> What is needed is a new way of giving timely and effective exposure to reports. We propose that, once a week after Questions, there should be a period of half an hour devoted to a report—normally one published within the previous fortnight. The proceedings would begin with a Minister giving an initial response to the report for five minutes . . .

The recommendation is for an initial response, not a final response. After all, the press and everyone else give an initial response. Let the Government say which matters

need to be considered. They do that in emergency situations; why not in this case? Paragraph 40 goes on to say that the initial response would be

> followed by the Chairman of the committee, or another Member speaking on its behalf, for five minutes. The remainder of the half-hour would give an opportunity for Opposition front-benchers to comment, together with any back-benchers who caught the eye of the Chair. A procedure of this sort is already used in some other Parliaments, for example in Australia and Canada.

There is nothing new about the suggestion. We are saying that there are 659 Members of Parliament, but where are they all? What are they doing? There is plenty of work here for them to do, and the sooner they devote themselves to it and develop an alternative career structure, the better. We may want to reduce the numbers of Members of Parliament at some stage in the future, but that is a very long way off. Meanwhile, there is work for them to do.

Paragraph 40 concludes that the introduction of such a procedure here

> would help to keep the work of select committees at the forefront of Parliamentary and public attention.

Half an hour is not very long, and such a debate could be fitted in easily. If the House regards all the work we do and the reports we produce as important, they should be worth half an hour's debate a week.

I shall now deal with some of the other recommendations. Paragraph 52 says:

> Some select committees have made a practice of following up their recommendations and criticisms at regular intervals; and the Agriculture and Defence Committees produce annual reports bringing matters up to date and detailing any progress made. This is an area where we believe that concerted action will have a disproportionate effect. Accordingly, we will expect all appropriate select committees, by the rise of the House for the Christmas 2000 recess, to assess progress on "live" recommendations and criticisms, and to report. This may be possible with written evidence only; or one or more oral evidence hearings may be necessary. But we are in no doubt of the value of the exercise.

This recommendation follows the monitoring by the National Audit Office—incidentally, I happen to be the chairman of the Public Accounts Commission. The NAO produces reports which are examined and commented on by the members of the Public Accounts Committee. Those comments are published in a report, and it does not end there. The NAO is asked to keep the matter under review, and it does. A year or so later, it tells the PAC that progress has been such-and-such and the matter is considered further. That is an automatic process, and we propose that it should also be applied to Select Committee reports. At present, so much of the work of the Select Committee is dealt with in the report and the matter does not proceed very much further. It needs to be monitored in the same way.

Paragraph 55 says:

> Each committee should make its annual report before Christmas each year. In the following January, we (or our successor Panel)—

if it is introduced—

> will consider all the reports, with two aims: *first*, to draw conclusions about the overall effectiveness of the select committee system; and *second*, to address any problems affecting committees, such as—for example—access to documents, attendance of witnesses, or quality of government replies.

One area where there is a need for monitoring is that of departmental expenditure plans. Not much time is spent on them at present—it is not very well organised. Of course, the estimates are very difficult to read, other than by those who have a professional or particular interest. However, it is crucial. In Public Accounts Committee annual debates, I used to tease Select Committees whose members did not examine departmental proposals in the estimates. I used to say, "For heaven's sake, let us just say that we agree with everything that the Department is doing, and move on to the next business." That shows what a nonsense it is. However, it is now possible to do something about that because resource accounting will make it much easier for Committees to understand and focus on expenditure, and to make useful comments on it and the order of the priorities involved.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the view on estimates that he is expressing to the House on behalf of the Liaison Committee, which he chairs with distinction, is also fully reflected in the unanimous report to the House from the Procedure Committee?

Mr. Sheldon: Undoubtedly; I shall pay tribute any time on these matters to the hon. Gentleman.

It is essential that expenditure is considered and that useful comment is made on it. In that way, the Committee can see how Departments deal with problems that the Committee knows something about—for example, by accepting the estimates, putting them in limbo or amending them.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): My right hon. Friend knows that I am a relatively new Chairman of a Select Committee. His recommendations place great demands on Select Committees and their staff. I find it very difficult, with the slender resources that we have, to give our full attention, in sufficient detail, to the growing burden of work. My Committee would like to do more work, but the staff and resources that we have are simply inadequate to do the job and be accountable to the House for the efficient working of the Select Committee. I was amazed at the smallness of the resources provided for doing an expanding job.

Mr. Sheldon: There is no question about that. We have quite a bit to say on staffing. I shall be dealing with that later, although not in any particular detail, as there is so much, and showing the kind of approach that I believe to be necessary.

We have at present three days of the Session on expenditure linked to Select Committee reports. We consider that that should be increased to six days. For more than 30 years, those interested in the ordering and priorities of public expenditure—including many in the Government and the civil service—have wanted these priorities to be debated and decided in a rather better way than has been the case for so long. That was, in effect, the birth of departmentally related Select Committees.

The proposals would make it possible to look at priorities and make assessments. There is now a great momentum in the country and the House for more informed and better decision making—no question about it. Resource accounting is expected to lead finally to a proper assessment of how we decide on the Government's detailed expenditure plans.

[Mr. Sheldon]

On the issue of evidence, uncorrected replies by Ministers are available on the internet the following day. We managed to get that concession, but other uncorrected evidence, which is reported in the press and on the radio, is not available on the internet or, indeed, in any other form. I have been saying for some time that all uncorrected evidence should automatically be available on the internet so that the following morning we can look up what has been said, as I do with ministerial evidence. Large typeface makes it clear that the evidence is uncorrected. It can, of course, be corrected subsequently. All uncorrected evidence should be available to everyone. We see that important evidence in the press, but we cannot get access to it for ourselves. That is nonsense, and I have made my views on that clear.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was going to refer to him as my right hon. Friend because we have served in the House for so long together. I hope that he would not take that amiss.

Given the criticisms that the right hon. Gentleman has outlined and those contained in the report, and the fact that the Government talk about wanting to listen to the House, does he agree that it is not fair that this subject is being discussed in an Adjournment debate? There should be a proper motion so that the House can vote and show its disregard for the replies that were given to his two excellent reports.

Mr. Sheldon: I shall come to that matter before I conclude. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—or perhaps I should say my right hon. Friend—for raising it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) mentioned staffing. The report deals with the format of our publications and the publicity that they receive. Those are important matters and I hope that they will receive full consideration. Staffing is also important. Responsibility for that lies partly within our own province, but we need the assistance of the Commission. Our demands are modest in comparison with demands generally. The whole expenditure of the Select Committee system is manageable if it is regarded as important. We have set out what staff would be needed to produce the information that my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield wants. I will not go into detail, but it is in the report, and I hope that staffing will receive proper consideration.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) rightly makes much of the format of our publications, and it is awful that our reports are produced in such a way. Government reports have lots of colour and are fancy, but we are prohibited from publishing reports that look like that. It is an absurd situation and relegates us to the also-rans in the publicity stakes.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am sorry to trouble the right hon. Gentleman at this stage of his speech, but will he press the rewind button and return to the subject of the composition of Committees? In light of his earlier remarks, does he agree that it is curious—to put it most charitably—that the Modernisation Committee should not only be chaired by a member of the Government, no matter how distinguished that individual might be, but that it should also include no fewer than three parliamentary private secretaries to Ministers? Is it not wrong that such a Committee of the House should have the fingerprints of the Government Whips Office all over it?

Mr. Sheldon: I should not like to comment on that. I have a great deal of admiration for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. She was born in my constituency, remember. She visits it from time to time and I welcome her with great pleasure.

Following our first report "Shifting the Balance", other commentators have published plans that largely follow our main recommendations. They go further than our report, but their involvement gives an idea of the pressure for change that has certainly been aroused. Three or four major non-Select Committee reports have commented on the future and how we should proceed.

Early-day motion 1135 was tabled yesterday. It is signed by the 30 Select Committee Chairmen. I do not usually sign early-day motions, but I was delighted to sign this one. The signatories include the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, both Chairmen of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee and the Chairman of the Procedure Committee. All 30 are dedicated Members of the House who seek to improve the administration and competence of the Government and the laws of our country.

The report was passed unanimously by the Select Committee Chairmen, all of whom are senior Members of the House. On Tuesday, substantive motions were introduced in the Chamber on the second report of the Modernisation Committee, but that Committee was divided on its report, not unanimous. Proposals to implement the majority report of the divided Committee were agreed to. I am not arguing against that, but explaining that our report was unanimous. We are entitled to ask for substantive motions on it to be put to the House.

2.57 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Perhaps the first and most important point to make is that the Government are not attacking the worth of the work done by Select Committees, nor do we seek in any way to weaken their responsibilities, independence or role in the House. It should not be necessary to say that, but I think it is necessary because of the way in which the Government's response to the very profound and far-reaching recommendations in the Liaison Committee's report have been reported and described.

The Liaison Committee itself describes its proposals as modest. It does itself less than justice. My own view is that the overall impact of its recommendations would be profound. They would impinge on the role of every individual Member in the House, not just on the way in which the House deals with the Executive. It is arguable that they would even impinge on our constitutional conventions because it seems to me that the Committee envisages a perceptible shift away from the long-established role of Select Committees—perhaps going back hundreds of years—to scrutinise decisions of Government, and towards Select Committees beginning,

unprecedentedly, to substitute their judgment for that of Government. *[Interruption.]* I am glad to hear that the Opposition agree that that is what is envisaged. It is, of course, worthy of discussion, but it is a profound and not a modest change.

Moreover, recommendations in the Liaison Committee's report, such as the call for decisions to be taken on substantive motions, may well lead to greater party pressure on Select Committees and their members than is the case at present or, indeed, has been the case for many years. I accept, of course, that the case of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) was an exception, but we all know that, outrageous though that case may have been, it was probably unique and certainly did no good to those who brought it about.

Let me remind the House that the Government have already and without pressure made improvements for Select Committees. The European Scrutiny Committee has been given new scope and a new remit—the full role that it should have had. Select Committees have been given a role in examining treaties and draft legislation. Albeit with some opposition from the Opposition, the rules have already been eased—we are perfectly prepared to look at them afresh—to make it easier for Committees to work together. Guidance has been issued telling Departments to co-operate with Select Committee reviews of their previous work, as well as on-going reports and recommendations. Moreover, the Westminster Hall experiment has meant that the number of debates on Select Committee reports is now higher than even the most ambitious Committee ever requested, and the matter may be reconsidered. Far from resisting the extension of scrutiny, the current Government have shown remarkable willingness to envisage greater scrutiny, and that shift towards greater scrutiny has been larger in the three years of this Government than in many previous years.

However, as I have already said, one fundamental principle underpins the Government's approach to Select Committee work: it is that Select Committees exist, as they always have, to scrutinise the decisions made by Government, not to substitute their own judgment for that of the Executive. Those who draw simple comparisons between our work and that of other legislatures sometimes overlook the huge difference between a legislature in which the Executive is not represented, and one from which the Executive draws its authority and to which members of the Executive are, as Ministers, personally accountable. For example, accountability for ministerial appointments runs through the Minister directly to the Members of this House as the legislature, and the Minister is answerable for the decisions that he or she takes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) referred to the Liaison Committee's proposals for which legislative authority is sought, but he knows, and I remind the House, that, as is pointed out in the Government's reply,

> The Committee on Standards in Public Life considered this issue and recommended not Select Committee hearings, but a Commissioner for Public Appointments.

That is one of the areas in connection with which the Government have some concerns about the Liaison Committee's report.

The Government have been accused of rejecting "virtually every recommendation" in the Liaison Committee report. I reject that accusation. The Government wholeheartedly accept the need for joint working, whether between Committees in this House or between Committees in this House and in the House of Lords. The Government also accept the Committee's strictures on the need for sound and timely responses to Select Committee reports. We do not dispute a number of recommendations made by the Liaison Committee about what is best practice and how that can be spread. Several other recommendations are for the Select Committees themselves, but the Government do not in any way disagree with them.

However, there is a genuine and key difficulty, which might have led to the remarks I mentioned earlier, in that a substantial number of the recommendations made by the Committee depend on one central and key recommendation relating to the role of the Chairman of the Liaison Committee and his or her colleagues on that Committee: the report proposes an enormous increase in their role and authority. The Government believe that that needs serious and thoughtful examination because it has genuinely profound implications for the working of the House as a whole.

Let me highlight one of the central propositions underlying the report—one that does not depend directly on the detailed proposals regarding the role of the Liaison Committee, but does underpin many of the recommendations. I refer to the thrust of the recommendations that would, in effect, establish a separate career structure for Members of the House who choose to make a Select Committee route the chief focus of their work as Members of Parliament.

I fully recognise, as do the Government, that it has long been argued that not only is the work of Select Committees valuable, but it should be even more highly regarded than it is today. That is a view I strongly share. However, in many ways, the route to that greater regard lies in the hands of individual members of Select Committees themselves. The report deplores the fact that some hon. Members are less than assiduous in their attendance at the Select Committee to which they are appointed, suggesting that some have been appointed who are less than anxious to serve on those Select Committees. All of those problems, which I realise are genuine, appear to lie at the door of the Whips of the relevant parties and the appointments mechanism itself.

I suggest to the House, in all seriousness, that we ought to stop and think for a moment about what we are saying about the interests and concerns of individual Members. The stated assumption is that there is a plethora of Members of Parliament burning to serve on the Select Committees in place of those who, for whatever reason, have found it difficult to find sufficient time to carry out their Select Committee responsibilities. Would that it were always so. All Members of Parliament carry more burdens and face more calls on their time and more responsibilities than any human being can sustain; they all have to make choices about their priorities, but only the individual Member can make his or her own choices. I accept that the Liaison Committee has tried, in all good faith, to find answers to the question of how we make Select Committees work more highly regarded, but I maintain that many of the answers to the problem that they pose lie in the hands of individual Members themselves, in the attitude they adopt to the work of the Select Committees, in the nature of their reports and in the studies that are carried out.

Mr. Sheerman: My right hon. Friend and I have been friends for a long time, but I have to tell her that I think

[Mr. Sheerman]

she is missing the issue underlying the Committee's report and the work that we put into it, which is the role and authority of Parliament, not of the Select Committee system. Those who have been Members of Parliament for some time know that this place is dying on its feet. If we do not find a proper role for Parliament, we shall become merely subservient to Ministers and the Executive. My right hon. Friend says that Parliament is a busy place in which people have lots to do, but, after many years as a Member, I have come to believe that, soon, parliamentary private secretaries will start to have parliamentary private secretaries. Everyone on the Front Benches on both sides seems to have a PPS, and we cannot run a Select Committee system when, every five minutes, someone is promoted to PPS or junior Minister.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to say that he and I are friends of long standing. That is why I am sorry to disagree with him. I am genuinely dismayed to hear him echo that easy and, in my view, empty criticism of the role of Parliament, expressed most frequently by Opposition Members and used in a partisan way—

Mr. Sheerman *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend is not saying that—he believes that the problems go back many years and I accept that the issues have long been the subject of argument. They are, in a sense, old chestnuts—what happened to the giants of yesteryear, or why are today's politicians so trivial? The debate has been going on for centuries. Perhaps I am too old-fashioned for the taste of my hon. Friend and those who are participating in the debate, but I regard being elected to be a Member of Parliament as one of the greatest honours that the people of this country can confer on one of their fellow citizens and I reject with contempt the assertion recently made by a fellow Member of Parliament that being a Member of Parliament is not work for a grown up. There is plenty of work to be done—certainly, I have never had any difficulty finding work to do, even when I have not held office.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I shall give way in a minute—I thought I saw my hon. Friend inching forward.

First, let me tell my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) that I do not accept that the House is as diminished, nor that it is as subservient, as it has become fashionable to allege. However, I accept that there is always room for improvement in the way in which we carry out our duties and I am always prepared to consider proposals on how we might do so.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Does my right hon. Friend not know that one of the best tricks in politics is to set up one's own guys and then knock them down? She is being a trifle unkind to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) when she answers a question that he did not put.

Is my right hon. Friend not aware of the fact that often—I can quote a specific case—Members of Parliament with lots of relevant experience are not picked for service on a Select Committee, whereas someone who does not want the job is drafted in and becomes an extremely unwilling member of the Committee. In the week in which, for the first time, we have, by changing voting times, unhooked the relationship between a debate and the decision made in the light of that debate, should we not consider that the House of Commons stands in grave danger of losing the rationale on which it was created, and should we not start to think seriously about some other role?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware—the matter is referred to in one of the Committee's reports—that, from time to time, there have been suggestions that individuals have been placed on Select Committees when they did not wish to be on them and when others would have preferred to exercise such a role. I accept that that is highly undesirable. I am also aware—I say this with even greater regret—that it is difficult to find Members who are willing to serve on some Committees. The assumption that the thrust of the difficulties that arise is simply and only that Members are jostling to hold office in different Select Committees is perhaps over-simplification.

That brings me to the next issue that I wish to raise. It is something that Members as a whole should consider. I am not sure that many have done so. It is whether we need or want an alternative career structure. I fear that it might lead to at least two, if not three, kinds of Member.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I apologise for intervening as the right hon. Lady moves to the next issue. I thought that she would take up the point that, in my mind, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) crystallised brilliantly, when he said that there is something wrong when those who are at the forefront of scrutinising government should be chosen by the Government of the day. What is her response to that simple question?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall return to the issue of how nominations are made. My right hon. Friend asked a brilliantly simple question, but the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I do not share my right hon. Friend's view and that of the right hon. Gentleman that it is the Government who choose members of Select Committees.

There is the group of Members who have been fortunate enough—some may say unfortunate enough—to be drawn into Government ranks. If I understand the underlying thrust of the proposals, there is to be a second group of Members for whom the Select Committee work will be the chief focus of their work and careers. Presumably, there will be a third group of Members who are neither in the Government nor on Select Committees, who simply make up the remnant of the House.

Mr. Bercow: What is wrong with that?

Mrs. Beckett: That is a matter that should be clearly aired and clearly put to the bulk of our colleagues, who will presumably be that remnant. It should be made clear to them that we may, in these proposals, be creating a particularly privileged role for Select Committee members.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I agree that it may be useful to have the debate on the

Adjournment. However, when my right hon. Friend says that these matters should be put to our colleagues, will she ensure that, at some stage, we have a chance to vote on the recommendations?

Mrs. Beckett: When I said that the matter should be put before our colleagues, I was referring initially to this debate. I keep being told of the views of the Members who have contributed to the discussion and put forward the report. They have had, as has my hon. Friend, their opportunity to contribute to all the discussions through which the report was thrashed out. He knows as well as I do that the bulk of Members are perhaps hardly aware of the report, and certainly not of its contents. The first step that should be taken, before we are advised to come to any decision, is to try to ensure that there is awareness of what is being proposed. That is the reference that I made.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If I must. I am trying to make progress.

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Lady must know that it is on the record that an early-day motion refers specifically to the Liaison Committee's report. It has been signed by more than 250 Members, most of them Labour Members. I therefore contest her assertion that many Members are not aware of the report. Not only are they aware of it, but they have supported it by putting their names to the early-day motion to which I refer.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point about the role of early-day motions, on which I do not intend to dwell.

In the report, the Liaison Committee highlights as a problem the undervaluing of Select Committees work because some Members, if offered the opportunity, would choose the route to decision-making, even at a junior level in Government, over a senior though advisory role on a Select Committee. The Committee does not suggest that Members must choose, but it seems to postulate a potential choice of future members, not least by deploring the decision of some individual members to move from a Select Committee role to a role in government.

Of the 121 Members who have been appointed to ministerial office since the last general election, only nine have moved to do so from within a Select Committee. Equally, however, of the 33 members of the Liaison Committee, I think that I am right in saying—I do so partly from memory—no fewer than 20 have in the past enjoyed ministerial or shadow ministerial office on their respective Front Benches. The number may be higher. In some instances, they have held senior office at Cabinet or shadow Cabinet level.

The suggestion that it is perhaps a bad thing for Select Committee members to move into government is not a view that in any way I share. I believe that the potential for Members to move into and out of Government and Select Committees, between the one and the other, is one of the strengths of our system. Certainly, it is clear from the membership of the Liaison Committee that if the suggestion is that the route should be only one way or that it should not exist at all, we would see a very different group of Select Committees from the one that we see now.

That brings me to the Government's and my own principal concern about the largest group of recommendations made by the Liaison Committee. The most profound change proposed is the different role for the Chairman of the Liaison Committee and for his or her panel. I shall set out clearly what is proposed. It is the intention, as indicated in the report, that immediately after a general election, three Members, identified as Members of seniority and impartiality, should be appointed to handle Select Committee work. To those three Members would fall the role of nominating every member of every Select Committee now appointed by the Committee of Selection. It is not wholly clear to me whether it is intended also that they should appoint all the members of the Select Committees whose nominations now come directly from the party Whips.

Those three Members would have the additional role of deciding, and in effect implementing the decision, which Select Committees would be chaired by members of which party. Those are considerable powers. For example, the three Members could decide whether, to take an example at random, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs or the Select Committee on the Treasury should have a pro or anti-European bias.

As the Select Committees chosen by the three come to take up their role and as those Committees elect their Chairmen, those individuals would join the original group of three. From among the entire group of Chairmen of different Select Committees gradually returned, a Sub-Committee or an Executive Committee would be drawn. That would exercise in future the general responsibilities that follow the responsibilities initially exercised by the initial three. It is proposed that the Sub-Committee—in itself obviously very much influenced, if not directly chosen, by the original three Committee Chairmen—should handle any future nomination.

The report recommends that the Executive Committee should be charged with handling what I understand to be all the funding of Select Committees themselves; the Chairman of the Liaison Committee should have responsibility for deciding what reports are tagged to, or can be taken in conjunction with, debates, including debates instigated not only by the Government but by the Opposition and individual private Members. Thus it will be up to the Chairman of the Liaison Committee, and to him or her alone—they can consult the Sub-Committee—to decide that the purpose of a particular debate, perhaps chosen by an individual Member or the Opposition, can encompass a particular Select Committee report.

I draw the attention of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) to the proposal—perhaps it is one that she has not been following—that the Liaison Committee Chairman should have a role in advising the Government on which legislation, following the Queen's Speech, should be put forward to the House in draft. Each of those is a substantial and considerable power individually. Collectively, they represent an enormous accumulation of power and influence in the hands of a Member, albeit one initially chosen by the House.

All hon. Members know that I bow to no one in my admiration for my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, who presently holds that post, but I shall not disguise from the House the fact that one of my main concerns is that, if we set up a structure and positions of that nature, we shall be in danger of

[Mrs. Beckett]

replicating the seniority provisions that have led so many people to criticise the American legislature, for example, in that respect. Whatever disagreements hon. Members have with their Whips—all of us have them from time to time—there have been eight Chief Whips during the 17 years served by the previous two Chairmen of the Liaison Committee.

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Lady correctly points out those aspects of the Liaison Committee report with which she disagrees, and she explained her reasons clearly. Does she not understand that, had she tabled orders on a substantive motion on the report, she could have identified her areas of concern and we, as Members of Parliament, could have voted on them or tabled amendments? The trouble is that we now face an all-or-nothing situation, not her carefully thought-through reasons for disagreeing with certain aspects of the report.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady is entirely wrong. I shall presently discuss her point but, for the moment, I simply say that this is the first occasion on which the House has had an opportunity to discuss these matters. It is the first occasion on which hon. Members have had the chance to express their views and, in fact, the first occasion on which I have had an opportunity to express my views on the Floor of the House. That is all—no more, no less. Nothing about today's debate will confine the House's options in future.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I shall get on. I may give way on it later. *[Interruption.]* I have not finished making my case, and I want to complete this part of my speech.

Certainly, I take the view that were appointments to Select Committees in comparatively few hands—particularly at the outset in a new Parliament, but even later in a Parliament—we would not have dispensed with a system of patronage and information about the interests of Members or about who may or may not be a worthy person to contribute to a Select Committee's work. Instead, we would have replaced a system of patronage that all know and understand and relate to the system of patronage within the parliamentary parties with a free-standing system of patronage that would depend entirely on the judgment of individuals, on the information that was made available to those individuals and on the channel of knowledge and influence that they themselves, as individual Members of the House, would exercise.

I do not doubt—I say this in all sincerity—that there is a case to be made for such proposals. I simply say that they are indeed important proposals that should be seriously considered and not merely nodded through or accepted as if they were of no consequence whatever, because they are of considerable consequence to every Member of the House.

I know that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, "We should have an opportunity to put our views." If I recall correctly, the Leader of the Opposition committed the Conservative party, from the Opposition Dispatch Box, to accepting many of the proposals. I very much doubt whether he had read all the report before he did so. My response to the hon. Lady is that hon. Members should re-read the report, think about it and come to a view about whether the proposed path is the one that the House should tread.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Is not the essence of the right hon. Lady's argument the fact that she objects to the transfer of power from the Government, the individuals who lead the Government Whips Office and the Leader of the House to those who are elected by Parliament?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely mistaken. After all, however the names arise—I shall discuss that in a second—they will be put to the House on a motion with which the House could disagree. He will know that although it is rare for the House to disagree with a nomination, it has been known to do so. I cannot recall whether I shall discuss this matter further later in my speech; if I do, I apologise to the House for the repetition. Whatever the position of the Conservative party—in this context or in others, it has never been my practice to dwell on private grief—my party has a procedure, which is neither infallible nor perfect, for self-nomination to the membership of Select Committees. That procedure is open, and recommendations have to be put to my party for affirmation before they are put forward by the Whips to the Committee of Selection. There is no need for a wholly changed system to secure input of that kind.

Mr. Bercow: A few moments ago, the right hon. Lady observed that this is the House's first opportunity to debate the report, and she apparently sought thereby to justify the fact that we shall not have a chance to vote on it today. Does she agree, on reflection, that that is an entirely spurious argument, because the fact that every Second Reading debate is also the first opportunity to consider a Bill's merits or demerits is not used to justify holding a debate on an Adjournment motion?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me; although I shall come back to his argument, I shall not respond at this point.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): My right hon. Friend's point about the number of people who are involved in selection is, of course, one of substance; it is also a point of detail, and that detail can be changed if the principle is accepted. Does she understand that the principle in this context—the root principle in terms of patronage—is that such people will of course exercise patronage, but that they will do so on behalf of the House of Commons and that they will do so transparently? There is a difference between that and patronage being exercised by the Whips, transparently on behalf of the Government or party, which is a completely different matter.

Mrs. Beckett: I shall make two brief points to my hon. and learned Friend. To pick up the latter first, yes, he is quite right—the situation that he described is different from a role exercised in a party, whether the party of opposition or of government. There is scope for a debate about the way in which we, in the House and in

this country, discuss the role of the party—I might have much to say, perhaps when I retire from the Front Bench, on that. I think that we take too little account of the role of political parties. With the possible exception of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), whose circumstances are unique, not one hon. Member is in Parliament for any reason other than because we are representatives of our parties. However, the workings of the House continue to treat all hon. Members as if we were gentlemen and amateurs who were returned to the House several hundred years ago. That approach does not reflect the role and the existence of parties, although it should do so, and I take issue with my hon. and learned Friend in that respect. Only in this country is it considered somehow ignoble to be a party representative, and to be above parties is considered to be the highest accolade that a politician can receive. It is usually given when politicians are either superannuated or about to be kicked out of their party.

Mr. David Davis: Given what the right hon. Lady has just said, I hope that she will not take it amiss if I say that I look forward to her return to the Back Benches, if only so that she can reveal that information.

On the very important point that was made by the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), the difference that the right hon. Lady did not highlight—between members of the Liaison Committee choosing which parts of the Queen's Speech should be presented as draft legislation before going through the normal procedure, and the Government so choosing—is that members of the Liaison Committee have a single interest: enhancing scrutiny.

Since the genesis of that argument, a good example of the reverse situation has occurred in the Public Accounts Committee. A year or so ago, my Committee was promised a draft of what became the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000. The arrangements were such that it was impossible for the Committee to examine the draft Bill, with the result, which is understood by hon. Members on both sides of the House, that it was badly flawed. That situation arose because the Government and the Scrutiny Committees have different interests with regard to Bills.

Mrs. Beckett: Without dwelling on what I know was a matter of contention and disagreement in the past, I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that I hope he is aware that the Government have already proposed further mechanisms whereby hon. Members across the House can give an opinion about the weight that they give to various proposals. It is true that, like our predecessors, we have at present only a limited range of proposals about what is looked at in draft, but I hope and anticipate that we will expand that aspect of dealing with legislation. The right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not dwell on that now.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) made a slightly different point about structure. I say to him—with the deepest respect for my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and for any others who may be proposed as part of the initial group that begins to make appointments—that much thought needs to be given, not least by hon. Members who have not been engaged in the discussions on the Liaison Committee and who may not have considered as fully as my right hon. Friend no doubt has, to the full implications of the recommendations.

If we were to take the route recommended in the report, we would have a separate group of hon. Members not coming through the route of party office—hon. Members who may be in that position and hold that responsibility for far longer than anyone does, given the transient nature of appointments in our party political structure.

Those hon. Members would, as individuals, exercise enormous influence. How would they make their judgments, as now we do, about which new hon. Members coming in were particularly interested? Yes, there could be self-nomination and so on, but we all know what will happen: they would draw on the experience, understanding and discussion of other hon. Members. That is what happens now, but it happens through the Whips Office and with party influence and changing personnel. These are interesting ideas, but they require considerable thought and weighing.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way on that point. Does she agree that the case is not made in the report and that it is not self-evident that a system whereby three individuals, no matter how senior, would decide on the nominations to all Select Committees would not necessarily produce a more transparent system, a system less open to the influence of patronage or party, or a system that would bring about a stronger Select Committee scrutiny process?

Mrs. Beckett: I share my hon. Friend's reservations. The situation is bad enough now, even within party and even within our party, where we have a structure for the proposals. There are occasions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) correctly identified, when such appointments become a matter of considerable contention. There is the real possibility that it could be a matter of even more contention where a group of individuals exercise the patronage and are explicitly intended to be outside the normal system and route of pressure.

I shall say no more about that now, as I must make progress. I am conscious of the time that I have taken, and I must deal with a couple of other issues.

The report suggests also that we ought to increase the business taken in the main Chamber. That, as hon. Members will recognise, goes against the flow not only of the handling of business in the House over many years, but of many reports that have come from outside this place from people—about whose work I am sometimes sceptical—who have asked how Parliament can be made of more interest. As far as I am aware, none of them has suggested that we should add to the work of the House; indeed, many have suggested that we should reduce the work of the Chamber.

The Liaison Committee proposes not only that we should move the ten-minute rule procedure from a Tuesday to a Monday, which I would be reluctant to do, as it is very much to the advantage of an individual private Member, but that we should add to the business in the main Chamber at prime time by providing an opportunity to debate briefly a Select Committee report shortly after it has been produced, with the Minister being required to give, in effect, an off-the-cuff response to what might and should be, if we are to take the Select Committees as seriously as we ought, a report of considerable weight and moment.

[Mrs. Beckett]

There are already—there always are—more claims on prime time in the main Chamber than any Government have been able to entertain. Of course, under the present Government, there is scope to expand the opportunities for Select Committee scrutiny in Westminster Hall—opportunities that are, perhaps, not as fully exploited at present as they might be.

There are other suggestions about how debates on Select Committee reports should be handled. It is proposed that those debates should be taken on substantive motions. I understand that, of course, but I simply say to the House that if Select Committee reports are to be taken on a substantive motion which gives an expression of opinion about the recommendations of that report, there is no way that will not become a matter of party political interest and party political decision and pressure.

Anyone who imagines that that party political interest and pressure will confine itself merely to the occasion when the report is debated is living in cloud cuckoo land. Any Government who did not take an interest in the likely recommendations of a Select Committee would be taking no heed of their interests and of the position in which they might find themselves in the House.

I had always understood that one of the most cherished traditions of our Select Committees was that they should be able to be independent in party political terms. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne rightly referred to that in his remarks.

If we are to see decisions of substance being put to the House on the recommendations of Select Committees, we are going in the opposite direction; so too are we on the mechanics. The proposal of the Committee is that such votes should not only be substantive, but that they should be taken not at a fixed time, as they are, say, on estimates day at present, but whenever the debate of substance on the report comes to an end.

We are talking about more debates and decisions in prime time; we are talking about their being taken on a basis where there will be a party political interest; and we are talking about their being taken at unpredictable times, not at a fixed time, as now arranged for the convenience of the House. All these proposals in their different ways run counter to the way in which the House has been moving for the past 10 years.

There is much in the Liaison Committee's report that is worthy of serious consideration. There is very little in it that is of so little weight and substance that it justifies the House simply accepting it and coming to a decision off the cuff and without mature consideration.

I make one final observation on that, in response to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and her hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Two days ago the Government brought before the House programming proposals which have been aired, discussed, re-discussed, recommended and considered for a minimum of 10, and probably more like 20, years.

In sharp contrast, we have been invited, not just by the hon. Lady and her hon. Friend, but by many engaged in the report, after its publication to move to a decision on it today, before even the formality of an initial debate in the House. The Government were not and are not prepared to take that step. This is the initial debate. This is the first opportunity that anyone in the House has had to pronounce on the recommendations of the Liaison Committee, and sadly—I use that word advisedly; it is sad—we all know that not many hon. Members will have focused on the detailed implications of what the Liaison Committee proposes.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): The right hon. Lady says that the House is invited to come to substantive conclusions when it has not had the opportunity to discuss the issues. When that matter was put to her in several interventions on Tuesday, she denied that that was the case and said that it was perfectly all right, when the Government tabled proposals, for extensive debate and discussion not to take place. Today she is saying the contrary.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman seems not to have followed the point that I have just made—most uncharacteristically, I know. What I said today is precisely what I said on Tuesday. The issues that we decided on Tuesday—it was Tuesday, was it not? Sometimes the days run together—were issues that had been aired and discussed in various forms—*[Interruption.]* They were discussed in the Select Committee on Procedure and were part of the recommendations of the Jopling report 10 years ago.

One of those on the hon. Gentleman's Front Bench—speaking, I accept, as an individual, but as a member of the then Government—recommended the Jopling committee's proposals. I referred to that on Tuesday night. The vast bulk of that advice was that we should go to programming of all our discussions and all our legislation. To compare that with this report, which has come out only in this Session and which is being aired in the House for the first time, is not, I suggest to the hon. Gentleman, a valid comparison.

Sir Peter Emery: The Leader of the House's comments on guillotining or programming are true: the procedure has been around for a long time. However, the concept of taking votes which would usually be taken after 10 pm on Wednesday at 3 pm is new. It has hardly been discussed in the Modernisation Committee. The idea that it was all right to present that proposal to the Committee, vote on it with next to no debate, and almost guillotine that debate, is unacceptable. We must get the facts right. The right hon. Lady is correct about programming, but wrong about voting.

Mrs. Beckett: I accept that there is a substantial difference between the two, but I stress two points. First, on Tuesday, I made the point—albeit one that the right hon. Gentleman does not consider valid—that on occasions, we separate the decision from the debate, especially in the case of Report and Committee stage. Earlier, I referred to another occasion when we do that: estimates days. It has been decided for the convenience of the House to take a vote at a specific point. The Liaison Committee suggests that we should reverse that.

Secondly, while I accept that the proposal for a specific day on specific issues was new to the House—although it had been discussed in the Modernisation Committee—the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) knows that the principle has been before us for a long time.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I apologise for impeding my right hon. Friend's progress, but I should

like her to clarify a point. She said, quite properly, that it would be improper to have a vote after a first debate. For the avoidance of doubt and for the record, can I establish that there will be a second debate, when a vote will be held, and that, as the Prime Minister promised, it will be a free vote?

Mrs. Beckett: It depends what exactly my hon. Friend means. He is right to say that, when the Prime Minister was asked whether any vote on the matter would be a free vote, my right hon. Friend confirmed that, as always for Labour Members, votes on House matters are free votes. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) will note that I emphasise that point because many Conservative Members had grave reservations about the report, but they seem to have diminished or evaporated since Conservative Front Benchers expressed pronounced views in favour of it. The Prime Minister gave an assurance that free votes are held on House matters. He went so far and no further. *[Interruption.]* I must progress.

The Government welcome much in the Liaison Committee's report. Indeed, we would have liked the Committee to say much more about the implications for joint working between Departments and for cross-cutting the Select Committees than the report contains. I should have liked the Committee to say more, not only about the publication of draft legislation, but about the role that Select Committees can play in post-legislative scrutiny, and in ascertaining how legislation works in practice, as opposed to the way in which we imagine it will work when we put it on the statute book.

I am mindful that, whether recommendations are made for the scrutiny of the financial reports of Departments or for pre-legislative or post-legislative scrutiny, we stray increasingly into the realm of prescribing Select Committee's actions. That has hitherto been unwelcome to Select Committees. I was reminded of that again by the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne. That aspect of the report deserves further consideration.

I have said nothing about the available resources, whether for our method of paying for the Chairs of Select Committees, for extra research support for them or for such support for Select Committees. Those matters are all worthy of consideration. However, just as those issues are important, the full package that is currently proposed could completely reshape the work of a Member of Parliament, create two-tier or even three-tier membership structures in the House and bring Select Committees into government and party politics. That has hitherto been anathema to those who have so much admired our Select Committee structure.

The proposals in the report are worthy of examination. None should be decided off the cuff.

3.44 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I begin with one of the later points that the Leader of the House made. Hon. Members from all parties have asked her about the Government's intentions for the report. She has suggested that our discussion constitutes the first debate on it. We must conclude from her words that she has in mind a plan, which she believes to be sensible, for considering the proposals and ultimately making decisions about them. We must therefore also assume that she has a timetable in mind.

The Leader of the House values the opportunity for the House to consider matters in a timetabled manner, so I hope that before the end of the debate she will spell out the way in which she intends to proceed and the timetable that hon. Members—who obviously have a great interest in the report—can expect before we see, in terms, Government proposals that we can possibly amend and on which we can vote. I agree with her that although there is much support for the Liaison Committee report, we want to explore some aspects further through amendments and votes.

I must begin by taking her back to the commitment that the Prime Minister made to the House in the Opposition day debate on 13 July about Parliament and the Executive. The Prime Minister was asked specifically about the Liaison Committee report and the conduct of votes. The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) raised the matter. I make no apology for putting on the record again the discussion between the Front Benches. The hon. Member for Pendle began:

> The Liaison Committee report has huge support across the House . . .

He said that 211 Members—the vast majority were Labour Members—had supported the early-day motion. That number has subsequently increased. He continued:

> If the Liaison Committee report is a parliamentary issue rather than a matter for the Government, may we have a free vote on it?

He was not asking about general matters, but about the Liaison Committee report.

The Prime Minister replied:

> There we are. That is the legitimate voice of Back Benchers speaking . . . This is a matter for the House, and of course we shall have a position on it.

The Leader of the House has today spelled out the Labour Front Bench position. The official response to the Liaison Committee report further elaborates the Government's reaction to the Committee.

In the debate on 13 July, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said:

> I do not think that the Prime Minister has given a full answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). The hon. Gentleman asked whether, in view of what the Prime Minister has just said about the importance of free votes on House of Commons matters, members of his party could have a free vote on the Liaison Committee report.

My right hon. Friend was not asking about general matters that affect the House, but about the Liaison Committee report. My right hon. Friend continued:

> Opposition Members will have a free vote. Will the Prime Minister do the same as me, and—as a party leader—undertake to vote in favour of Select Committees no longer being appointed by the Whips, as is suggested in the report?

Again, that question was specifically about the report. The Prime Minister replied:

> Yes, there will be a free vote, as I have just indicated.—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2000; Vol. 353, c. 1099-1100.]

In the course of many debates in the House, we experience the way in which language can be manipulated, but in anybody's language, the Prime Minister made a commitment, in terms, about the way in which votes would be conducted on the Liaison Committee report. I readily accept that Labour Front-Bench Members will have views on the Liaison Committee report and will not wish to accept it lock, stock and barrel. *[Interruption.]* Of course they have views;

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

we all do. However, in the interest—and rights—of Back-Bench Members to be able to determine a parliamentary matter, the right hon. Lady must now introduce a timetable that will allow us to understand how each Member, especially Opposition Members, can make a contribution to the report, which should not just be discussed today in an Adjournment debate and then kicked into the long grass. That will allow us to see exactly how suggestions in the report can be taken forward. There is no doubt that many of those suggestions have mutual support across the Floor the House.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping) *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Browning: The Parliamentary Secretary is nodding. We should move forward on issues on which we can find common ground and conclude our deliberations with activity that will both improve the way in which Select Committees work and acknowledge the importance of Select Committee procedure in the democratic scrutiny of legislation.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend has just caught the Government leg before wicket and, as she did so, the right hon. Lady was chuntering in apparent disagreement. Would it be helpful if the right hon. Lady indicated that she stands by the words that the Prime Minister uttered on that occasion? If we have no such assurance, how can we believe anything that the Government say?

Mrs. Beckett: I resent the implication of dishonesty. As I have repeatedly said from the Dispatch box to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), I do not accept that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave anything other than a commitment to the fact that any decision taken about the House on this or any other issue is taken on a free vote. I do not accept that there is any implication for the timetable, as we have not even started the debate. I do not accept that there is any implication for when the debate may be carried forward, when it may be concluded and when or whether a vote may be taken. I accept none of those implications, and the position is precisely that which I set out, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton knows, which is why she and her hon. Friends keep asking me about it.

Mrs. Browning: I appreciate that the right hon. Lady is speaking in that way because she is under considerable pressure from her colleagues in the Cabinet. This is a parliamentary matter, and it is the will of Members on both sides of the House that it is dealt with as such. I am new to the job of shadow Leader of the House, but I believe that one of the primary tasks of the Leader of the House is to consider carefully the views and will of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I am sorry that the right hon. Lady, in an uncustomary manner, is denying the will of the House .and not accepting what is on the record. The Liaison Committee's report is referred to on more than one occasion in the exchange of dialogue on 13 July. There is no ambiguity about that, and it is clear that the Prime Minister made a commitment. I shall not embarrass the Leader of the House by pressing her further, but I hope that she will look carefully at the wording of *Hansard*.

Mrs. Beckett: I was there.

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Lady says she was there, but we were all somewhere at sometime, and we are discussing the record of the House and the word of the Prime Minister of this country. If she is to do justice to her position in the House, she must agree to go back and look at that wording. There can be no doubt about what was intended and meant in that exchange of dialogue.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not accep. the case made by the hon. Lady. I was present on that occasion and heard what the Prime Minister said. I am perfectly well aware of the substance of the exchange and the attempt to pretend that, in some way, I am saying something different to the House from what I have repeatedly said, either on my own account or that of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, in the weeks and months since the Liaison Committee report was produced is simply not justified.

Mrs. Browning: I do not intend to press the right hon. Lady any further on the matter. As Leader of the House, she must stand by the words that she has spoken today, which will be on the record. When we have a record, such as that for 13 July, which is interpreted differently by the Leader of the House, then the determination of hon. Members will be that the House must sit in judgment of her. It is not for me to do so.

I hope that the Leader of the House will bear in mind the fact that there is overwhelming evidence on both sides of the House that the Liaison Committee's report is worthy of the House's attention. We should scrutinise the report today, and—I put it no more broadly than this—take forward those parts that will improve the House's democratic process and involve a shift of power from the business managers of the House to those people who represent their electorate through the Committee system of the House.

I must seriously ask the Leader of the House to reflect on her words today. Will she make recommendations on what the next steps will be and give the House some form of commitment so that hon. Members may be assured that they will be able to take the proposals forward within a reasonable time?

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Did my hon. Friend notice the inconsistency in the right hon. Lady's approach to events in the House on Tuesday, when a substantive vote was taken? Those events may well have the effect of increasing Back Benchers' power, whereas today's proposals, which may have the same effect, are not to be taken on a substantive vote.

Mrs. Browning: I hope that, before today's proceedings are concluded, the right hon. Lady will give us an indication of when that vote will be taken so that we can take the matter forward. I said that I would not pursue that issue any further and have made my position clear. The right hon. Lady has certainly made her position clear.

The membership of Select Committees was the subject of a large part of the right hon. Lady's contribution and is an important part of the Liaison Committee's report. The report states that the de facto practice of the Whips in all parties in choosing Select Committee members is not conducive to Committees being objective in their findings, as some members have been kept off or removed from Committees because of their views. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) spoke of his own experience in the last Parliament, which I recall very well. The report's proposals would bring about changes which, I believe, will be for the good. I therefore hope that the way in which the membership of Select Committees is determined, as outlined in the report, is a matter that could be moved forward quite quickly, regardless of those parts of the report about which there may be more controversy.

The Liaison Committee believes that it is wrong in principle that party managers should exercise effective control of Select Committee membership. Instead of the existing system, it proposes a system in which the selection of Committee members is more independent of party managers. That is not naive, as there is a willingness among Members on both sides of the House to try to correct the perception outside that we are incidental to the democratic process. The proposed change will be fundamental to altering that. It is proposed that the Liaison Committee should be reconstituted as a Select Committee panel with the task of proposing to the House the names of Members who should serve on Select Committees.

The right hon. Lady expressed reservations about that procedure, and I hope that we will have an opportunity to explore in more detail the way in which members of the panel are elected. The democratic process should be brought to bear on the way in which the panel is constituted, rather than it being the preserve of a form of nomination. I hope that members of that important and privileged panel would be subject to a form of scrutiny or qualification regarding their experience in the House and what they would bring to the panel. There would have to be a structure to determine how Members could qualify to sit on the panel.

I do not want to get into the detail of the report, but it would be useful for us to debate those aspects. The right hon. Lady seemed to think that these question could be dismissed because of the proposed transfer of power from the Whips—who certainly hold it at the moment—to the panel. There are ways to make the process far more democratic.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): The hon. Lady's party has a well-developed Back-Bench system—it is perhaps even more influential in her party structure than it is in our party. Does she agree that it is open to the political parties to establish their own Back-Bench system for selecting members of Select Committees and to remove that power from the Whips without the need to change the system in the House as proposed by the Liaison Committee, laudable though the proposals are? Would she consider establishing an independent selection system within her own party structure tomorrow?

Mrs. Browning: I understand why the hon. Gentleman puts that case, but we want the reform of House procedures to provide greater transparency, which I accept is needed in my party as much as it is needed across the House. The debate that surely must follow the publication of this report should consider those structures, so that it is not merely an internal party matter, but there is transparency across the Floor of the House.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because the plot is now thickening. Is she aware that, quite apart from the Prime Minister's observations on 13 July in the debate on the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, the Leader of the House referred to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and said:

> He asked whether there would be a free vote on the Liaison Committee report. Indeed, there will.—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2000; Vol. 353, c. 1170.]

Is that not game, set and match?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend never lets go when he knows that he has right on his side. I said that I would not pursue the right hon. Lady further on this matter. She will have heard my hon. Friend's words. I am sure that *Hansard* of 13 July will be her bedtime reading tonight, and that she will want to revisit the words that she and her right hon. Friend used in that debate. I wish her joy.

The membership of Select Committees is extremely important. The Liaison Committee report proposes that the Select Committee structure should become more relevant to Members of Parliament. I am disappointed that, in just eight short years in Parliament, I have noticed that the enthusiasm of Members to serve on Select Committees has waned. I do not understand that. When I was a Minister, I always waited—sometimes with trepidation—to hear what the Select Committee report had to say. I took those reports very seriously. Although we are now considering amending and reforming the Select Committee process, it commands the respect not only of Members of Parliament but of the outside world.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: If I may finish this point, I shall then give way to the hon. Lady.

The Liaison Committee report's proposal that the Select Committee structure could provide an alternative career path for Members of Parliament is welcome. For various reasons, not everyone in any generation of parliamentarians is made a Minister or takes part in government. Indeed, many of them are in opposition for the whole of their parliamentary life. It is unfair that they should be denied the chance to hold a position of influence in the parliamentary system. I support the proposal to recognise a career path, especially for Select Committee Chairmen. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who chair Select Committees. Those who have served on a Select Committee understand the responsibility that its Chairman has for the work that has to be done in the many hours when the Committee is not sitting. All hon. Members respect the work of those Chairmen, and it is appropriate that they should have a career path with attendance allowances and possible remuneration, as the Committee has recommended.

[Mrs. Browning]

Someone asked me to give way—

Fiona Mactaggart *rose—*

Mr. Bennett *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Bennett: Will the hon. Lady be careful when she refers to remuneration for Chairmen of Select Committees, because there is already a tendency for other members of the Committee to assume that they can rely on the Chair to do the work? It is important that we do not have two categories of people on a Select Committee: the Chair who does all the work and the other members who follow.

Mrs. Browning: That is absolutely right, and we should consider that problem in the context of these proposals. The proposal for it no longer to be the prerogative of the Whips to appoint people to Select Committees requires us to consider more carefully how individuals can nominate themselves for Select Committee service. One would hope that positions could be sought outside this place, so that people would have a CV showing their interest and experience in a certain area, and their continued attendance and contribution to a Select Committee could also be taken into consideration when deciding on their future position on the Committee.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Does the hon. Lady accept that those considerations are relevant to appointments to Select Committees now? Technically, nominations are made by the Whips, and the Selection Committee makes the appointments. Does she think that Whips on both sides of the House decide who should be appointed to Select Committees solely on the basis of who will do what they say? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] That is nonsense. If that were so, there would be no dissent in Select Committee reports. Does she really think that that is what happens now?

Mrs. Browning: Yes.

The report covers the composition of Select Committees, the way in which members are appointed, and the role of the Chairman. I do not intend to go through all aspects of the report, but the House will be aware that the Norton report, which considered ways of strengthening Parliament, also examined departmental Select Committees. Many of the Norton recommendations mirror some of the proposals in the Liaison Committee report. There is common ground on the appointment of Select Committee members being taken out of the hands of the Whips, so it is not just the view of the Liaison Committee.

Other work has been done that contributes to the debate and to the views of the Liaison Committee. The Norton Committee report supports the idea of an alternative career path to ministerial office through the Select Committee process.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not want to detain the hon. Lady, because I know that she wants to get on with her speech. However, the Leader of the Opposition committed the Conservative party to supporting the Norton report. He was careful to say, and wisely so—more wisely than he sometimes is—that he wanted to consider the detail of the recommendations. She says that the Conservative party supports the proposal that the Whips should not have the sole say and that there should be a proper structure of nomination and self-nomination, as we have in our party. Is the Leader of the Opposition introducing such a system for the Conservative party? I understand that that is not the case at the present time.

Mrs. Browning: I am delighted that the right hon. Lady takes such an interest in our policy development. I assure her that, in my new position, I am carrying on the work of my predecessor. We are examining the Norton committee proposals in great detail.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has already accepted some of those proposals, and they are now part of the Conservative party's common-sense agenda. By the time we draw up our manifesto, we will have produced our commitments based on research and on the work that has been done. I assure the right hon. Lady that many of the Norton committee's recommendations will influence our policy in time for the next election.

Tony Wright: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I am responding to the right hon. Lady's intervention, but I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

If the right hon. Lady would like me to keep her informed of progress on our policy development, I would be happy to make her party to that information on a confidential basis. I am delighted that she shows such an interest.

Mrs. Beckett: I think it would have been simpler if the hon. Lady had said "No".

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Lady is being far too uncharitable. As a new girl in this job, I am trying to learn what "other channels" actually means. I hope that the right hon. Lady will help me: I am sure that she would be a very good tutor, and I am trying to show willing.

Tony Wright: While the hon. Lady is endeavouring to learn, perhaps she will reflect on the experience of the last Parliament, when her party was in government and many of us were pressing issues such as this on that Administration. They refused even to allow the House to discuss a major Hansard Society report on parliamentary reform, over many years. Does not the approach to such issues depend very much on whether one is in government or in opposition?

Mrs. Browning: I shall study what the hon. Gentleman has said very carefully. When his right hon. Friend the Leader of the House was at the Dispatch Box, she seemed to be trying to persuade us that these matters were all so new that we could not make decisions about them too soon, because the ideas involved had not been around very long. I will look at what the hon. Gentleman says was

being debated in the last Parliament, because that is the reason the right hon. Lady gave for our not making those decisions soon.

Mrs. Beckett: I think that the hon. Lady has misunderstood me. If I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) correctly, he was making the same point as me. The issue was not debated in the last Parliament. My hon. Friend argues that it could have been, because reports have been produced, but the hon. Lady's party refused even to discuss it.

Mrs. Browning: When the right hon. Lady's party was in opposition it was against guillotines, but it has now changed Standing Orders so that our debates can be curtailed. I do not think it is appropriate for Labour Members to keep praying in aid what happened in the last Parliament; we must concede and move on, and that is what I intend to do.

We in the Conservative party, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks, have commissioned our own report, which I think shows willingness and a genuine interest in the subject. We have done that in the last year, and it shows that we really are interested in making progress.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am sorry to say that, whenever it is suggested that the House of Commons should take to itself powers that would not only improve its scrutiny but give it a real role and return the powers that it once had, all Governments—whatever their complexion—resist the suggestion to their dying day. I am very sad that my Government are following a well-worn path set by Governments of other colours.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Lady is a well-respected Select Committee Chairman, as I am only too well aware, and she is absolutely right: Governments resist things.

It is very easy for an Opposition to present proposals. I hope, however, that the Leader of the House accepts that I, as shadow Leader of the House, am pressing for proposals to be presented in a timely manner so that they can be implemented in the certain knowledge that we support them in opposition, and will be bound by them in government. There is a vast difference between our saying that and what the Liberal Democrats say: knowing that they will never come to office, they support just about anything that is going.

I say, in the sure expectation of a Conservative Government next year: give us a timetable. We will scrutinise and support these changes, and will do so knowing that we will be bound by them when we come to office.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I will give way to a Liberal Democrat.

Mr. Stunell: The debate is altogether more lively than I had expected it to be, but may I remind the hon. Lady that my proposals at least add up?

Mrs. Browning: In that case, it is probably the only Liberal Democrat policy that ever has added up.

I think that I have detained the House for long enough. There is a genuine willingness on this side of the House—and, I think, on the other side—to make progress. We do not want to be cavalier about decision-making; decisions require proper scrutiny, and need to be thought through. However, I urge the Leader of the House to produce a practical timetable before the end of the debate, so that all Members understand how the report can be implemented.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I appeal for more brevity, so that hon. Members seeking to catch my eye will not be disappointed.

4.15 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): Debates in the House remind me of London taxis: for a long time there is never one in which you want to take part, and then, all of a sudden, they all come along at once. A debate affecting my constituency will take place on Monday, and I hope to speak in that as well, so I will be brief on this occasion.

This is an extremely important debate. I am not disappointed that there will be no votes, because that provides us with an opportunity to give the issues a good airing today. Although I support the thrust of the report, and support almost all the report itself, it contains issues that need further consideration, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House pointed out.

In terms of increasing accountability and empowering Back Benchers, this debate strikes me as being more important than last Tuesday's debate. I do not think that that debate was primarily about increasing accountability; in fact, I thought that it was like moving deck chairs on the deck of an oil tanker and suggesting that that would somehow make it change course. Today's debate gets to the heart of bringing about a change of course in terms of accountability and scrutiny.

I see this as a natural progression in the debate about devolution. As a new Back Bencher, I quickly became aware that I had been far more influential as chairman of a major committee in my town hall than I was in the House of Commons. I see a great deal of devolution: quangos are being empowered, individuals are being empowered, and—quite rightly—we are creating regional development agencies and the like. However, we as Members of Parliament are being given no power to scrutinise all the issues that we are discussing today. We are not automatically being given a role in the development that is taking place in the constituencies that we represent.

I would go so far as to suggest that some Select Committees could be given a scrutiny role in regard to issues outside the House. I am thinking of, for instance, regional development agencies. We might want a regional basis for Select Committees, which would allow us to call in the mayor of London. As London Members, we could perhaps scrutinise the role and activities of the new Greater London Authority. That would give us some say and some influence in the way things develop in the communities we represent, and the way in which the new bodies that are being established affect those communities.

I believe that our Select Committees and their membership are influenced far too heavily by the Executive. I want to examine ways in which the two could

[Mr. Clive Efford]

be separated, because I think that such separation would empower the House a great deal more, and would give Back Benchers a more influential role. The report suggests a panel of Chairmen; I would like to know more about how such a panel would be established and how it would be accountable to me, as a Back Bencher, rather than to the Executive. Like my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I would like that to be given more serious and thoughtful consideration.

Before I became an MP, one of the things that impressed me most about the House was the cross-party co-operation that existed in the Select Committee system, and how effective that co-operation could be. That, I think, portrays the House in a favourable light outside. The public often see the House at its best when it is dealing with Select Committee business. Having said that, let me add that it is unfortunate that today's debate has already featured a petty attempt at party political point-scoring, which has added nothing to its value. It draws attention to the fact that we Back Benchers should debate that issue among ourselves and, with respect, try to ignore the influence of Front-Bench Members because, frankly, our Front Benchers will want to resist devolving power to us on the Back Benches and Opposition Front Benchers will certainly not want to tie themselves to proposals that they would not want to agree with if—heaven forbid—they ever managed to sit on the Government Front Benches.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend find it surprising that the one Select Committee that actually legislates—the Deregulation Committee—given its powers under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1998, has a difficulty finding Members to serve on it? We must recognise that some Select Committees are extremely popular, but hon. Members must have their arms twisted to serve on others so that they have sufficient members to function.

Mr. Efford: I agree with my hon. Friend. Perhaps that reflects the fact that Back Benchers did not set up the Committee structure. If Select Committees were thought to be more relevant, more Back Benchers would want to become members of them. When I was first elected in 1997, I did not even know that the Select Committee on Procedure existed, but I found myself member of it. I have been a member of that Select Committee for three and a half years. I now find myself being dragged forward, blinking into the spotlight, to sort out the mess about the election of the Speaker. I am being forced to do that in double-quick time when we should also be considering other, wider issues, such as whether our Front-Bench Members should be involved in electing the Speaker or whether Back Benchers only should do so, as in other Parliaments. That matter needs more consideration and consultation than the suggested time scale that will allow, but I shall not go any further down that path.

I should like to stress one point in my short contribution to the debate: the Whips' influence on the membership of Select Committees. That is the one matter in which the report, if it achieves nothing else, should achieve some success. It is open to Members to achieve that success within our own party structures. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that, within the formal structures of the House, we do not recognise the party structures. We are here because our respective parties have bestowed that honour on us, but that is not reflected in the structure of the House.

Under the current system, involving the House of Commons Commission, we could nominate Back Benchers for Select Committees through a body that is independent of the Whips within our own party structures. That body could determine the membership of Select Committees without such matters having to go to the Whips. We could achieve that without making major changes to the structure of the House if we genuinely want to ensure the separation of legislative scrutiny from the Executive.

The Hansard Society recommends further powers for Select Committees. We could consider certain issues—for example, the requisitioning of items perhaps even from the House of Lords, which has a backlog of work. It might be to the benefit of the House if Select Committees could take on the scrutiny of measures, perhaps co-opting Members of the other place. We could make progress without the in-built and undemocratic Conservative majority that exists in the Lords dictating the progress of Bills, which are often held up there. We would have greater influence if we could determine the timetabling of such Bills. That would stop any party political influence being exerted on their progress. That influence has nothing to do with scrutiny and brings the House into disrepute.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Would it not be better if legislation were better thought out in this House before it went to the House of Lords so that the Government tabled fewer amendments in the House of Lords?

Mr. Efford: Yes, we can all make several points along those lines and some of us may agree with the hon. Gentleman, but it is undeniable that legislation is being held up because it contains measures that the Conservative party does not like. That is why there is a legislative backlog. We must find ways in which the House can become more effective so that we can deliver the policies that the people elected us to deliver without falling foul of the party political system that is so easily corrupted.

Mrs. Browning: I must put on record the fact that Lord Carter, the Labour party's Chief Whip in the other place, has said on record that the Conservative party was not unnecessarily delaying legislation.

Mr. Efford: I shall not debate that issue further—*[Interruption]*—because we all know the facts. We can all select various statements from different individuals to try to make our case, but the facts are before us.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because he is making an interesting speech and I do not want to break his flow. I hope that he will give some weight to the reality that, nowadays, legislation—even Government legislation—can return to the Floor of the House as late as Third Reading with several hundred amendments. Frankly, that is an example not only of extremely bad drafting but of extremely bad management. That has a direct effect on progress of legislation.

Mr. Efford: I have already said that I accept the point that has been made along those lines by the hon. Member

for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). I find it incredibly frustrating that the House, which is seen as the Government of this country, is so easily thwarted by the systems that exist. Members should have more influence and greater ability to intervene. I think especially of some of the Back-Bench proposals that have been thwarted. It should be possible to expedite matters more effectively without allowing certain tactics to frustrate the demonstrable will of the House and the people.

Before I finish, I should like to repeat that, if the report achieves nothing else, it should end the unwarranted influence of the Whips over the selection of members of Select Committees and Standing Committees. Even if the report does not result in a change in the way in which the House deals with such matters, our own party political structures should ensure that Back Benchers have greater influence in scrutinising the Executive.

4.29 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): It is very good news indeed for the House that time has been set aside to debate such issues today. The report of the Liaison Committee should be commended in principle and accepted to a large extent. I had thought that much of the report was non-controversial and very much formed common ground among Members of Parliament. Indeed, in some places I thought it lapsed into a self-congratulatory tone about how well the system had been developed over the years. Then I listened to the speech of the Leader of the House, who was kind enough to inform me that she would not be able to be present for my speech. She was very combative in what she said. She not only underlined but entrenched some of the more negative parts of the Government's response to the report. I found that rather disturbing. I hope that we will look at that.

It was all too clear from what the Leader of the House said that she does not accept the report's fundamental premise that some change is necessary. The Government's response and her response today were all about how we are in the best of possible worlds—we should think ourselves lucky to have what we have and, if we make too much fuss, we might lose it; indeed, she explicitly said that in relation to Select Committee reports. Commenting on the suggestion that they might regularly intrude into the House's business, she said that we already have in the House more than the wildest wishes of Select Committee Chairmen and that we might have to look at that again. It seemed to be a case of, "Shut up at the back or you will lose your play time." The whole tone of her contribution failed to engage with the mood of the House and with the intentions of Members.

There is a mood for change and a need for change. The report outlines a list of those.

Maria Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, although there may be a mood for some changes, that does not mean that every Liaison Committee recommendation would be equally welcomed? Does he accept that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House welcomed large parts of the Liaison Committee report, but had strong words to say about other parts?

Mr. Stunell: I do not suppose that any Member, with the possible exception of the Chairman of that Committee, is absolutely signed up to the explicit implementation of every recommendation in the precise form that it appears. We can all find things that we think should be changed or thought about some more. That is proper. For that matter, I am happy to put it on the record that it is for the benefit of the House that this is an open debate without recommendations at the end of it. I do not share the view that we should have had a set of proposals before us, but to say that is an entirely different thing from the approach of the Leader of the House. She made it clear that she was happy to agree with the page numbers, but not a lot else. The whole point of such a debate should be that there is some discussion, some negotiation and some progress on what needs to happen.

The report says that there are some issues about the membership of the Committees. Quite a lot of the discussion so far has focused on that. There are the big structural issues, but there are also some shorter, tactical issues about how long it takes to set up Committees at the beginning of a Parliament, and the delays that there can be in replacing members when vacancies occur. Clearly, all those matters can be addressed if the House's procedures are tightened and developed.

There may be something to be said for the criticism of the three wise men, or the three wise senior Chairs, as it may be. They may be legitimate points to make in developing proposals, but what I want to hear from the Government is an acceptance that something different is needed to ensure that we can establish Committees rapidly at the start of any new Parliament.

There are some longer-term issues about the power of the Whips and of the Government to dictate who serves on Committees. Perhaps that shows up in two ways, only one of which has been talked about. We have talked about the possibility—the reality even—of people being kept off Committees if they might embarrass the Government, create waves, or do various things. A particular illustration has been given—my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), and his experience as Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, but we all know that that is probably not the most pernicious part of it. The most pernicious part of it is that the Whips use the possibility of attaining Committee membership to subdue the behaviour of Members in wholly unrelated areas of their parliamentary activities. It is the fettering of the discretion of Members by the use of patronage that we should put our finger on.

The Select Committee has come up with a particular solution: to have a Committee of Chairmen; a Committee of the great and the good. To have three people who have senior experience in this place and who are Chairmen or Chairwomen taking the decisions in the open, with open nominations, is clearly an advance on a system that is completely opaque. Names emerge. They are never even seen by the rest of us when they go to the Committee of Selection, which incidentally is pretty well entirely bunged up with Whips of one sort and another. The nominations come to the House in a pro forma manner, which it is exceptional to challenge.

Therefore, that solution is an improvement. It is more transparent, but I would want to hear from the Committee, as it refines its proposals, exactly what criteria those people will use when they select the people whom they nominate to come before us and to serve on the Select Committees. How will they ensure that fairness and equity is achieved? How will they ensure that balance

[Mr. Stunell]

is achieved? How will they ensure that the skills, preferences and time of Members are properly allocated to a particular Committee?

I say that not because I think that those people will deliberately get it wrong, but because that is complex and difficult to achieve. If the rules are not established properly when a new system is introduced, it might rapidly fall into disrepute and be perceived to be as bad as the thing that it replaced. A recipe is given to us by the Select Committee, but it is indicative and we do not know precisely what might follow.

That is a good reason for us to have this debate. It is a good reason to hear from the Government what they think sensible improvements might be of the existing system, or, if we moved to a new system, what they see as the essential elements of it. I will not use the time of the debate to set out my views on that. I am sure that, if we set about establishing a new, more objective procedure, we could all get round—I hesitate to say, the table; I suppose that we would have to sit in the Chamber and shout at each other. However, there must be opportunities for some working papers to define a system that could meet widespread consent. Perhaps we need the Select Committee to do it, as Select Committees often can.

The issue of the power of the Executive against the restraining hand of the House is one of perpetual balance and negotiation; it changes all the time. Had she been here, I would have said to the Leader of the House that part of the balance was adjusted on Tuesday. I was happy to support the changes that were introduced on Tuesday. I have argued on their behalf in the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons and elsewhere because I believe that their benefits outweigh their disadvantages.

The Government did not lose in the balance or negotiation as it was struck on Tuesday. I was hoping that, in today's debate, the Leader of the House might have been prepared to acknowledge that, even if only subconsciously, and say, "Yes, we got a lot of things that were important to us on Tuesday"—and that were important to the House, too—"and we now think that on Thursday we can go a little further and take another step forward in liberating Select Committees, so that they are more independent of the power of the Whips and of the Government." It would have been good to have some acceptance from her of the problems that are identified by the Select Committee, and some acknowledgment that the Government can play a part in solving the difficulties that have been identified, and in setting a timetable for action to put in place the changes that we need.

I shall take only a few minutes more. There are two or three points, which have been alluded to, that are important and where we need to have some clear moves forward. One is the support and resources that are available to Select Committees.

We have the least well equipped Select Committee system of any Parliament in western Europe, north America or the old Commonwealth. It does not matter with which group we are compared or whatever one's political complexion, the fact is, that our Select Committees are less well serviced than any of those. Therefore, it is not a great surprise to find that our Select Committee system has the weakest impact on the Executive of any of those Parliaments. Those things are connected, although not directly. I am not saying that if we doubled the resources, we would double the impact, but there is a link. We need to make our Select Committee system stronger, and to do that we need more support and greater resources.

I am not particularly committed to the model in the Select Committee's report, but I would have hoped—it would have been helpful—to have received some acknowledgement from the Government that they would at least not obstruct that being developed.

Another issue that has been mentioned is the career structure that might be developed as an alternative to getting into Downing street. Most people imagine that when we enter the House, we are provided with our knapsack and the key to No. 10, and that some of us might be lucky enough to use it. *[Interruption.]* In reality, there are about 655 hon. Members who will not achieve that, but we do not know who the remaining four might be. In all probability, they do not include the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) or me.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. They are probably the occupants of the Chair.

Mr. Stunell: The serious point is that the career structure for Members of Parliament is a notional dream world, which is so subject to the laws of chance that it almost seems obscene to suggest that we should have a structure that is carefully designed via the Select Committee system.

There is a great difference between status and power. One may gain status by becoming a Select Committee Chairman, but whether one has power is another matter, and is perhaps part of today's debate. Select Committee Chairmen might be given a few extra thousand pounds, but that might not make them more powerful, more influential or more able to do the job. These are wide-ranging issues that are not easily resolved.

There is a good case for making sure that people of real quality are drawn into the Select Committee system and are prepared to devote a substantial chunk of their lives to that work. However, to suggest that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is not such a person, is offensive to him and demeans the House. The system does draw in high-quality people. However, if we are to have 33 Select Committees, a drawing through of Members and people finding that they are promoted or taken out of the system for one reason or another, we must ensure that there is sufficient incentive for people to come forward. Money may be part of that, but what is more important than being paid to do the job is whether hon. Members think that the work they do is effective, appreciated by the House and influential in the development of policy.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): If payment is to become an issue, surely that would require some reform of the selection procedures. If not, it merely becomes another means by which the patronage of the Treasury Bench is increased.

Mr. Stunell: For perhaps the first time in our parliamentary lives I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I want to comment on what I understand to be an annual audit of outstanding Select Committee recommendations. That is an excellent idea. It should not just be an accumulation of recommendations that have not been implemented, but there should be proper scrutiny of those unresolved recommendations and a proper report to the House on what has been done. Following on from that, we could and should expect a full and proper response from any Government to the outstanding recommendations so that the House could judge the effectiveness of the system as it is described in the report and the effectiveness of the Government in dealing with such matters.

This is a revealing debate on a thoroughly useful Select Committee report. I hope that, after thinking about it more carefully, the Government will feel able to take a more positive attitude to what I believe could be one of the great steps forward for the House in this decade.

4.45 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I want to take the House backward before taking it forward. On 17 November 1966, Richard Crossman confided in his diary. He said:

> Cabinet. The Prime Minister had decided to take my procedure package of parliamentary reform. Actually it took nearly two hours and was a ghastly discussion. How ghastly you certainly wouldn't get an idea from the Cabinet minutes . . . The moment I'd finished George Brown said, "Well, it's asking a terrible lot of us, Prime Minister. We're busy men." . . . He was followed by Minister after Minister round the table simply saying how busy they were, how they were harassed by all these Cabinet Committees and how they simply couldn't be burdened with any more work by the House of Commons.

Richard Crossman went on to say:

> Most of these Ministers were individually as well as collectively committed to parliamentary reform. Yet, after two years they've become Whitehall figures who've lost contact with Parliament. And of course what they're saying is pure nonsense. The Executive rides supreme in Britain and has minimum trouble from the legislature. Perhaps it's because Parliament is so entirely subordinate to the Executive that my colleagues were saying, "We can't allow this Parliamentary Party to bother us."

That was 34 years ago. It is a reminder that we have been round this circuit many times before and that we keep coming back to the fundamentals. However, we have made some progress.

Mr. Sheldon: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Dick Crossman, but he should also mention Norman St. John-Stevas, now Lord St. John of Fawsley.

Tony Wright: Indeed, they were the two formidable Leaders of the House, from different parties, who were decisive in driving forward the process of reform, particularly the strengthening of scrutiny, and that is what is important.

The month following the presentation of his proposals to Cabinet, Richard Crossman asked the House to put them into action. He said:

> Procedurally, we still behave as though we were a sovereign body which really shared with the Government in the initiation of legislation, which exercised a real control not only of finance, but of the administration of the Departments . . . The House of Commons, too, has surrendered most of its effective powers to the Executive and has become in the main the passive forum in which the struggle is fought between the modern usurpers of parliamentary power, the great political machines.

As I have said, that was 34 years ago, but the analysis is adroit.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I agree with that absolutely, but before my hon. Friend becomes too starry-eyed about the great Crossman, I should point out that at the first Cabinet Committee I ever attended, Richard Crossman, then the Leader of the House, spent a long time saying that we should get rid of the Select Committee on Agriculture because it was causing enormous difficulty, going to Brussels and discovering things which were inconvenient.

Tony Wright: I am grateful for that—although I have only rarely been accused of being starry-eyed. Richard Crossman was a bully and a rather disagreeable man in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, I am grateful to be reminded that, unfortunately, there is no correlation between great reformers and great characters.

In the same speech, Richard Crossman went on to say:

> there is a difference between modernisation and Parliamentary reform.—[*Official Report*, 14 December 1966; Vol. 738, c. 479-80.]

I think that that is worth reflecting on.

We are engaging in some modernisation of the House, but the question is whether we are engaging in parliamentary reform. The point about the Crossman reforms all those years ago is that they were reforms in the round. The reforms came not only with a package of modernisation measures—he wanted morning sittings, more sensible hours and timetabling of legislation—but with the commitment to strengthen Parliament in relation to the Executive. It was a genuinely reforming package of measures.

In the current reforms, we are taking a rather different approach. I think that it is a source of great regret that, at the beginning of this Parliament, the Modernisation Committee did not take a view in the round on what parliamentary reform required. To do so, one would have to determine one's own view on the role of the House of Commons and on whether there is a case for shifting the balance—as the report says—between the House and the Executive. If one believes that there is such a case, one should say what proposals flow from that conclusion.

At the beginning of this Parliament, it would have been possible to integrate proposals on sittings, more sensible hours and timetabling with measures to strengthen scrutiny and the Commons's power in relation to the Executive. Unfortunately, that did not happen, and, consequently, we have no benchmarks. We do not know to what purpose and in what direction we are modernising, and we are suffering greatly as a result.

I have enormous regard for the Leader of the House, and we are well served by the fact that she clearly very much believes in the view that she is expressing—which is a challenging presentation of an alternative position. Although she did not do it today—unlike previously, in other settings, when faced with such proposals—she is wont to ask, "Why ask us to make the change? Why are they asking us to do it? They never asked anyone else to do it." Those are very fair questions. However, one of the axioms of parliamentary reform is that Oppositions are enthusiastic about reform and Governments are cool towards it. That is clearly the case now, and it has always been the case. They are, however, not questions that trump the argument.

[Tony Wright]

We are being asked to make the change because it is right to make it. The balance needs to be shifted, and we now have the opportunity to do it. If we always ask where the balance of party advantages lies, we will never make progress. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) said, and as Opposition Members have shown in this debate, the instincts of all hon. Members is to look for party advantage, to see whether easy political points can be scored even in an argument about the rights of Parliament as a whole. It is the default option into which we all relapse almost immediately.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the group of 30 Chairmen who have signed the early-day motion seeking change to shift the balance back to the House of Commons and away from the Executive is dominated by Government supporters who serve with distinction as Select Committee Chairmen? Change is supported also by various Opposition Members who certainly do not seek to score any party political advantage at all, but wish merely to enhance the role of Parliament.

Tony Wright: Of course I accept that. However, I have sat through enough of these debates to know precisely what happens, the character of the exchanges, and how hard it is to make genuinely House of Commons points, as opposed to those seeking purely to exploit current party political advantage. That is the difficulty that we have in making such proposals.

Nevertheless, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) was right to point out, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) did, the central issue that the House will eventually have to confront. Through Richard Crossman and Norman St. John-Stevas, now Lord St. John of Fawsley, we invented a scrutiny system which is undoubtedly Parliament's greatest advance in scrutinising the Executive. Now, however, we have to move on to answering the next question—which is, who owns the scrutiny system that we have created? Is it to be owned by the Executive or by the House of Commons?

We can shuffle round that question, explore some of its difficulties and say, "This is not the right model; that one is better." All that is very proper. However, we cannot shuffle round the central question. At some point, every Member of Parliament will have to answer that question for himself or herself. The answer to the question defines not only what we are, but what the House is.

I do not underestimate for a second how difficult it is to give the answer that ownership should lie with the House of Commons, and realise that all the pressures are in the opposite direction. If we are honest with ourselves—this is a moment to be honest with ourselves—we would admit that this place runs itself as a permanent election campaign. Election campaigns do not happen only every four or five years; they happen every moment of every day in the House. The whole way in which the House is organised reflects the fact that, in the House, there is a permanent election campaign. That is exactly how the Front Benchers of both parties want to regard the role of Members of Parliament. Moreover, Members of Parliament have never been better equipped to perform the role of permanent election campaigners.

An interesting part of Richard Crossman's speech in the House 34 years ago was on the balance between what he referred to—perhaps rather archaically now—as full-time and part-time Members. He was exploring the difficulties of different sitting hours for part-time Members and for full-time Members. I think that we are now into different territory, as we are all more or less full-time and decently paid Members. I also think that that status brings with it obligations to be proper Members of Parliament.

I am not saying for a second that Members of Parliament are not busy people—they are immensely busy people who work extraordinarily hard—but, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that they are as busy as hamsters in a wheel, going round and round, often doing little of productive value. Although we might try to persuade ourselves that that is not true, I think that, in our hearts, we know it is.

There are many reasons why Members of Parliament feel unhappy with their lot. However—we have to pick our words with care in talking about these issues—large public sums are devoted to enabling Members of Parliament to be permanent election campaigners. That is the important change that has occurred. There are no brownie points, here or anywhere else, for being good scrutineers of government, particularly when that Government are of one's own party.

If we are serious about shifting the balance, we have to be serious about what we think Members of Parliament are all about. I do not for a second say that that will be easy, and I do not even believe that it is possible. Although I was accused a moment ago of being starry-eyed, in fact I am deeply gloomy about the issue. It was Enoch Powell who, many years ago, said—I may not have this quite right, but essentially—that Parliament does not exist. He said that all that exists is the Government and the Opposition, locked into permanent conflict. He said that if one sought to construct an independent, collective entity called Parliament, one would get nowhere. He may have been right about that. Indeed, although she used different words, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House was seeking to persuade us of that view. Some of us have been saying that the next step has to be to try to build some independence into the scrutiny system, but that may be impossible, rather than undesirable. I hope not.

We have in this country a system of strong government, and that has many virtues. It provides a great capacity for action and that is not easily to be dismissed, but in my view strong government can be defended only if it is matched by strong accountability. The Government are taking many admirable measures to insert new checks and balances into our political system, but the area where they have not done that—and they have to do it—is Parliament itself.

I end by quoting Crossman again, from the same speech that I referred to earlier. He said:

> This reform would be good for the prestige of Parliament, good for the morale of back benchers, and, I believe, very good for the Government as well, because a strong and healthy Executive is all the stronger and healthier if it is stimulated by responsible investigation and criticism.—[*Official Report*, 14 December 1966; Vol. 738, c. 483.]

That was true 34 years ago and it is true today. It will become more true if the House adopts the recommendations of the Liaison Committee.

5.1 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I start by making the most important point that needs to be made in this debate. Although the Government claim—and claimed in their election addresses and their manifesto—to be massively in favour of modernising Parliament and to want to do everything to that end, the three documents that are the basis of the report that we are debating today prove one thing absolutely: that, to the Government, modernisation means lessening rather than enhancing the control of Parliament over the Executive. Their purpose in modernisation is to strengthen the Executive and override any major suggestion of allowing Parliament to have a greater impact on the Executive. The documents prove what the Government are setting out to achieve and, if that is their way of modernising Parliament, it is a pretty depressing factor.

I served on the Liaison Committee for 14 years from 1983 to 1997 with the present Chairman, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), and I congratulate him on the service that he has given that Committee, for introducing today's debate and for his report.

As I said in an intervention on the right hon. Gentleman, this debate should have been on a motion on which the House could have divided. It really is not good enough that it should be palmed off on an Adjournment debate so that the Government can turn around and say, "We have had all that before the House." The House has not had the opportunity to ensure by a vote that the majority of the proposals in the Liaison Committee report are carried out. I believe that, if a motion were put before the House without the Whips on it, the Liaison Committee's proposals would get a considerable majority. Indeed, I suggest to the Parliamentary Secretary, who is to reply to the debate that he says to the right hon. Member for Ashton- under-Lyne, "If you table a number of motions and get them on the Order Paper, we will allow the House to debate them and to vote on them without a Whip." That would be the way to test whether the Government are really convinced of the desire to modernise this place.

The Leader of the House, who always speaks with considerable charm and raises temperatures by only a very small amount, made a charming and delightful speech, but it did not add up to a row of beans.

I have another minor criticism to make. Where are all the Blair babes today? I see only two or three ladies in the House.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am here.

Sir Peter Emery: I have known the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) since she was my constituency neighbour when she represented Exeter. At no time have I ever believed that she was in the hands of the leader of her party or any other party.

Maria Eagle: Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that I am in the hands of the leader of my party? He does not know me well enough to know whether that is the case.

Sir Peter Emery: During Tuesday's debate, between 30 and 35 hon. Ladies were usually present. They were pushing forward the reforms, as they saw them, proposed by the Modernisation Committee. Their amendments sought to reduce the working hours of the House. I believe that their support was not adding to the control of the House over the Government, but was in fact giving way to the Government and allowing them to proceed with their legislation more quickly than they can do at present.

Fiona Mactaggart: I feel tempted to ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for a ruling on whether "Blair babe" is parliamentary language.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that some 50 per cent. of Labour Back Benchers present in the Chamber are women? That is a larger representation of women than in the parliamentary Labour party. If only we were half the parliamentary Labour party. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will accept that women are as interested in issues of democracy in the House as they are in making the House work more efficiently, which is what we were discussing on Tuesday.

Sir Peter Emery: There are always a number of ladies who are interested in what is happening in the House. Indeed, two are waiting to speak in the debate. I hope that they will prove by what they say that they really are interested in achieving greater control by the House over the Executive, but that was not evident in Tuesday's debate.

The issue of selecting members of Select Committees has taken up a great deal of time. I believe that we have to find a way of doing it other than having them nominated by the Whips. I am not saying that the Liaison Committee's proposals are perfect, but at least they are a stab at trying to get it right. If the Government feel that the proposals are too involved, let them come up with a method of their own that does not involve the Whips. If they do that, I am sure that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and the Committee will examine it thoroughly. They should not dismiss the idea of changing the system simply because they do not like the alternative that has been proposed.

If we want reform, we must get rid of the control of the Whips. We need to get away from the shadow of the black hand of the Whips, which has fallen in particular on my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). There is no doubt that, as Chairman of the Health Committee, he was responsible for some excellent reports that were highly critical of the Government and that an excuse was found in the following Parliament to get rid of him. We all know that that is wrong.

That is not the only instance. I will now reveal something that I have kept to myself. When the Trade and Industry Committee was created, the late Sir Donald Kaberry and I were candidates for the chairmanship. He won, and he was an excellent Chairman. At the end of the first Parliament, when he was retiring, the Committee decided that it would like me to be Chairman. I had spoken to the Chief Whip and, as far as I knew, it was all agreed.

Suddenly, a new member was put on the Committee. He was rather disillusioned about not having been made a Minister, and the Whips wanted to find something for him to do. Without any consultation with me, the Chief Whip talked to Labour Members to persuade them to vote against me. My opponent had two supporters on the

[Sir Peter Emery]

Conservative side, as did I, but to get him elected, the Labour votes needed to be twisted. One Member of Parliament came to me and said that the Chief Whip—now Lord Cocks—had spent 45 minutes twisting his arm to vote against me. The excuse was given that if the Conservative Chief Whip did not get his way, Mr. Cocks could not be certain of getting the Labour Chairmen that he wanted elected to various other Committees.

Those are the real facts of the behind-the-scenes operation of what I call the black hand. I have kept that fairly quiet, but it is about time that some people realised that when they say that the Whips do not really interfere, that is a lot of baloney.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) has left. He suggested that Parliament was all about Government and anti-Government, in a permanent election campaign. That is entirely wrong in one area: it is surprising how much co-operation there is among all the parties in the work of Select Committees. When they see the real facts, Select Committee members are willing to criticise Governments of their own party. In that way, Parliament has worked as people in the country would like it to work.

Ministers do not like appearing before Select Committees. They have to prepare themselves well and they know that they cannot wriggle. They are pressed time and again on the same subject, especially when they are seen to be wriggling. That is surely one of the ways in which the House can begin to have some influence on how the Executive is performing.

If that is the case, are we right to allow our Select Committees to do as little as they do at present? Some hon. Members will throw up their hands and say that they are terribly busy and cannot afford the time, but I believe that the Select Committees' influence over the Executive is much greater than that exerted by hon. Members, nine times out of 10, on the Floor of the House. Question Times do not really hold the Executive to account, and neither do most debates. What happens on the Floor of the House is regarded as the most important factor in the parliamentary process, but more often than not it is what happens in Select Committees that attracts headlines about the problems of Governments and their overriding and often overweening power.

I wonder whether we should not ask Select Committees to sit twice a week and take over more subjects. If they did so, they would have to be given the staff that they would need, and their members would have to be dedicated, as Members of Parliament, to looking after the control of the Executive. However, that control is much more likely to be exerted by Select Committees than by any other bodies involved in the work of the House.

If Select Committees were to take on more work, the recommendation of the Liaison Committee that the Chairmen of Select Committees should have a special allowance would be appropriate. Such an allowance may total, say, £10,000 a year, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield and the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne will know, being Chairman of a Select Committee involves a vast amount of extra work.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Peter Emery: Of course. I did not mean to leave the hon. Lady out of the list.

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is quite all right, I am used to being ignored. The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point, but I have reservations about paying Chairmen an allowance. We can justify having extra staff with no trouble at all, because those of us who do a lot of work in Select Committees put enormous pressure on staff. That would still be the case even if their numbers were increased. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a better alternative would be to ensure that we had more people to do the work necessary to assist Chairmen?

Sir Peter Emery: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady's thesis, but I do not preclude the possibility that Chairmen could receive some allowance recognising the extra work that they do for, and the dedication that they bring to, Select Committees.

However, we must be certain that such an allowance would not become an aspect of the Government payroll, and that hon. Members appointed as Select Committee Chairmen would not consider that role to be secondary. That is why I should prefer Chairmen to be appointed by the Select Committees and not by the Whips. In that way, we would ensure that appointment to the chairmanship of a Select Committee was not a placement by Government.

I have seen it happen several times that Ministers who are no longer in office turn up as Select Committee Chairmen. That is wrong, and it should not happen in the House of Commons.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To an extent, I agree with the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), but does my right hon. Friend agree that the recommendations in the paragraph in the report entitled "An Alternative Career" supply the answer to the problem? The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) referred to them very positively. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Parliament must offer hon. Members an alternative to becoming Ministers—who, of course, do receive additional remuneration? Should we not encourage hon. Members who are prepared to sacrifice being political all the time, for the sake of democracy and the workings of Parliament? I believe that recognising the chairmanship of Select Committees as an alternative career is the best way to achieve that.

Sir Peter Emery: I am delighted to hear what my hon. Friend suggests. The records show that that suggestion first appeared in a report from the Procedure Committee that was compiled when I was its Chairman. My hon. Friend will not be surprised that I agree entirely.

Members might say that they are too busy to spend two days a week on Select Committee reports. I am concerned, as I believe that a Member of Parliament's work is here in Westminster and not in the constituency. Why do Members have to get away early on a Thursday to have constituency Fridays or Saturdays? What are they? Are they councillors, county councillors or social service officers? We already have those; that is not the role of a Member of Parliament as I believe it to be.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): The answer to my hon. Friend's question as to why more Members of Parliament

do not spend more time here is the Liberal Democrats. They have made it difficult for Members of Parliament not to spend more time on pavement politics. More and more hon. Members feel that they have to head off the Liberal Democrats' obsession with pavement politics; they cannot spend enough time here and they have to look after their constituencies.

Sir Peter Emery: My hon. Friend speaks a great deal of truth. Pavement politics started with Mr. Lubbock, who won a famous by-election in Orpington and preached that one won seats by spending all one's time knocking on people's doors. That is not what a Member of Parliament is for.

Mr. Stunell: I know that the Liberal Democrats have had to take the blame for many things in this country, but that is the first time that we have been accused of causing the downfall of parliamentary democracy. I am delighted that my colleague, Rachel Oliver, is doing such an excellent job in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Sir Peter Emery: I have never said that that was the sole reason for hon. Members not spending more time here. I am saying that Members of Parliament should be spending more time here, controlling the Executive, rather than attempting to be councillors. I will say no more about the lady who was mentioned. I did not even know that she was there; obviously, she must be doing a marvellous job.

I wish to refer to travel. When the Select Committees were considered, it was thought that all the work should be done in this country. It was then pointed out that the Defence Committee would have to travel to the many bases and troops around the world, and it was thought fair that the Committee be given the right to travel. Then, the Foreign Affairs Committee said that, as it had to look after the embassies, it ought to be given the right to travel. The Trade Committee then said that certain trade matters—disputes between this country and America or within Europe, for example—meant that it might be necessary, occasionally, for it to travel. However, that was all; just those two and a half Committees.

Now, the prestige factor means that every Select Committee has to travel. I do not believe that that is necessary. With telephone and television conferencing, the need for Select Committees to travel as much as they are doing should be looked at by the Liaison Committee, which controls this matter. One difficulty, as the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne will know, is that as the Liaison Committee is made up of all the Chairmen of the Select Committees, the Chairmen of a number of Select Committees get together and say to each other, "You support my bid to travel and I'll support yours." [HON. MEMBERS: "Shocking."] Well, some truths need to come out.

Again, the Procedure Committee recommended having a sub-committee of the Liaison Committee made up of the Chairmen of Committees whose members do not travel, and that they should decide whether money should be allocated to Committees whose members want to travel. [*Laughter.*] From the laughter that I hear, that idea is not so foolish. Whether it would be accepted is another matter. However, it is the only way that I can see of dealing with the problem.

My final point—about the problem of dealing with secondary legislation—is equally important, and I am sorry that the subject was not really dealt with in the Liaison Committee's report. The volume of secondary legislation that goes through the House every year is vast, and the amount of supervision or examination carried out by Members of Parliament is minimal. We must look at that. If there are difficulties in passing a Bill through the House of Commons, it is much easier for the Minister to leave the thing that will cause problems to be dealt with under secondary legislation after the Bill has been enacted. That is not a new way for Ministers to behave—they have been doing it for years. Therefore, we must look even more carefully at the secondary legislation coming before the House, and we are not doing so.

I apologise for having taken more time than I intended, but I have allowed one or two interventions. Again, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and say to him, "Keep up the good work." We must deal with the matter, and unless there is strong pressure from people like him, it will not happen.

5.27 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in the debate. I am not sure that I was quite so pleased to be referred to by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) as a Blair babe. I consider myself the Member of Parliament for Liverpool, Garston, and am perfectly happy to be referred to as such.

I think that I understood the point that the right hon. Gentleman was trying to make, and it brought to mind something that occurred to me recently. The debate on the modernisation of the House has been represented outside, certainly in the press, as solely about the hours that we sit, family friendly policies and the convenience of Members of Parliament—about our terms and conditions. I think that Labour Members of Parliament who are women have been used a shield to deflect criticism. We are spoken of as the people who are pushing for modernisation. Of course, some of us have pushed for it, while others are more wary about some of the procedures. One cannot simply say that all those of one gender believe one thing while all those of the other do not.

In the debate on the election of the Speaker, it struck me that all the candidates had something to say about changing and modernising the way in which the House works, and not all of them were female. So perhaps Labour women Members of Parliament have been used as a shield to deflect criticism from outside. The discussions are often portrayed in terms of us simply wanting to make our lives easier, but in fact there is a real discussion going on in the House, which was reflected in the debate on electing the Speaker. All the candidates had something to say about modernisation; they said it in the Chamber and in other places as well in advance of the debate.

I welcome the opportunity to debate issues such as this, although I have some fear, coming from the Labour party, that one can get too obsessed with internal constitutions and little niggling bits of procedure. People outside the House do not necessarily think that that is what they sent us here to do. We must be careful not to navel-gaze too much, but we need such debates, and it is important that we are having one today.

I believe that it is too soon to have substantive motions on the Liaison Committee's report and I do not accept the criticism, advanced mainly by the Opposition, that they should have been tabled today. Although I agree with

[Maria Eagle]

much of the report, I would not have been moved to speak—but I would probably have listened to the debate—if I had not disagreed strongly with some elements of it. Had I been faced with substantive motions based on the report, I might have had to vote against parts of the report that I agreed with. Substantive motions at this stage would have been premature.

Let me say a little about what I agree with in the report. I agree that Select Committees are an important part of the House. In my short time here, I have served on the Public Accounts Committee, which is chaired by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). The right hon. Member for East Devon does not think that the right hon. Gentleman should be a Select Committee Chairman because he used to be a Minister. The PAC is well served because it has the National Audit Office at its disposal, so it receives more support than the departmental Select Committees. However, because it meets twice a week, it also requires its members to work harder and put in a great deal more effort.

When I served on that Committee, party politics did not enter into the consideration of National Audit Office reports on value for money, for example. There was no need for a vote, and I do not think that it was the practice of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) to call for votes in that Committee. We undervalue our achievements as scrutineers of the Executive if we do not recognise the qualities and fine work of Select Committees, which is achieved even under trying circumstances and without all the resources that they wish they could have.

I also reject the idea that because Whips serve on the Committee of Selection, which sorts out the membership of Select Committees, people are put on them who have nothing to offer. That is an insult to Members of the House. Every hon. Member who manages to get elected to the House—it is not something that one stumbles into by accident—has considerable, although possibly varying, experience of life. We can bring that to bear on the role of Back Bencher—or Minister, if we get that opportunity. We can bring it to bear in scrutinising the Executive when serving on a Select Committee, or in scrutinising legislation if we serve on a Standing Committee. It is a bit insulting to suggest that members of Select Committees are not up to the job if Whips put their names forward. There is no single set of qualifications that fits one person for Select Committee membership better than any other. Everyone has something to offer in any one of those roles.

I shall be brief, because I know that other hon. Members want to speak, and concentrate on elements of the report with which I disagree. There are two issues. The first, which is difficult to grasp, is the idea of an alternative career. It is mentioned in a heading in the report and is floated as an idea, but I must confess that I do not really understand what an alternative career through the Select Committee system would mean for someone who comes into the House. I suspect that the proposal would establish an alternative career structure that would enable people to serve on Select Committees on the understanding that they did not go into Government so that there would be another way of making a mark that currently does not exist. Currently, only the chairmanships, of which there are a mere 33, offer career progression in that sense, so the alternative career structure is somewhat limited. Presumably, had they entered the House at a time when the recommendations had been implemented, some of the people who chose to pursue the proposed career path would have had little more chance of advancement than they have now.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Does the hon. Lady not realise that the aim of the proposal is to ensure that there are senior Members who feel somewhat independent of their party and are therefore able to use the Committee to focus scrutiny and enable cross-party working?

Maria Eagle: How does one become a senior Member, independent of one's party?

Our experiences, whether as Back Benchers or Ministers or in some other arena, enable all Members to bring something to the scrutiny they carry out as a member of a Select Committee. To say that anyone wanting to become a Select Committee Chairman cannot ever go into Government would be a nonsense, because it would deprive the Committees of the valuable experience that Members bring with them. Who better to scrutinise the workings of the Executive than someone who has been through the Whitehall system, seen how government works and tried to make it work better?

It would be a mistake to separate the two roles, not least because it would lead to two classes of Member of Parliament. Apart from Front Benchers, we are all Back Benchers together, whether we sit on the Government or the Opposition Benches. We might serve on the Front Benches for a while, but we shall inevitably end up back on the Back Benches. What would be wrong with then becoming a member of a Select Committee and bringing our experience to bear? Many distinguished Select Committee Chairmen have done that and we should not prevent others from doing the same.

In addition, if the suggested career progression is insufficiently appealing, no one who has any hope of ministerial office will opt for it. That raises questions about whether we would be able to fill the membership of Select Committees.

My main objection to the report centres on the proposals for the Select Committee panel. I understand that they are designed to increase the power of Select Committees—and therefore strengthen parliamentary scrutiny—rather than that of the Executive. However, we have to remember that our constitution provides that the Government can govern only if they have a majority in the House of Commons: Ministers are Members of Parliament. It is therefore not fair to suggest that it is impossible to hold such people to account without entirely separating parliamentary scrutiny in the fashion proposed.

If we implemented all the recommendations, there would be three people—the Chairman and two Deputy Chairmen of the Select Committee panel—who held enormous power. They would almost be a self-perpetuating oligarchy, because they would choose the members of the Select Committees from which Select Committee Chairmen were drawn. They would be able to select those who could have the alternative career; thus members of the Select Committees would owe them a certain obligation.

The panel would be able to select subjects for debate on the Floor of the House and in Westminster Hall. Other hon. Members have mentioned recommendations that its

members should be paid or get an increase in their office costs allowance to reflect their work. The Norton report even set out salary scales and stated which Select Committee Chairmen should be paid the equivalent of a Cabinet Minister's salary.

The panel would have the power to report those who failed to attend Select Committee meetings, to decide the format and presentation of Select Committee reports, and to propose changes in the budgets of Government Departments through the referral of estimates to departmental Committees. That sounds as though elements of the Government are to be supplanted, rather than scrutinised. The panel would be able to control whether or not joint inquiries could be undertaken and it would provide communications support, which sounds as though a spin machine is to be established to enable Select Committees to publish reports that look nicer than such reports do now.

All that does not give the impression of scrutiny; it sounds as though an alternative source of power would be established in the House. We are all politicians in this place, and politics is about power. The members of the Liaison Committee are all senior Members. Many of them are Privy Councillors who have been in the House for many years. They are owed a great deal of respect, but perhaps they think that they should have a little more respect and power than at present. The report proposes that they should get that.

Having read the report, I am not surprised that the Government might think, "Hang on a minute, is this really about scrutiny of the Executive?" It is about establishing a separate power structure within the House that is not necessarily accountable to Back Benchers. I cannot see that the Select Committee panel would be accountable to Back Benchers, and that worries me. It is an alternative source of power that is outside of party.

We must be careful. It is fashionable to suggest that party influences are terrible and represent everything that is wrong with the legislature and its power to scrutinise the Executive. The House could not function without the proper functioning of the party systems. There is too much legislation, too much secondary legislation and too many pressures on individual Members time for us to be able to function without party. We weaken party in this place at our peril. We should consider carefully the implications of what we are doing.

It is for these reasons—

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle: I am coming to the end of my remarks. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not give way.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Lady said that she would give way.

Maria Eagle: I did, but I do not want to take up too much time. Other Members wish to speak.

It is easy for us all as Back Benchers to say, "It's terrible. The Executive has too much power and we need more carefully to scrutinise it." We need extremely carefully to examine the proposals for changing the balance and allowing Back Benchers to scrutinise more carefully before we implement them. They could change many other things in the House, which would be to its detriment. That applies not only to the present Government but to any other Government who are elected in future.

5.42 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): It is a pleasure to speak while you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have not congratulated you before on your appointment.

I never expected to hear such a Conservative speech made by a Labour Member as that of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle). The hon. Lady is right to say that the report is an attempt to create a power structure within Parliament and to grab back the power that the Executive has grabbed from Parliament. The speech of the Leader of the House would have pleased Charles I. It would certainly have pleased any President of the United States. Both the right hon. Lady and the hon. Lady are saying that they disagree with parliamentary supremacy, which the English civil war delivered to Parliament. They want to run an Executive system when they are in office. However, they do not want that when they are not in office. That is true of both the Conservative party and the Labour party. It is a considerable fault and a serious undermining of Parliament.

I would like to see substantive motions come forward from Select Committees to the House. The whole House could discuss them and the motions would change Government policy.

Mrs. Beckett: This is the second time, although not in this debate, that I have heard a Conservative Member talking about taking back power that the Executive has removed from the House. It is my understanding—it may be at fault—that hitherto Select Committees have not been encouraged to substitute their judgment for that of the Executive. I do not quarrel with the hon. Gentleman for making the case that they now should. It is a legitimate case, but I happen to disagree with it. To talk as if we are turning back the clock to a "golden" age is perhaps unfair.

Mr. Wells: There is no golden age within the memory of the House as currently constituted, but one, especially that after the English civil war and during the commonwealth led by Cromwell, is within the House's historical memory. Parliament had supremacy, but has consistently lost that over the years.

Why has Parliament lost its supremacy? The reason is that the civil service does not want Parliament to interfere with its suggestions. Although the Government succeeded a Conservative Government, they have proposed exactly the same propositions, which came from exactly the same civil servants. Civil servants could not persuade Conservative Ministers to introduce proposals, flawed as they were, so they sought to convince Labour Ministers to do so. The civil service does not want an alternative body to be established before which it would have to account for its actions and policies, with the inevitable consequences.

Membership should be taken away from the command of the Whips. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) explained the

[Mr. Wells]

way in which Whips work. I am well aware of that process because I have been a Whip. The Labour party excludes from the Committee that I have the honour to chair Members whom the Whips do not want on that Committee. I can make that assertion because Labour members of the Committee told me so. That is the only evidence that I have, but I believe that it is reliable.

We need a body—I agree that it may not be that proposed in the Liaison Committee report—that is independent of the Whips Office. That wish is unlikely to be fulfilled, because the Whips Office will make certain that its influence is felt, whichever body is established. The Whips Office is well practised in that, and needs no protection from the House in that respect.

As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs Dunwoody) said in an intervention, staffing is the great problem with our Committees. Committee staff are expert and extremely hard working, but only three or perhaps four people service the Committees. The International Development Committee could not do more work simply because its staff could not carry out the work that we could generate. Equally, Committee members cannot do much more than they presently do and the idea that Select Committees meet once a week is a joke, at least with regard to the International Development Committee. We meet on average twice a week, and often, when considering reports, much more frequently. We also have to carry out ancillary work, such as meeting those from outside the House—perhaps from international sources—who wish to influence the Committee. We do not conduct our affairs on only one or two days a week.

It is essential that Select Committees consider all Bills that come before the House before they reach Standing Committee. We need a system that carries out pre-legislative scrutiny along the lines on which Select Committees operate. That need not be done by the relevant departmental Select Committee—the heavy legislative loads that would fall on, for example, the Home Affairs Committee would make that impossible. However, a Select Committee process needs to operate before each Bill is considered clause by clause and line by line.

I did not support the right hon. Lady's programming proposals on Tuesday because, before we consider programming every Bill, we should establish a pre-legislative Select Committee process. Indeed, I would not agree to the proposals until we had such a process. There should also be a post-legislative process, which the right hon. Lady proposed, to establish how legislation has been implemented and whether it has produced the result that the House expected. That consideration is more important now that we have such a plethora of judicial review processes. In my view, those processes hold the Government up to scrutiny more effectively than Parliament manages to do, in view of the dominance of the House by the Executive, backed up by the civil service.

My next point concerns the powers of Select Committees, which I believe should be enhanced. Under the current rules, Ministers do not have to attend Select Committees, nor do Members of the House of Lords when called upon by a Committee to attend. Many Ministers—all the Ministers whom I remember—do not resist calls to go before Select Committees. That is established practice. However, there is one Minister who has refused to attend any Select Committee hearings: the Prime Minister. When Lady Thatcher was Prime Minister she refused to attend a Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, of which I was a member, when she was called upon to do so, and I believe that the present Prime Minister is following the same rules.

A Select Committee should have the power to call Ministers, as well as its present power to call others. Members of the House of Lords should come to our Committees; equally, Ministers in this House should be prepared to go before House of Lords Committees. The powers of Select Committees therefore need to be increased.

The hon. Member for Garston spoke about ex-Ministers. Former Ministers who serve on the International Development Committee have told me that, compared with their role as Ministers or on the Floor of the House, working on that Committee has been their most rewarding and most influential experience in the House or elsewhere. The most satisfying aspect has been the fact that they have been able to argue from strength, information and evidence to persuade Ministers to change policy.

That is the huge value of Select Committees. The International Development Committee has no difficulty in getting members.

Mr. Tipping: I am interested in the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made. He is the Chairman of a Select Committee, and he has just pointed out to the Chamber the advantages of having ex-Ministers on his Committee. If that is the case, why has he signed up to the notion of an alternate career structure in the report? The two propositions do not hang together.

Mr. Wells: I do not agree. I was in the House when the departmental Select Committees were introduced and the noble Lord St. John of Fawsley, who was then Leader of the House, occupying the position of the right hon. Lady, said that they would provide a satisfying career and an alternative career to a ministerial one. I see no inconsistency in that. After a Minister has left office, he is available to pursue another career on a Select Committee. Indeed, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich is in that position. I agree with the Parliamentary Secretary that former Ministers add a dimension that should not be denied to Select Committees. I see no contradiction in stating that that is an alternative career path, which can be influential in the House.

Mr. Tipping: If that is the case, an opportunity to serve on a Select Committee, adding value, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, should be good preparation for being a Minister. His argument suggests that he would have to deny that.

Mr. Wells: Select Committees offer opportunities pre-and post-ministerial office. I do not exclude either possibility, but I believe that serving on a Select Committee makes a satisfying alternative career to being a Minister. The hon. Gentleman, who has not been a junior departmental Minister, may think that Select Committee membership is a more influential position than a junior Minister often occupies.

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This is the last time I shall seek to intervene

in his speech. His comments imply that the notion of an alternative career does not exist. If one can be a member of a Select Committee before being a Minister and after being a Minister, what is the notion of an alternative career, referred to in the Liaison Committee report? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will spell it out to me.

Mr. Wells: It is entirely clear. A career could be mixed; an hon. Member could have a ministerial and a Select Committee career. The latter offers an alternative path for influencing matters that relate to a specific subject that an hon. Member wishes to pursue.

Mr. Evans: The Parliamentary Secretary has missed the point. Paragraphs 29 and 30 of the report state:

and of course former Ministers bring valuable knowledge and experience to their service on select committees. What we would like to see is a better *balance* between the attractions of government office and of service on select committees.

Mr. Wells: That makes the point. However, I must conclude my remarks because many other hon. Members want to contribute.

The Liaison Committee report looks forward to the way in which an effective Parliament can be seen to be working by the public. That is important for the prestige and power of Parliament. Select Committees are much more suited than the House to the television camera because the viewer can see what happens, watch the exchanges and identify with the proceedings.

The Select Committee system should be expanded, enhanced and given extra powers. That is the future for seeing Parliament respected again in our country, and enabled to be more powerful than it is at present.

5.56 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): Congratulations, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and the Liaison Committee on producing a luminous report. It is terse, short, but in many ways perfectly formed. That also applies to the demolition of the Government's response in the Committee's reply.

The most important passage is short. Paragraph 12 states:

Members have undoubtedly been kept off committees, or removed from them, on account of their views.

That is a simple, spartan statement, which enjoys the support and imprimatur of 30 of the most distinguished and experienced Members of Parliament. That passage is of paramount importance.

When I learned, within days of arriving in this place, that Labour membership of Select Committees was vetted by the Government through the Whips, I thought that it beggared belief. With great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), that is not a pettifogging matter. If we explained the process to the British people, and said that those who scrutinise the Government are selected by the Government, they would be astounded.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the percentage of hon. Members on the Select Committees is also important? Members are selected in proportion to the ratio of Members in each party, and therefore more Members of the party of Government serve on the Committees. Should not the equal representation of parties be discussed?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I do not agree with that, and I do not want to follow a tributary of the argument; I prefer to stick to the bull point of the report. That point is much more important than the alternative career proposals. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Consolidation of Bills, etc. I should not want that to become an alternative career. It is not one of the Committees that is besieged by hon. Members wishing to join it.

There are two compelling reasons for the House to move as fast as possible and use all the agencies at its command to ensure the implementation of the proposals in the report. The first is the changing nature of the constitution of the House. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House came to this arena rather late in life, having had the good fortune to pursue and enjoy careers in other places. We do not seek preferment or office, and the vast majority of us are delighted to serve on the Back Benches and whatever Back Bench Committees we are invited to sit on. That is pretty fortunate in some cases. It is easy for those of us who are in that happy band of brothers to look at the gross, transparent abuse of power by the Whips Office and treat it with the contempt that it deserves.

The same cannot be said for many other hon. Members because, let us face it, we live in the age of the career politician. There are people who perceive politics not simply as a dedication and calling, but as a vocation and a job which, they hope, will last for life. There is nothing wrong with that, and I do not criticise that position. Politics is a noble calling and we even have our own patron saint—one thanks God nightly that that did not involve the elevation of Cardinal Wolsey. For people who come to this place as career politicians, the Whips wield a deadly, capricious power that affects both the reputation, however transient, that they seek but may never have, and their entire career and raison d'etre. Of course, many Members apply themselves honourably to ignoring that and getting on with the business. However, human nature is such that many will not do that, and there will be growing pressure for conformity, which is the handmaiden of a lack of principle.

By that means and as a result of the changing nature of the House, the Whips power will continue to grow. As it does, the corollary is that the power of the House to curb the Executive will be steadily eroded. I agree that this matter is an old chestnut that has been before Parliament many times, but it is timely because of the change in the nature of the House.

My second point is much simpler and shorter. Quite simply, the use of that power is an exercise in political corruption. This Administration has been free of the taint of economic and commercial corruption, of which we should be justifiably proud. However, that does not apply when we come to look at the question of political corruption. It does not matter whether one calls it nepotism, cronyism or the abuse of patronage, because they are all the same. Unless we root it out, we will not be heard with respect and, indeed, the House will forfeit the right to be heard at all.

I am pleased to have made a short contribution on those two matters. I share the pessimism of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), who made a wonderful speech, but I hope that the measure will, at the very least, be debated and voted on without fear.

6.4 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that you will be happy in your duties.

I am delighted to follow the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). In his brief, articulate and succinct speech, he summed up the essence of and the principle that lies behind the Liaison Committee report "Shifting the Balance", which we are debating today.

It was mentioned earlier that I may have a vested interest in the debate because of my experiences in the House. I fervently believe in the House and in the role that it plays in holding the Government of the day to account and scrutinising legislation. As hon. Members on both sides of the House have said, the only effective way in which the House of Commons can properly hold the Government of the day and their Ministers to account is through the Select Committee system. It is quite wrong that the Government, however tenuously, should have any say in the appointment of hon. Members to Select Committees. Of course, the Government can have a say through the usual channels—the Whips Office—on which Committees are to be controlled by the Government party and which by the main Opposition party and other parties. Should the Government have any direct say in the appointments to the Select Committees? The answer is no.

In its report, the Liaison Committee has made propositions that should rightly be voted on in due course. The Government reacted quickly to include motions on the Order Paper to change Standing Orders in response to the Modernisation Committee's report, which was not unanimous. They have a duty and a responsibility to the House to table in this Session of Parliament—and I mean in this Session—substantive motions to enable the House to vote on the proposals contained in this report, which was unanimous. The Minister will recognise that there is substantial support on both sides of the House for the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report.

The Chairman and two Deputy Chairmen of Committees could be appointed as you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Chairman of Ways and Means and the other Deputy Speakers are appointed. Such appointments can be put to the House to be agreed or otherwise. I liked the speech of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle). I did not agree with her, but she was honest and direct. The House could have a say over who is appointed as Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of Committees. The House could make appointments to all the Select Committees within a short time after a new Parliament came into being. Hon. Members from all parties would then have a vital role in holding the Government of the day to account.

Having gone through a rather sad experience in 1992, I do not believe that the House should tolerate any longer a system of selecting people for Committees that allows such abuse to occur. In a way I am quite proud that the Winterton rule, as it is now known, is part of parliamentary history, is in textbooks and is taught in universities in this country and elsewhere. What went on was condemned by those who value the role of the House of Commons. What the Government of the day did brought them no credit.

The Minister misunderstands the reference to an alternative career. Of course people who serve on Select Committees, and even become Chairmen, could go on to become Ministers of the Crown. Nothing in the report prevents that. Likewise, nothing in the report prevents someone who has been a Minister of the Crown from becoming a member of a Select Committee—perhaps even a Chairman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who is currently an Opposition Whip, said to me, "Of course that is right, but such people must not be imposed on Committees. There must first be a voluntary decision by the House to appoint them as members; then the Committee must elect a Chairman."

I ask the Minister to understand what is being said in the report, and also in another report. I do not have a copy with me, but I think it was called—perhaps someone can remind me—[HON. MEMBERS: "Independence or Control".] That report was our brief but, again, unanimous response to the Government's very inadequate reply to the Liaison Committee's initial report.

Both new and old Members have served on the Liaison Committee, providing a wealth of Back-Bench experience. Let us be fair: the present Chairman, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), was a very distinguished Treasury Minister in an earlier Labour Government. He does not bring just a Back-Bench perspective to the report; he brings to it the experience of having been a distinguished Minister in a Labour Government.

It is not a matter of Back Benchers versus the Government of the day, or the Executive. A Member of Parliament with many years service, together with his colleagues, has brought to the House a wealth of experience in trying to shift the balance of power back to Parliament in order to give it a meaningful role—and the alternative career structure to which I have briefly referred represents one way of doing that.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) has been very honourable about expressing her opposition, even during Committee sittings. She says that we should not start talking about extra salaries or allowances. That may well have to come in due course, but I do not necessarily advocate it in the short term, either.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway, who is a practising lawyer and a man of great distinction, articulated his point—which he was right to make—in an incisive legal way. I listened to him with great respect. While being considered—like me—to be a maverick, the hon. and learned Gentleman is honest and honourable, and it is right for both honesty and honour to be part of this place.

Nowadays, more and more MPs are professional career politicians. We want MPs who do not just want preferment. We want MPs who will serve the House, not only on Select Committees but in other ways—MPs who believe that their role is important to Parliament, and to the role that Parliament itself plays.

We need an alternative career structure. I hope that both the Liaison Committee and the House will consider that. There will, I assume, be limited time before the Government table substantive motions—I suspect that the Minister will not tell us that they will be tabled before the end of the current Session—but let me make a plea. If the Government believe in democracy, and in Parliament's real role of being able to hold the Government of the day to account, will the Minister tell us that before the end of the current Parliament Members will have an opportunity to vote on the issues, principles and recommendations mentioned in today's debate? That will at least show that the Government believe that the House has a meaningful

role to play, that there are Members of Parliament who do not want become Ministers because they believe that they can fulfil other roles and that there are those in this House who are prepared to appeal not just to their parties.

I have sat on the Back Benches for 29 years, and I am proud of it. This is my 30th year as a Member. Some hon. Members may say that I do not have the ability to be a Minister, but I do not believe that that is the case. I have the ability, but I chose a particular way to fulfil the role of a Member of Parliament. I do not regret that; I do not want to push the water back under the bridges. I fervently love the House of Commons, and I want it to have more control over the Executive so that we produce not only better legislation but a better Government.

6.16 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Governments of all kinds—even the best intentioned—suddenly discover that power is very comfortable after they enter office, and they know what they want to do with it; they want get their way. Even those who have been completely committed to the House of Commons and the democratic system suddenly discover that the exigencies of day-to-day life are inconvenient when they have to return to the House to justify their actions. That is not a party political matter; it is true of every Government whom I have ever known. The reality is that the House allows its powers to slip away at its peril.

Life becomes more complex. More work is done and more decisions are taken outside the House. More people are unanswerable. There are more stand-alone agencies and more parts of Government that impinge on our lives in every way but answer to no one. I am sorry to say that it is not true that the report suggests a revolutionary return to an alternative centre of great power. Would that it were so. The Liaison Committee simply told us that if we continue down the current path, the House will consist of people who regard their constituency work as more important than legislation; who find time for many social occasions, but little for the detailed scrutiny of highly complex legislation; and, most importantly, who do not have access to sufficient informed and accurate back-up to be able to tell when legislation is not only wrong but dangerous. We have seen that with the use of secondary legislation and other measures that give Ministers enormous powers, which are then backed up outside or in subsidiary Committees.

The House must begin to make a stand. We should hold a Speaker's Conference to consider in detail the work that is necessary. While we wait for that, the Liaison Committee's recommendations should be put to the House in an understandable and acceptable way. I have never seen so many Guys put up as I have by the Government in relation to the report. All the details about whether or not people are paid or whether they have access to certain information are totally unimportant. The House can determine those details. However, we in Parliament must be able to tell people that, as life becomes more complex, we are ahead of the game and capable of scrutinising all those changes that affect them in every aspect of their lives. We have let some of that go in the most dangerous way. It is a matter not simply of drafting or organising, but of Select Committees having the time, information and sheer commitment to hold Ministers to account for their actions.

Of course, Ministers hate coming to our Committees. Of course, when we do too much work, they find it inconvenient. I found one of the comments in the Government reply vaguely amusing. It said, in effect, "The Committees are doing too much work. They are calling us forward too often. We have been called before the departmental Committee at least once every fortnight." Frankly, on occasions, I would prefer to have the senior civil servant. It is Ministers who are determined that I shall not have access to that source of information, not anyone else.

I say to the Government that, in the whole of politics, it is essential to have someone who stands at their shoulder and says, "You may take that decision, but the difficulties and implications are bad for democracy, bad for the country, but above all very bad for you. If you are clever, if you are a good politician, you will ask Parliament to perform the role of scrutiny because you need it." We all need it, but the Government need it more than we do. The Government need it as a protection against the almost unconscious arrogance that goes with the constant exercise of power. This is the place that needs to ask the awkward questions.

I say one thing very simply: put the Liaison Committee's report to the House of Commons. Give it the time to debate it. Do not get involved in absurd details, just accept that the principle is what matters. The principle is that Parliament needs to take back the right to speak for the people because Parliament's greatest enemy is not hatred, but apathy and lack of connection with what we are doing.

6.21 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the Chair.

Having sat through the debate, I have decided more or less to change my speech. Some Members have suggested that, in the past, the House has had lots of powers, has been able to bring the Executive to account on its Budget and to be an effective scrutiniser. I challenge that idea. One of the reasons why I like the report is that it begins the process—it is a very small step—towards the radical constitutional reform that needs to happen to the House.

I quote from the 19th edition of "Erskine May" with respect to the process of supply and the scrutiny of Government Budgets.

> financial relations between the Crown and Parliament took shape during the period while the King still governed through ministers responsible to himself, and the House of Commons only exercised a negative control through its power to withhold supplies. These constitutional relationships have been maintained in essential continuity, despite the establishment of Cabinet government dependent upon the support of the House of Commons.

The House has had only a negative role in all the Budgets that have been passed over the centuries.

To give another example, the last time that the House told the Government of the day that they could not have the money that they requested was in 1919. The then Government had put forward an estimate requesting money in the royal palaces vote for a second bathroom for the then Lord Chancellor. The House of Commons decided in 1919 that the money for that second bathroom should not be granted. In the current Parliament, there was a hue and cry about a certain Lord Chancellor's expensive wallpaper. Members got up and made some criticism of that expenditure, but we did not vote it down.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

I give that example simply to say that the House has been powerless for far too long. I do not think that it has ever had the power that it should have had. The Liaison Committee report begins to address that centuries-old problem.

Indeed, one of my criticisms of the Liaison Committee report is that it is too complacent about the current situation and therefore conservative in its proposals. The Select Committee system is not the great, wonderful scrutinising system that some colleagues have suggested. With a few honourable exceptions, many of our reports do not have the effect that they should have. They do not lead to changes in policies, to rethinks and to changes in expenditure priorities. They should lead to that because they are the result of an awful lot of work.

The only real effect of Select Committees tends to come from their hearings, when Ministers are giving evidence and the press are listening. If Ministers are given a hard time, they might have an embarrassing headline the next day. That is important and is part of Parliament's role in scrutinising the Executive, but it is hardly a major role. It defines "scrutiny" in a narrow way, relating just to asking a few difficult questions. My view of accountability and scrutiny is a rather more powerful one. I thought that we were elected to this place not just to ask the odd difficult question or give the Minister an embarrassing headline, but to scrutinise properly and attempt to amend or change the direction of Government policy. That is why I think that the report, excellent though many of its proposals are, is too conservative.

I accept that we have to begin somewhere. Page 2 of the white summary sheet to the report makes it clear that the Committee wants to recognise the reality of the current political situation and take a small step forward. It would be unwise of Ministers to suggest that there are hon. Members who would be happy with this rather timid set of recommendations. Many of us want to go much further so as to make this Chamber an effective and active participant in the formation of Government policy.

I shall give just one or two examples and leave some time for other colleagues to participate in the debate. I believe that we need to challenge Standing Order No. 48. For those who do not know that off by heart, it is the basis for the Crown financial initiative. It says that only Ministers of the Crown can propose spending. I believe that parliamentarians—Members of the House—should be able to propose spending plans; not just switches between expenditure heads, as the report suggests, but spending increases.

I am not suggesting legislative anarchy because I believe that the Executive should retain the ability to veto financial proposals. A few years ago, the New Zealand Parliament, which is very much like this Parliament, changed its Standing Orders to get rid of the Crown financial initiative. It has put in its place something slightly weaker, called the Crown financial veto. It has opened up the Budget process so that ordinary Members can make constructive and well-thought-through spending proposals. If a proposal would wreak havoc with the financial stability of the country, the Executive can table a certificate of financial veto, which is not debatable, and defend the viability of the Budget.

That change in Standing Orders would create a huge incentive for hon. Members to get their hands dirty and get involved in the nitty-gritty of scrutinising the Budget. I believe that the suggestions about changing our procedures and the way in which we scrutinise the Budget that are contained in this report and in the report from the Procedure Committee, on which I had the pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), do not go far enough. We need to ensure that hon. Members are given more powers, more training and greater resources to be able to undertake the scrutiny role.

I hope that, after looking again at the proposals and taking note of the arguments that we have heard today, the Government do not try to sit on this for years, or until after the election. I hope that they come back urgently and realise that there is a need for radical reform of the House. Perhaps they will be even braver than the Liaison Committee.

6.29 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I welcome you to your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is grand to see you in the Chair.

I welcome the Liaison Committee report, particularly its objectives of ensuring more effective scrutiny of legislation, more pre-legislative scrutiny and more effective work by the Select Committees. However, I was almost depressed by what sounded like a bit of hypocrisy from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), who demanded a vote on the proposals. Although she claimed to support the report and its proposals, she was not convinced by some of the details. However, even if we were debating such motions and we all supported the report's main theme and objectives, we would not all agree with the precise recipe that the report offered to achieve those objectives.

As the Leader of the House said, the report highlights the danger of swapping the current system of patronage held by the Whips Office for one in which patronage is exercised by a committee of three wise men—and they probably would be men, would they not? Perhaps it would be sensible to determine whether we can create a procedure to select Select Committee members that really is transparent, really does reflect the composition of the House and really does involve Back Benchers.

Derek Fatchett—the former Member for Leeds, Central, who is sadly no longer with us—wrote a pamphlet for the Fabian Society in which he suggested that Select Committee members should be elected by hon. Members, excluding Ministers. I would like to go further than that. I think that there is much merit in the points made by hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), on the importance of the party system and of maintaining the party tradition that underpins our democratic system.

Perhaps the best way forward would be to allow political parties to organise internal elections to choose Select Committee members. Such a system would certainly ensure greater eagerness to serve and greater commitment to Select Committees. It would also create a genuine alternative career structure.

Many people seem to think that one can have only one career at a time—that one can run along only one set of career "tram lines" now, only one set later, and that one

cannot jump at will from one set to another. I have had at least six different careers, and, on two occasions, I have had two careers at the same time. The opportunity for Members to serve on a Select Committee, and therefore to contribute even more than they do as Back Benchers, should not entail the exclusion of career alternatives.

The Committee's report offers some good challenges. In his pamphlet, Derek Fatchett urged us, when we came to power, not to do what Conservative Members had done. He said that the Conservatives will have had 17 years in power—he guessed that it would be that long, but was one year out—with their noses in the trough, but that we should not think that our time had come to do the same. He said that we should be bigger than that. He said that, to ensure and strengthen democracy and community, we need a Parliament that works well.

For four years of my life, I was a member of a local council, and for two of those years I led the opposition on the council. There were 31 members of the majority party and 30 members of the minority party. One consequence of that small majority was that fewer mistakes were made. As leader of the opposition, I helped that council to be a better council, and that helped it to become a very popular council.

Strong scrutiny produces better decisions and better government, regardless of who is in government. We need the courage and the bottle to admit that, and to create a democratic structure that can more effectively deliver it.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Mactaggart: I do not have time; I am sorry.

Mr. McWalter: It was going to be helpful.

Fiona Mactaggart: I am sure that it was.

Not all of the details in the report are right. I urge the Liaison Committee to do one more job. I think that we have to widen the debate so that it continues beyond this Adjournment debate, and include more hon. Members in it. I also think that the Committee should take evidence on how to develop the proposals. I think that it has got the principles right in respect of what we are trying to achieve, but in practice the transparency is not being delivered. If the Committee intends to propose that appointments are approved by Select Committees, as was proposed in the 1992 Labour party manifesto, it must be very clear about which Committees will be involved and how the system will work. There is more work still to do, but we have made a good start. Let us do the work as well as pressing the Government to act on some of these proposals.

6.35 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I, too, welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart). I declare an interest as a member of both the Liaison Committee and the Norton commission, although I recognise that the report of the latter is not part of today's debate. I should also declare that although I am a member of the Liaison Committee, I did not sign the early-day motion tabled by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). As a matter of principle, I never sign early-day motions, except when they are of a memorial nature. I did not think that this one was of a memorial nature, although having heard the speech by the Leader of the House, perhaps it is.

Select Committee reform—not modernisation—received a powerful stimulus 20 years ago when my noble Friend Lord St. John of Fawsley was Leader of the House. The Liaison Committee's reports are a further stage in that process. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne not only on the speech with which he opened the debate, but on the way in which he has led our collective endeavour. Just as the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms revolutionised our civil service 40 years ago, the St. John Stevas-Sheldon reforms will do the same for the scrutiny of the Executive by Parliament.

I shall not dwell on the circumlocutions by the Leader of the House on free votes, but her answers to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and myself at business questions today, let alone in the debate on 13 July, amounted to her saying, yes, there will be free votes but only if the Government agree that there should be substantive motions—or, in Marie Antoinette's words, "Let them eat cake."

I am of a profoundly conservative disposition, even if not quite to the level of the Scottish judge who said that a change for the better was a contradiction in terms. Not least as a member of the Norton commission, I have been driven to the conclusion that we need to reform our ways in order to strengthen Parliament's scrutiny of the Executive, which is what the Liaison Committee's reports are also about.

I use again the word "reform" rather than "modernisation". The latter is a Humpty Dumpty word. It is a porous word, neither rigorous nor muscular. On 13 July I quoted the opening three paragraphs with which my noble Friend Lord Norton launched his eponymous report on 10 July. I shall now quote only the middle of the three. If I quote it again hereafter, I shall have fulfilled Humpty Dumpty's other dictum, "What I tell you three times is true."

Lord Norton said:

> we identify the functions of Parliament and the purpose of parliamentary reform. Too often, reforms are proposed for different purposes. Some are designed to expedite the business of Government, some are for the convenience of Members of Parliament, some are designed to remove archaic practices. Others are designed to strengthen Parliament in calling government to account.

In his final paragraph, he went on to say that the Norton report was devoted purely to the last of these aims, and the same could be said of the Liaison Committee's report.

When we debated the report of the Modernisation Committee on Tuesday, I thought that its aims were devoted more closely to the other aims referred to in the paragraph that I have just quoted. I have yet to hear a speech by the Leader of the House explaining why her changes and proposals strengthen Parliament's scrutiny of the Executive.

The Leader of the House did seek to rubbish the Liaison Committee by flank attack, but in resisting our proposals—I agree with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) that that was what she was doing—she has never offered any alternative vision of how scrutiny of the Executive might be strengthened.

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

I do give her credit for Westminster Hall sittings and the frequency of debates there on Select Committee reports, although ironically it weakens her case for resisting the Liaison Committee's proposal for an early half-hour debate on the Floor of the House on a Select Committee report. She said that the Minister replying to such a debate would be obliged to respond off the cuff. I have attended a debate in Westminster Hall where, months after the Government had given a considered response to a Select Committee report, the Minister replying to the debate in which half a dozen reasonable questions had been asked—again, no names, no pack drill—was scarcely able to answer any of them and could not have done worse off the cuff. Indeed, one had the impression that it was off the cuff. Had it been a debate on the Floor of the House, the Minister would have taken the trouble to be prepared.

Before I dwell briefly on the Select Committees, which understandably are at the heart of the Liaison Committee's report, let me turn briefly to the historic parliamentary role of scrutiny of the Executive and who chose to do it by a series of examples over the last quarter of a millennium from a variety of parties. If I had had more time, I would have described their careers. Burke, Fox, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, Cobden, Bright and the late Enoch Powell had massive parliamentary reputations, yet they served in government for only 20 of their collective 225 years here. That is a tradition that we need to maintain, and the Select Committees are one vehicle for doing that.

I wanted to say something about the influence of the Whips on the composition of Select Committees, and specifically about the disappearance of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) to be Mayor of London and the fact that he was not replaced by someone of comparable political views—the use of the Whips is extremely dangerous when it excludes people who could make a contribution to the Committee—but as we are pressed for time, I shall now sit down.

6.40 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I, too, welcome you to your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am loth to start a speech by paraphrasing Bill Clinton, but here goes. He said that, in the United States of America, the people had voted and spoken, but it would take a little time to work out what they had said. In this debate, by contrast, the House has spoken, but, because the Government know what it has said, it will not be allowed to vote. I do not see this as party political. Nearly 250 Members of Parliament have signed early-day motion 476, the vast majority from the Government Back Benches.

I may not have time to refer to all today's speeches, but I enjoyed the debate immensely and some of the speeches were very good. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said that the House is dying on its feet and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said that it is in grave danger of losing its rationale and must think of some other role. They are both Government Members and they are both absolutely right.

The membership of the Liaison Committee reads like a roll call of the great and the good, plus one or two hopefuls for that accolade. It contains a wealth of experience in the House. We have heard much of that from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I congratulate him and his Committee on an excellent report. It has been said that one of the reasons we cannot vote on it today is that we have not had enough time to consider it, but it has been out for eight months and the Government commented on it six months ago, so we are hardly rushing to judgment.

It is, however, right to give the report proper deliberation. It is timely and comes at a time when journalists are writing about how Parliament has changed. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) says that we must find a new role for it but, irrespective of our judgment of what the role of Parliament and the House of Commons has been, we can all agree that the changes suggested in the report are worth considering. I am not saying that we should adopt them all, but it is right for us to have the opportunity, hopefully in the near future, to say which of them we should take on board to strengthen the House of Commons.

The Opposition day debate on 13 July rehearsed the arguments well and clearly demonstrated the desire of hon. Members of all parties to strengthen Parliament. The fire for strengthening Parliament burns brightly among some Government Back Benchers, but not so brightly—indeed, it is flickering badly—among members of the Executive. This is all about bringing the Executive to account. That is a vital role for both Opposition and Government Back Benchers.

Like many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I break out in a cold sweat when I hear about changes that are to take place under the guise of modernisation. We all know what modernisation means. It is a euphemism for streamlining the House so that a quantity of legislation can be got through as quickly as possible. The quality of that legislation does not matter any more, and adding value is not deemed so important. As a result, we have longer recesses, truncated days, and timetabled or guillotined legislation.

I am not in favour of sitting through the night. I was elected in 1992, and was here for the deliberations on the Maastricht legislation, some of which went on through the night. Probably enough midnight oil was burned during those proceedings to heat a small city, but I should prefer to find ways to improve the strength of Parliament. Talking through the night will not do that, but neither will the changes made so far.

For example, last Tuesday we debated the separation of votes and debates. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) noted, that change that did not receive much deliberation, but was voted on none the less.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Evans: The Minister's Parliamentary private secretary, the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin), is trying to make a sedentary intervention. I wish that he would keep quiet, as we are talking about the ability of Back Benchers to have their say. That is the change that we want implemented, but the Leader of the House said that we could not vote on the Select Committee report that is at the centre of this debate.

The right hon. Lady said that there had not been proper time for discussion of the report, but few of the changes that it contains are revolutionary: they are, rather,

evolutionary. The introduction of Select Committees in 1979 was a good idea, and they strengthened Parliament. We must build on that innovation.

I have served on three Select Committees. I was a member of the former Transport Select Committee with Robert Adley, who could be an absolute pain in the side of the Government of the day. We miss him. I also served on the Select Committee on Public Administration. I was asked to do so because the Whips were desperate. I enjoyed my time as a member of that Committee, and I hope that I contributed to its work, but we know that appointments can be a problem with some Committees.

I found serving on Select Committees a rewarding role. I am glad that I have never had to go before a Select Committee. That can be a harrowing experience, but Parliament is all about analysing, scrutinising and dissecting what is going on. Select Committees can be far more effective in that regard than the Chamber, and we must look for ways to improve that situation.

The recommendations in "Shifting the Balance" and in the Norton commission report build on what needs to happen to ensure that better legislation leaves the House. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne spoke eloquently about some of the changes that he thinks need to be made.

The proposal that Select Committees be given extra staff is absolutely right. I recall from my time as a Select Committee member that we needed more staff and resources to facilitate our work. I do not want to enter the debate about whether Chairmen ought to be paid an allowance, but their work should be recognised. That work can be very time consuming for those who do the job properly.

The report also recommends that hon. Members who do not turn up for hearings should be thrown off Select Committees. That is a jolly good idea. Any Members who do not pull their weight in Committees should make way for others who will make a difference.

I enjoyed many of the speeches in the debate, none more so than that made by the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). He said that he was a member of the Joint Committee on Consolidation of Bills, Etc. I wonder whether that was a punishment for him, or for the other members of that Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) is, like the hon. and learned Member for Medway, a self-styled maverick. He is very independent. He is a relatively near neighbour of mine, and I know that people in his constituency who would vote Labour anywhere else vote for my hon. Friend because he is a person of independent spirit. He told the House about how the Whips treated him when he was Chairman of the Health Committee, a post from which he was ultimately turfed out. Perhaps that could be called the Winterton of discontent.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich —a great defender of Parliament—put it correctly when she said, "Put it to the House." That is all we are asking. We have a commitment from the Prime Minister that this matter would be given time in the House and that Members would be given a free vote. Irrespective of what the Leader of the House says, I have read the quotes from the Prime Minister on 13 July; what he said was quite clear, and it is incredibly difficult to twist it. It is one of the few straight answers that he has ever given to a straight question.

A lot of work has gone into the report; let us not put it on the back burner. The Government love timetabling; let us have a timetable for these recommendations. When will we have the second debate? When will we have substantive motions put before the House on free votes so that this House finally can have its say?

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): First, I apologise on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who anticipated being here for the wind-up. Clearly, she has been unavoidably delayed.

Unlike the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), I always thought that this was going to be a lively debate. It is clear that there is a difference of view between the Committee and the Government, as expressed by a number of Committee members tonight. I cannot pretend that divisions do not exist; they do. It is easy to concentrate on the divisions and the places where the Government and the Committee do not agree.

I want to sketch out areas where there is agreement between us, because there is a great deal of agreement, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said. Those agreements have sometimes been obscured by the big issues that divide us.

The Government could not agree more that

> The 1979 select ctte system has been a success,

as the report points out. I wholeheartedly endorse the statements in paragraph 4:

> At a bargain price, it has provided independent scrutiny of government. It has enabled the questioning of Ministers and civil servants, and has forced them to explain policies . . . Its very existence has been a constant reminder to Ministers and officials, and many others in positions of power and influence, of the spotlight that may swing their way when least welcome.

I agree even more wholeheartedly that the system

> has shown the House of Commons at its best . . . with constructive co-operation rather than routine disagreement.

I was particularly impressed with paragraph 58, which states:

> When Ministers and departments have got their act together, and are prepared to be co-operative rather than defensive, the results have benefited both Parliament and government. We will encourage this style of working.

The difference between the Government and Back Benchers centres on whether reforms would increase the Committees effectiveness or diminish it, and whether they would foster constructive co-operation or undermine it. The Government's position has been clearly set out and was commented upon tonight by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. The Liaison Committee could, and is likely to, take on some of the duties that it identified for the Select Committee panel. We have no problem with that. We welcome steps to spread best practice among Select Committees—and some of the practice is extremely good.

One of the examples of best practice that the Committee identifies is the examination of treaties. We have undertaken to send treaties to the relevant Select Committees and we will normally provide a debate on treaties of major importance if the Select Committee concerned and the Liaison Committee so request.

Another example of best practice—referred to by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells)—concerned the scrutiny of draft legislation. The

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

Government have undertaken that, in general, we will give Select Committees first refusal of Bills falling within their remit. The constraints on the production of draft legislation have been explained and the Liaison Committee welcomed that part of our response. However, I hope that in time the Government will produce more and better draft legislation.

Another example of best practice is the systematic monitoring of action on recommendations. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove mentioned that. Committees have begun this work, and a letter was sent from Sir Richard Wilson's office reminding Departments that the Government have undertaken to assist Committees in follow-up inquiries.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The Intelligence and Security Committee also undertakes pre-legislative scrutiny of draft Bills. I am not in the least surprised at the Government's findings and the wish not to change the present arrangements. Unfortunately, the Liaison Committee did not bother to consult the Intelligence and Security Committee, which is the most senior Committee of parliamentarians in the House. I hope that the Government will be anxious for the Liaison Committee to consult the Intelligence and Security Committee, whose members have collectively given 200 years of service in the House, before making any change in the future.

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is important to consult across the whole House on these profound matters.

The Liaison Committee wants Committees to have greater powers to work together. Its solutions rely on the existence of a Select Committee panel. We cannot accept those solutions, but we have indicated that we are willing to bring forward Standing Order changes to facilitate joint working. We have gone further: the Government's response to the Liaison Committee clearly states that

> the Liaison Committee itself will be able to identify the need for any ad hoc committee and make a case for it to the Government. The Government would have to retain the right to choose whether to put such proposals before the House, but the presumption would be that reasonable requests would be granted, and repeated refusals would lead to political controversy.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned Select Committee staffing. This is, of course, a matter for the House of Commons Commission, not the Government. However, we would be the first to agree that the Committee staff do a superb job with very limited resources, ably assisted by specialist advisers—experts drawn from many fields. Select Committees have differing practices. There is a case for extra resources. In its second report, the Liaison Committee notes at paragraph 66:

> we are grateful for the consideration which the Commission has given to our submission.

An important point which the Liaison Committee makes is that the drive to work must be done through the Committee members rather than the staff. It is important for Committee members to thrust forward.

The report also recommends secondments. The Government have been happy to work with the House authorities to facilitate secondments both into and out of the civil service, and will do so in future.

Many people have spoken tonight, and some have said that the Government's concessions do not go far enough and that we cannot satisfy them. However, I hope that when the dust has settled, right hon. and hon. Members will reflect on everything that has been said today and accept that the Government have already made changes to improve matters for Select Committees. For our part, we too will reflect on this debate.

We have not agreed to debates on substantive motions, but we have provided more time in Westminster Hall than most reformers could ever have dreamed of. Westminster Hall is indeed a parallel Chamber. Ministers must take debates there as seriously as they do on the Floor of the House, and we will ensure that they do.

We have extended the European scrutiny system. We have agreed to the Procedure Committee's proposals on scrutiny of treaties. We have already eased restrictions on joint working at the request of the quadripartite Committee, and will do more. We have sent draft legislation to Select Committees for scrutiny, and we hope to do much, much more. I hope that this will be a defining moment—a defining task—of the Government.

Right hon. and hon. Members may not consider that the changes go far enough, but there has been more change in three years than in the previous 15. The balance may not have shifted far enough for everyone, but we must recognise that it is already shifting towards the Committees.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

NHS Services (Haemophiliacs)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

7 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I want to draw to the Government's attention a number of important points about NHS services for people with haemophilia, and I hope that the Minister will respond positively.

The current situation is pretty inequitable, particularly across different postcodes. Recombinant factor 8 is being provided to all haemophiliacs in Scotland and Wales, regardless of age and viral status, but in England it is restricted to children under 16 and a few people whose health authority has a policy of prescribing it. The Government took an important step in 1998 in making recombinant factor 8 available to all children; they now need to extend that to adults, as in Ireland and other European countries.

Another example of the inequality of the present arrangements can be found in the English haemophilia centres in Liverpool and Manchester, to which patients from north Wales go for treatment. The policy adopted by the NHS commissioners in Wales means that all haemophiliacs living in north Wales are entitled to receive recombinant factor 8, irrespective of age, postal code or viral status, and attend the Manchester or Liverpool centres. However, many people in Manchester and Liverpool and the surrounding areas do not have the same rights and benefits. That is substantially unfair. The restrictive policy in England might have been valid two years ago when supply problems and shortages would have prevented wider use of recombinant products, but those considerations no longer apply, and the Government should look at the matter afresh.

The provision of comprehensive care centres is also uneven and subject to postcode rationing. Some NHS regions have several comprehensive care centres for haemophiliacs, while others are under-provided. The south-west, where I come from, has none at all, and for haemophiliacs living in Cornwall or Devon, the nearest centre is in Basingstoke in Hampshire. The Trent region, however, has four centres. I hope that the Minister will tackle the need for more generous use of recombinant factor 8 for haemophiliacs.

I know that some haemophiliacs have inhibitors to factor 8, and other products, including recombinant DNA novo 7, are now safe and can be prescribed. The Government need to consider the issue of blood products.

More than 4,800 haemophiliacs in the UK are estimated to have been infected with the hepatitis C virus through the use of contaminated NHS blood products. More than 1,200 of those people were co-infected with HIV. Almost all those who received treatment before 1986—when viral inactivation procedures were introduced—have been affected. Every patient over the age of 14 may have contracted hepatitis C or HIV.

That has impacted greatly on the haemophiliac community. Hepatitis C attacks the liver and is potentially life threatening. Although the prognosis is unclear, up to 80 per cent. of those infected will develop chronic liver disease; up to 25 per cent. will have the risk of developing cirrhosis of the liver, and between 1 and 5 per cent. have the risk of developing liver cancer. It is estimated that the progression to severe liver disease can take from 20 to 30 years, but some haemophiliacs may have been infected for over 25 years.

Figures from the UK haemophilia centre doctors organisation show that up to 1999, more than 113 haemophiliacs have died from liver disease and liver cancer, both of which are related to the end stage of hepatitis C infection. The actual number of deaths related to hepatitis C is likely to be much greater. The Government need to think carefully about that.

The previous Government set up a fund for those with HIV, and the Haemophilia Society and many others would like the Government to consider whether more money and similar administrative arrangements should be provided for those with hepatitis C. Families who have the infection are experiencing problems dealing with it, and they need help now.

There is no national strategy to deal with hepatitis C, nor any national guidelines on management and treatment of those affected. The total lack of planning for hepatitis C services throughout the UK means that standards of management and care after diagnosis vary widely: in some areas, patients have to wait months, or even years, to see a hepatologist or hepatitis C specialist, and there are few counselling and support services. Hepatitis C is difficult to treat: interferon and ribavirin combination therapy was licensed last year and has been shown to clear the virus in about 30 per cent. of cases. It is a highly unpleasant treatment, so the decision to start therapy is not easy, but at least there is a way forward. The Haemophilia Society is extremely concerned that health authorities have so far denied the new combination therapy to those who have haemophilia on the grounds of cost. Now that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has recommended in favour of the use of the combination therapy, I hope that the Government will rapidly ensure that it is provided to patients with hepatitis C, where appropriate.

Many calls have been made for a public inquiry into how NHS blood products carried the infections. The Haemophilia Society has called for a public inquiry into the whole issue of blood products safety and infection by HIV and hepatitis C. No official inquiry or report has ever been carried out in respect of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the NHS. The Scottish Executive is conducting an inquiry into events in Scotland, but the English Department of Health has so far refused to initiate such an inquiry. Internationally, the response has been very different: Canada has held a large-scale, four-year investigation and the Canadian red cross has set aside $70 million to $100 million to provide compensation to those infected with hepatitis C. In addition, the issue has been pressed, sometimes through court action, in France, Japan, Switzerland and other countries.

In 1987, the previous Government accepted the moral responsibility to compensate all those infected with HIV and established the Macfarlane trust in 1988 to fulfil that role. People with haemophilia were infected with hepatitis C in the same way and at the same time as those who were infected with HIV, and they experience many of the same problems as those infected with HIV. Therefore, on moral grounds, they should be offered similar financial help. The best way forward would be to extend the role

[Mr. Robert Syms]

of the Macfarlane trust, as a vehicle to assist those with hepatitis C. Last week, the Government decided, rightly, that there would be a no-fault package of compensation for those with variant CJD, yet, thus far, more people may well have died as a result of hepatitis C infection through NHS blood products.

Given that the previous Government set up the Macfarlane trust and the current Government have accepted that help should be given to families in distress who have been affected by variant CJD, there is a strong argument for helping those unfortunates who have been infected by hepatitis C. After all, more than 100 might already have died as a result of the infection.

In a recent issue of *The Lancet*, more research evidence regarding the theoretical risk of transmission of variant CJD through blood was discussed. In the same week, representatives of the Haemophilia Society attended a special expert seminar held by EMEA—the European agency for the evaluation of medicinal products—on viral safety of plasma products with regard to non-enveloped viruses, particularly parvovirus B19 and hepatitis A. Taken together, the evidence from *The Lancet* report and from the EMEA seminar provide further justification for the Government's decision two years ago to ensure that all previously untreated under-16s with haemophilia should be treated with recombinant, as opposed to plasma-derived, products.

Although I am aware that there is, as yet, no evidence that either classical or variant CJD have ever been transmitted to people with haemophilia through blood products, new research shows that we cannot be certain that no risk of infection is associated with those products. Constituents of mine and others have told me that, although they were reassured in the past, their community has been badly affected, first, by HIV and, secondly, by hepatitis. They believe that if CJD rears its head, the haemophilia community is likely to be the first to feel the consequences. The significance of the findings, with the possible implication that blood donated by symptom-free vCJD-infected human beings might be infectious, is such that researchers chose to publish that finding immediately, without waiting for the completion of the study.

Considerable anxiety is generated in the community by fear of blood-borne viruses and diseases that might escape modern inactivation processes used in the manufacture of plasma products. The Haemophilia Society believes that it is most important that the Government take an early decision to ensure that recombinant blood products are given to everybody with haemophilia in England—not only to under-16s, but to adults as well.

There was criticism of the previous Government for the way in which they dealt with BSE. Certain products were banned for babies and children, but not for adults. We seem to have a similar situation in relation to the prescription of recombinant factor 8 and other recombinant products. As I have said, only children under 16 in England receive it. It is a matter of whether people are lucky to live in a particular area. That may depend on whether they receive the product. The Haemophilia Society wrote recently to the Department of Health asking for a meeting to discuss its concerns. When the Department responds, I hope that it will make it clear that it would be happy to meet representatives of the society to discuss its concerns.

These are important issues. There are only a few haemophiliacs, but they have tremendous difficulties. They have suffered greatly because of their particular affliction through blood-borne products, which were provided by the national health service. They have to deal with these problems daily.

The Government should consider what they are doing. They should reflect on postcode rationing, especially as the standard of service in Wales and Scotland is now different from that in England. They should reflect on recombinant factor 8 and its provision to all those in need, including adults in England. There is the associated issue of comprehensive support for haemophiliacs. Many people think that haemophilia is external bleeding, but most of the worst damage is done by internal bleeding into joints. It is extremely important that physiotherapy or hydrotherapy is available quickly so that people's joints are not destroyed. A comprehensive means of service is vital to ensure that people's bodies can stand up to what happens.

The Government took a responsible view in 1998 when, because of CJD, they changed the way in which blood products were treated. That was done as a precaution. That was a good thing to do, but there is still great fear and much more research needs to be undertaken.

Even if the Minister cannot answer all the points that I have raised, I hope he will reflect carefully on what the Government can do to make life much easier for some unfortunate people. I look forward to hearing his reply.

7.12 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I welcome you to your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing the debate. He has raised an important set of issues. There are about 11,000 people with inherited bleeding disorders registered with haemophilia centres in the UK. These include haemophilia A, which affects about one in every 10,000 men, the rarer haemophilia B, which affects one in every 50,000, and the milder von Willebrand's disease, which affects about in 10,000 people, both men and women.

Haemophilia is a lifelong, painful and debilitating condition. However, modern treatment is very effective, with patients able to look forward to an excellent quality of life. Sadly, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the majority of regularly treated patients with haemophilia were infected with either HIV or hepatitis C before it became possible to remove these viruses from clotting factors made from human plasma.

As a result, about 4,000 to 5,000 haemophiliacs are estimated to be infected with hepatitis C, and about 500 are still living with HIV. Most of those with HIV are also infected with hepatitis C, and this co-infection may accelerate the clinical course of both disorders as well as making the haemophilia more difficult to manage. They therefore face considerable medical and psychological problems over and above those faced ordinarily by people with haemophilia.

It is essential that the national health service is properly geared up to delivering the full range of clinical and support services needed by people with haemophilia and with treatment-acquired infections. These must include routine and emergency medical treatments, drug therapies, physiotherapy, counselling, genetic services and specialised services for HIV and hepatitis.

The treatment and care of haemophilia is provided by a network of comprehensive care centres and smaller haemophilia centres. Comprehensive care centres provide specialised care and support for patients and their families that is delivered by a multidisciplinary team. All haemophilia patients who need such support should have access to the facilities of a comprehensive care centre, although it may not be the facility nearest to them. I understand, for example, that many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents receive comprehensive care at St. Thomas' and Great Ormond Street hospitals and want to continue that arrangement.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that there is no comprehensive care centre in the south-west region. I hope that, over time, that will be addressed by the regional specialised commissioning group, whose role is to identify specialist services at a regional level. However, I am assured that all people with haemophilia in the south-west have access to the services that they need. There are a number of haemophilia centres in the region and Bristol and Southampton, while not designated as comprehensive care centres, provide a good range of services for people with haemophilia.

Earlier this year, we published the NHS plan. Our aim is to improve health, tackle health inequalities and modernise the NHS and social care. We want people with haemophilia to benefit from those improvements in the same way as other patient groups. There is evidence that greater consistency in the delivery of clinical care for haemophilia patients is needed across the country. The professional groups with an interest in haemophilia have recommended the development of a set of minimum standards for service delivery. That should be an effective way to help to standardise all aspects of haemophilia services in the longer term and get rid of unacceptable variations in care.

The Haemophilia Alliance, which includes the Haemophilia Society and the UK haemophilia centre doctors organisation, is developing a national service specification. That specification will outline the key components of a high-quality haemophilia service—whether that is provided in the larger comprehensive care centres or the smaller haemophilia centres—and it will go out to consultation shortly. The intention is to publish the specification by the end of the year.

The Haemophilia Alliance has asked my Department to circulate through our national networks information about its work on the service specification, and that is what we are doing. We have also identified haemophilia services as appropriate for specialist service commissioning and three regional specialised commissioning groups—in London, the west midlands and the south-east—are reviewing their services at present. That process will help to put haemophilia services at the top of their agendas and support them in performance managing services for people with haemophilia.

The lives of people with haemophilia were transformed in the 1970s by the development of clotting factors, which brought the prospect of a much improved quality of life. Tragically, an infection was associated with that development. Since the mid-1980s, the human plasma used to make clotting factors has been treated to remove HIV and hepatitis. With the onset of variant CJD, as an additional precaution, all human plasma-derived clotting factors used by the NHS are made from imported plasma. Therefore, everything has been done to ensure that the products needed and used by people with haemophilia are as safe as possible.

As medicinal products, all clotting factors have to be licensed by the Committee on Safety of Medicines under the Medicines Act 1968. They are therefore subject to periodic review and the same rigorous assessment for safety, quality and efficacy as all other medicines. Manufacturers of blood products, such as the NHS-owned Bio Products Laboratory, are also required to meet very stringent requirements of good manufacturing practice regulated by the Medicines Control Agency. In addition, the agency has in place the widely known yellow card system to pick up adverse effects of drugs, including the clotting factors. That adds to the monitoring of product safety.

As the hon. Gentleman said, over the past 10 years, new recombinant, or synthetic, clotting factors have been developed. The Haemophilia Society and others have petitioned us to make recombinant factor 8 and factor 9 the treatment of choice for people with haemophilia, largely on the ground that recombinant products are regarded as free from the risk of transmission of as yet unknown viruses and the theoretical risk of variant CJD.

Our position continues to be that the clinical case for recommending the use of recombinant clotting factors has not yet been made. Plasma-derived clotting factors have had an excellent safety record since the introduction of viral inactivation in the mid-1980s and there is no evidence that the recombinant product is more effective as a treatment.

None the less, two years ago the Government responded to the fears expressed by people with haemophilia—particularly families with haemophiliac children—about the theoretical risk of variant CJD. We required NHS trusts to provide recombinant factor 8 for all new haemophilia patients and children under 16 from April 1998, and factor 9 from April 1999, as soon as it became available. The policy was worked out with the Haemophilia Society and the UK haemophilia centre doctors organisation, and I hoped that it eased the anxieties of many parents about their children's future well-being.

Clinicians are, of course, free to prescribe recombinant products for all their patients if they choose, although I acknowledge that many health authorities have decided not to fund the treatment, on the basis of the clinical evidence of safety and effectiveness relative to cost. Even so, it is estimated that more than 50 per cent. of the clotting factors prescribed in the NHS in England are currently recombinant.

I also acknowledge that in Wales and Northern Ireland all haemophilia patients are offered recombinant products. The same will be true in Scotland by the end of March next year. I understand that the decision that led to that situation came from individual health boards, and was not made at national level.

[Mr. John Denham]

In recognising that individual health authorities have taken different decisions, it is important to note the lack of evidence that there is anything to choose between recombinant and plasma-derived products in terms of safety and effectiveness. Of course, I understand why many people with haemophilia, because of their past experience of infection from blood products, are genuinely concerned about potential future risks from those products.

In September, we received fresh representations from the Haemophilia Society putting the case for universal provision of recombinant clotting factors in England. I can inform the hon. Gentleman that my noble Friend Lord Hunt will shortly be meeting the society and other members of the Haemophilia Alliance to discuss the issue.

Mr. Syms: I thank the Minister for giving way. One or two people have moved from England to Wales because they believe that they will get the product prescribed in Wales. The society told me that it knows of at least two such cases. It is important to get matters right, and I am glad that the meeting has been arranged.

Mr. Denham: My noble Friend leads on these matters and I await the outcome of those discussions. We have responded to the Haemophilia Society by recognising that we should hear it put its case.

I shall deal with some of the other issues that were raised. The first concerns a fund for haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C. When we came to office, we met the Haemophilia Society and heard its arguments for a special payments scheme for people with haemophilia and hepatitis C, similar to the scheme for HIV. After long and careful consideration, we came to the conclusion that a special payments scheme should not be established.

Government policy remains that compensation or other financial help to patients is paid when the NHS or individuals working in it are at fault. The underlying principles are clear cut and independently established under common law. They apply to personal injury cases in general, not just those arising from health care. The same conclusion was reached by the previous Government, and the decision has been debated several times in both Houses. I am therefore unable to encourage the hon. Gentleman further on that issue this evening.

We must do what we can to enable people with haemophilia and hepatitis C to get on with their lives, and look constructively at how we can improve their health and well-being here and now. As the hon. Gentleman noted, until recently the only treatment available for hepatitis C was alpha interferon. That has a limited success rate—about 20 per cent.—in removing the virus and is not suitable for all patients.

The use of alpha interferon in combination with ribavirin appears to be significantly more effective, clearing the virus in about 40 per cent. of those treated.

Last year, we asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to assess urgently the interferon/ribavirin combination therapy. The guidance was published last week, and provides clear and authoritative advice for clinicians and health care providers. In brief, combination therapy is recommended as the treatment of first choice for moderate to severe hepatitis C in previously untreated patients, and patients treated with interferon monotherapy, who have responded but relapsed. We accept NICE's recommendations, and health authorities will be expected to implement its guidelines in the usual way.

NICE has also made two recommendations for implementation: viral genotyping facilities need to be upgraded, and counselling facilities need to be reviewed. We have noted and accepted the need to upgrade genotyping facilities and review counselling facilities. We will consider how best to carry out that work, and we will shortly formulate detailed plans.

For the longer term, several other therapeutic agents are in development, and they also show great promise. Treatment with pegylated interferon—a form of interferon that is modified to be slow release, more effective and possibly better tolerated—is likely to become available before too long. Other treatments, such as different combinations of drugs, are being researched. Significant developments and improvements in the treatments available are likely to occur in the next few years.

Before leaving hepatitis C, I shall deal briefly with the point that the hon. Member for Poole made about a public inquiry. He referred to an inquiry that was held in Scotland. The Scottish investigation was not a general inquiry into the history of hepatitis C and blood products. It specifically considered whether Scottish haemophilia patients were exposed to the risks of hepatitis C longer than they should have been, given the state of knowledge at the time and the fact that Scotland developed successful heat treatment later than England. I do not believe that there is a case on that basis for a similar investigation into circumstances in England.

Having considered the report, Scottish Ministers concluded that there was no evidence that the relevant authorities did other than their best for patients and that, consequently, the NHS should not pay compensation for non-negligent harm to the small number of haemophiliacs in Scotland who contracted hepatitis C during the period covered by the report.

The events of the 1970s and the 1980s are a complex story. However, all the information is in the public domain, and I do not believe that anyone's interest would be served by a public inquiry.

Professional guidance on the management of patients with HCV will also be available shortly. The Royal College of Physicians, the British Society of Gastroenterology and the Association for the Study of the Liver are now finalising evidence-based clinical guidelines for the treatment of HCV.

We are also developing a commissioning framework to ensure that specialist hepatology services are developed to uniform standards throughout the country. The regional specialist commissioning groups will be heavily involved in implementing the commissioning framework. An important element of that strategic approach is well-organised referral arrangements from primary care and centres that manage patients with that chronic viral infection, including people with haemophilia.

There is more that we can achieve by supporting and collaborating with the Haemophilia Society and professional bodies such as the UK haemophilia doctors organisation. Ministers have met both organisations this year to discuss services for people with haemophilia.

We provide an annual grant for the administration of the Haemophilia Society. We also provide some financial support to help with the excellent projects that it develops to support people with haemophilia.

The hon. Gentleman has raised many important issues. I hope that I have shown him our determination to make progress on several of them and assured him that discussions will take place on others. Doubtless I have had to disappoint him on one or two matters, but the debate has been useful.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 10 November 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Sport

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

9.34 am

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): There is a tendency in this country to exaggerate the significance for our sport of the last set of results. We win a test match, and the press writes up our cricketers as world beaters. We lose at football, and the mood swings to the other extreme. It is good to be able to report that we are holding the debate at a time when there is more considered and justified optimism about the future of British sport than there has been for a long time past.

That hopeful outlook has, of course, in part been brought about by the excellent performance of our Olympic and Paralympic teams in Sydney. Britain won 28 Olympic medals, including 11 gold medals. It was our best performance since 1920, and better even than the "Chariots of Fire" Olympic games in Paris in 1924. Our Paralympic team won 131 medals, including 41 gold, to finish second in the global medal table. I am sure that the House will wish to join me in congratulating all our Olympic and Paralympic competitors. The medal winners deserve particular praise, but we should also acknowledge all those who posted new personal best performances in Sydney or beat other sporting records. We should not forget the coaches and the performance directors, who prepared our athletes to produce their peak performance at exactly the right time.

I want also to congratulate the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association. Winning performances in competition need strong administrative support behind the scenes. There has been widespread and justified praise for the efficient and professional way in which they organised their teams. The support that our competitors received was much envied by other countries taking part.

We have done well in Sydney, and there have been other good sporting performances this year. Winning the test series against the West Indies was a highlight, as was Lennox Lewis's world heavyweight boxing title. In other sports, Yvonne McGregor became women's cycling pursuit world champion, Cassie Campion the women's squash world open champion, Yvette Baker was world orienteering champion, and we gained honours in the rowing world championships in the men's eights and the women's lightweight coxless pairs. However, we cannot be complacent. British sport can do better.

Make no mistake about it: sporting success is important. It lifts morale and brings the country together. Most important, it captures the imagination of our young people and encourages them to swap playstations for playing fields.

Let us look to the future. Our competitors surpassed our expectations in Sydney, and we want them to do even better at the Commonwealth games in 2002 and at the next Olympics and Paralympics in Athens. That is a tall order. As I have said, our Paralympians were second in the medal table, and there is only one way to improve on that. Our Olympic team will have its work cut out to improve on its impressive 10th place in the table. However, that must be one of our aims over the next 10 years.

Our main hope for the future is the young talent that is now emerging. One fine example among many is Lloyd Upsdell, who at 17 won two gold medals and one silver medal at the Paralympic games, and is a great prospect for the future. A number of other young competitors did not win medals this time round but did exceptionally well and have demonstrated rich potential for future championships across a range of sports. Examples might be Christian Malcolm, who was fifth in the 200 metres at the Sydney Olympics and who is only 21; Joe Glanfield, who also is only 21, and Nick Rogers, who is 23, who came fourth in the 470 class in sailing; and Stuart Bowman, who is 25 and came fourth in the canoe slalom.

There are many young athletes who did not go this time but hold real hope for the future. There is the exceptional Mark Lewis-Francis, the 18-year-old sprinter who qualified for Sydney but chose not to go this time in order to concentrate on the world junior championships in Chile. He and his advisers felt that that was best for his long-term development. It paid off in the short term too, as he won two gold medals at the world juniors, in the 100 metres and in the 4 x 100 metres relay.

All of these emerging sports stars benefit from funding from the national lottery through programmes such as the world class performance programme. In total, in the three years leading up to Sydney, our Olympic and Paralympic sportsmen and sportswomen have received more than £60 million in lottery awards from the UK programme. In addition, the home country sports councils also provide lottery support to our top athletes in home country-based sports through the Sport England world class programme, Wales's elite Cymru, and Scotland's and Northern Ireland's talented athlete programmes.

Our medal winners and others have acknowledged the enormous difference that funding has made to them. They can concentrate on training, instead of having to spend time fundraising. Many are now able to be full-time athletes and do not have to fit in their preparation around another job. Teams were able to train in conditions similar to those in which they would compete at Sydney: for example, our highly successful sailing squad derived enormous benefit from being able to train in Sydney harbour.

It is clear that the support we have provided through the world class programmes must continue if we are to build on the success at Sydney; that is why I have guaranteed that the funding will at least be maintained through the next Olympic cycle. We shall continue to invest in the success of our top competitors. That was confirmed by the sports cabinet on 6 October, at which it

[Mr. Chris Smith]

was agreed to continue the world class performance programme at least at its current level of funding. That will provide UK sport with £100 million over the next four years for the UK element of the programme, and provide the long-term assurance that sports have been seeking to enable them to plan with more confidence about the overall budget available over the period.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Everyone will endorse and applaud the Secretary of State's comments, but can I make a specific proposal on how to bring forward young talents and ensure that they can benefit from the regime? The other day, I spoke to a young boxer in my constituency, Matthew Thirlwall, who is an Amateur Boxing Association finalist. Just as we invite people to put forward names for honours and peerages, could we not invite people, through the press, to nominate people of every age—or invite people to nominate themselves—who have the potential to be champions or world-class athletes and swimmers; those who come through the system would be examined to see whether they qualified for the support, financial backing and professional encouragement that they need. It strikes me that such a general appeal would be likely to reach even more talent than the current system reaches.

Mr. Smith: That is an interesting idea and I shall certainly follow it up. Later, I shall make a proposal about the way in which sports governing bodies can and should work to identify new talent as it emerges. I hope that our work on school sport and specialist sports colleges will also help to identify potential stars of the future. However, an open invitation nomination process might well be a useful addition to the mix.

Successful as we have been, it is not enough simply to carry on as before. The world moves on, and a standard of performance that would have put us well up the medal table in Barcelona would have left us among the also-rans in Sydney. That is one reason why the achievement of our teams was so admirable, but we have to develop the programme. We have to make sure that world class funding reaches the right people, that it is efficiently administered and equitably distributed and that it gives the maximum benefit in terms of enhancing the performance of our leading competitors.

That is why the Prime Minister and I have asked our right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) to lead a review of the world class programme's structure and funding and the relationship with the developments taking place with the UK Sports Institute. My right hon. Friend will be helped by a small group of top athletes and other experts to report back by mid-2001. I hope to be in a position to provide further details of the review and of the membership of the group soon. My right hon. Friend has asked me to convey his apologies for the fact that he is unable to attend today's debate.

The establishment of the United Kingdom Sports Institute, with its network of centres throughout the country, will provide much needed first-class training facilities, together with medical and other services, to provide our top performers with the sort of support that they have never had before. It will sit alongside the world class performance support for individual athletes. The facilities will be of value not only to Olympic and Paralympic sports, but to sports such as cricket, football and rugby, which are interested in supporting the development of the institute and foresee themselves becoming major users.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Will the Secretary of State publish the terms of the review headed by the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham)?

Mr. Smith: Yes. I shall ensure that, when we publish full details of those who are to assist my right hon. Friend in the review, we also publish the exact terms of the task they are being asked to perform. Through a press notice, we have already made public the basic purposes of the review.

We expect that the early introduction of services and the continuous development of facilities at UKSI network sites over the next two years will enable the UKSI to contribute progressively to the development of our talented athletes and to improve performance. We have made a commitment to ensure that the UKSI is fully operational by the summer of 2002.

Recruitment of the key staff of the UKSI central services team has been completed. From this month, sports will have access to the technical, operational and programme support provided through the team. Already, across the UK as a whole, the athlete career and education programme is up and running, providing personal development courses to athletes to meet their individual needs, as well as a high-performance coaching programme, which has been introduced to provide a range of sport and coach-specific personalised programmes, from information technology skills to specific training sessions.

The establishment of the English Institute of Sport—the English element of the UKSI—moves on apace. The badminton centre in Milton Keynes, the aquatics centre and velodrome in Manchester and the ice centre in Nottingham are already available to athletes. In May-June this year, the water-based hockey pitches in Birmingham and Cannock became among the first completed new projects. Detailed designs and project development work have been undertaken for the network sites at Sheffield, Manchester, Bath and Loughborough. The stage 2 lottery application for athletics, judo, netball, table tennis and general facilities at Sheffield has already been approved.

I concede it has taken longer than we originally hoped to begin establishing the UKSI, but, at the outset of our Government, we took a hugely important decision, which was that—unlike the previous proposal—the UKSI should not be entirely concentrated in one central location, but should be based at 10 or 12 regional sites, forming a network throughout the country. That was the right decision. It was pressed on us by athletes and sports men and women themselves, and we are now in the midst of ensuring its delivery.

To date, more than £50 million of new lottery funding has been committed by Sport England for additional facilities for the English network. It is expected that the majority of the remaining lottery applications, representing more than £60 million of further investment in network facilities in England, will be made in the next six months. Once the full building programme has been

completed, more than 80 facilities will make up the English Institute of Sport network. In terms of the services to be provided through the English network centres, interim arrangements are planned to be in place this month, with the full service becoming available by April 2001 in the majority of the regions.

The UKSI Scottish Institute of Sport, funded by Sport Scotland, has been established and operating for 18 months. The Sports Council for Wales has been operating and developing UKSI Cymru for some time. Both have been providing a range of services directly to athletes, including technical training and support, conditioning guidance and supervision, preventive and reactive sports medical support and sports science.

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has identified the university of Ulster as its preferred partner to develop in partnership the UKSI network for Northern Ireland. Initial principles of agreement have been signed by both parties, and work is under way to identify the most appropriate format to operate the network centre.

I am the first to admit that I was pleasantly surprised by our athletes' performance in Sydney. All the experts were telling us that the real benefits of the investment from the world class performance programme for the development of the UKSI would not be seen until the 2004 games at the earliest. However, individual athletes excelled themselves and built on the modest support that was already available to them. We now want to improve that modest support. The experts are right when they say that developing excellence in sport needs a long-term commitment.

It was with a view to the long term that we published our sports strategy document, "A Sporting Future for All", in April this year. There we set out a comprehensive vision for the future development of sport in this country. The document sets out the changes that we think are necessary to improve performance at the top level, but it emphasises the need to strengthen sport at every level. Our Olympic competitors stand at the tip of a pyramid that is made up of millions who take part in sport just for fun, who take part in representative sport at local or county level, or who are just beginning to progress to representative competition. What ends up on the Olympic podium starts in the local park, recreation ground, club or school.

A first requirement is to increase participation in all parts of the community, with a special emphasis—it must be a special emphasis—on school sport. That is worth doing in its own right. Taking part in sport brings a range of benefits to physical and mental health, it helps to integrate people into their communities, it teaches valuable life and social skills, and not least, it is a source of great enjoyment. Increasing participation also increases the size of the pool from which we identify those with the talent to progress further.

For most of us, our attitude to sport is shaped at school. It is there that we get the first chance to try out a range of sports, there that we receive our first coaching in the skills and tactics of the sport of our choice, and there that we first have the opportunity to take part in competitive matches—or it should be, and it used to be, but for too many years now competitive sport in our schools has been allowed to decline.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Secretary of State recognise that the main reason why competitive sport declined was that so many Labour party activists said that competition in education was bad? *[Interruption.]* It had nothing to do with policies on the sale of school playing fields. The main reason was Labour activists saying that competition is bad for children. I know that the Government have rejected that now, but it was the main reason.

Mr. Smith: No, I do not agree. There were two main reasons for the decline in school sport. One was that, under the previous Government, school playing fields were sold off at an enormous rate.

Mr. Hawkins: By Labour local authorities.

Mr. Smith: Prompted by the issuing of circulars by the Conservative Department of the Environment, which effectively instructed local authorities to sell them off.

The other reason why competitive sport in schools declined was that, when the teachers were in dispute with the then Government back in the late 1980s, and the Government failed to resolve the disputes that they had with the teachers, many teachers throughout the country withdrew from taking part in after-school and weekend sporting activity. That caused a real decline in inter-school competition. We are trying to put that right.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: I shall give way in a moment. Let me finish with the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) first.

Those two facts do not excuse a number of daft people from all political parties who have said at various times in the past that competition was somehow bad for children. That denied children opportunities that they ought to have had. There is no excuse for that, but it is not the main reason why school sport went into such decline.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given the Government's pledge to end the sales of school playing fields—sales, as my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) rightly points out, that were overwhelmingly undertaken by Labour local authorities—how does the right hon. Gentleman justify the fact that, in the 15 months to 6 January this year, the Government had approved 101 out of 103 applications for the sale of school playing fields? Does that not prove that in this, as in other matters, the right hon. Gentleman speaks with forked tongue?

Mr. Smith: No. I shall deal with the specific point in a moment or two. The figures show that, under the Tory Government, the rate of sales of school playing fields averaged 40 per month around the country. It now averages five per month. That is still too many, and we are still not doing well enough, but it is a dramatic improvement on the previous situation.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Secretary of State agree that, in addition to the two reasons that he identified for the decline in school sport, there is a

[Mr. Bob Russell]

third—the Government's over-emphasis on academic achievement in schools, which is cutting out time for sport?

Mr. Smith: No. The Government are rightly putting a special emphasis on the development of numeracy and literacy skills. That emphasis is showing through in remarkably improved results for both literacy and numeracy in our schools. However, that must not diminish pupils' sporting and artistic activity. I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment confirmed within the past few months that physical education, as well as music, drama and art, are part of the statutory curriculum which must be taught to children in every school in the country.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I call Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Mr. Ainsworth: Peter Ainsworth, Madam Deputy Speaker. Robert Ainsworth is a Government Whip, and I am not.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State. On the subject of school playing fields, the right hon. Gentleman repeated the old line that the Conservatives were selling off 40 playing fields a month. Is he aware that the basis for that oft-repeated allegation is a report conducted by the Central Council of Physical Recreation in September 1984? Labour Members have extrapolated from that 1984 report the rate throughout the entire period of the Conservative Government. Will the right hon. Gentleman reconsider that allegation, which is utterly bogus?

Mr. Smith: No, because that is not the only evidence. We know from local authority after local authority around the country that the rate of school playing fields sales continued right through the 1980s and early 1990s. The extrapolation to which the hon. Gentleman refers is entirely valid, as the rate of sale did not perceptibly diminish in any part of the country.

Mr. Ainsworth *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Peter Ainsworth.

Mr. Ainsworth: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I say unequivocally that too many playing fields were sold off over the past 20 years. There is no question about that. The Secretary of State should acknowledge that Labour authorities played a prominent role in that process. He says that it is not the only evidence. It is the only evidence evinced in a written answer by the then Minister responsible for school standards, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), in support of the allegation about 40 playing fields a month being sold off.

Mr. Chris Smith: There was no new information in that second intervention, even though it allowed the nomenclature to be corrected. Of course, Labour local authorities conducted some of the sales, partly because the overwhelming majority of local authorities were under Labour control. However, they acted within a framework of guidance, advice and instruction from the then Department of the Environment. The circulars that the Tory Government issued through the Department of the Environment effectively forced local authorities to sell off playing fields. We have reversed that policy, and established the double-lock process, which involves both planning and educational requirements. The measures introduced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department for Education and Employment have been important in slowing the sales of sports pitches.

Mr. Hawkins *rose—*

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Smith: Let me complete the point before I give way. In April, as part of our sports strategy, we announced yet further measures to protect playing fields. The measures that we have already taken through the double-lock process, with reference to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, are already in place. We acknowledge that more needs to be done, and we are therefore doing more.

Mr. Hawkins: Despite all that the Secretary of State has said, the figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) gave remain valid. If the processes that the Government have established do not prevent the sales, they are clearly inadequate. The Secretary of State says that he is trying to do more; does he accept that his policy is not working?

Mr. Smith: Let me make two points. First, we have dramatically reduced the overall number of sales. The hon. Gentleman must not allow himself to be misled into assuming that that has not happened. Secondly, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment approves many applications either because the amount of land is tiny and its sale does not diminish the available space for sporting activity or because the disposal takes place to raise funds that are used to provide far better sporting facilities for the school and the local community. Those examples are included in the figures for disposals. I counsel the hon. Gentleman to be wary of using blanket figures and assuming that the picture is entirely bad; it is not.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a major factor in the decline in some sports in the 1980s and 1990s was the decline of the industrial areas under the previous Government? That meant that there was an enormous decline in cricket in England, since mining and other industrial areas produced generations of cricketers. In south Wales, rugby declined. That was due to the actions of the former Government, rather than those of Labour activists, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) suggested.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to make the point about traditional sporting activity in many industrial areas. That is one reason why we are currently paying particular attention to the needs of the former coalfield areas. We are giving them special attention, particularly through the

lottery distributors. Sport England, the sports lottery distributor, is playing a leading role in that. We are considering new or revamped sporting facilities in many former coalfield areas.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): As an example of what my right hon. Friend described earlier, I have agreed to and supported the sale of a small parcel of land at Minster college on the Isle of Sheppey. The school is applying for sports school status, and the sale of the land will provide at least £150,000 of the money that we need to make it a centre of excellence for the whole community.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. He gives a good illustration of the point that I was making to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. The blanket figures do not reveal the full picture. However, I readily admit that we can make further progress.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: No, I must make some progress.

In April, as part of our sports strategy, we announced further measures to protect playing fields through a revision of planning policy guidance note on sport and recreation: PPG 17. We are also considering the need to tighten the categories of possible exceptions for development on playing fields and open space, and encouraging local planning authorities to provide information on planning decisions to enable Sport England and other organisations to monitor the outcome of planning applications that affect playing fields. We have also already fulfilled our strategy pledge to establish a playing fields monitoring group, which will examine the statistical information on playing fields and consider examples of land that is being sold for the benefit of sport and examples of land which is not being sold for that reason. The group will pursue any issues that arise from those figures. The Department for Education and Employment has also established a national advisory panel to monitor and advise on applications to dispose of school playing fields.

We believe that those measures, along with existing ones, will further protect playing fields, which schools and communities need. However, we go further. The new opportunities fund has recently announced the award partners for its green spaces and sustainable communities initiative. Sport England will have the responsibility for awarding £31 million of lottery money to projects throughout the country for creating and improving playing fields and recreation spaces for local communities. We are therefore not simply ensuring that school playing fields are not sold unnecessarily, but, through the new opportunities fund, we are providing resources to create new playing fields and recreation spaces to replace those that we have sadly lost in the past 20 years.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth *rose—*

Mr. Smith: Whenever we mention the new opportunities fund, it seems that the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) wants to do away with it. Perhaps he will tell us whether he would scrap it and the green spaces scheme if he ever got into government.

Mr. Ainsworth: I did not rise to answer that, but to ask whether the Secretary of State acknowledges the profound disappointment of the National Playing Fields Association at not being invited to participate in the green spaces initiative. Has the Secretary of State any proposals to include it in the process? It has a valuable role to play.

Mr. Smith: Of course, the National Playing Fields Association, which is a doughty fighter, has an important role to play. The new opportunities fund decided that Sport England should be the lead body, but we hope that the National Playing Fields Association, which is already involved in the regular monitoring exercise that we are undertaking, will work closely with it to ensure that the funds go where they are needed.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: No. I shall make some further progress.

As I said earlier, we should place special emphasis on school sport. We are doing much to improve matters. This year, we announced that we would double Exchequer funding for sport by 2003-04 and create a major programme of investment in school sport. At its heart will be the new school sports co-ordinators. They will mainly be teachers, who are experts in bringing sport to children and young people. They will be given time to organise coaching and inter-school competitions in a range of sports. Those competitions will bring together families of schools and local clubs to get the best out of their resources and provide a range of sporting opportunities, which surpass anything that schools have hitherto been able to provide. Those co-ordinators will increase the range and number of after-school sport opportunities and improve the quality and quantity of inter-school competition for primary and secondary school pupils. They will also identify, recruit and train more volunteers to lead, coach, officiate and administer after-school sport at local level.

Thirty-three partnerships are in place, and 145 co-ordinators and 654 primary link teachers are working in primary schools. We have announced total investment in the programme of £120 million of lottery and Exchequer funding, which will, by 2004, pay for at least 1,000 co-ordinators. The school sport co-ordinators are at the heart of our measures to increase participation and improve performance, but this is only the beginning of our investment programme.

There are now 67 specialist sports colleges, where young people can develop their sporting talent without sacrificing their studies, in 48 local education authorities across the country. In September, the Prime Minister announced an additional £24 million of funding, raising the target number of specialist sports colleges for 2004 from 110 to at least 150. Recent Ofsted research shows that specialist sports colleges have not only achieved improved exam results, but reduced social exclusion, helped develop responsible citizens through sports leadership and improved health among pupils. Not only are the results good, but ministerial and parliamentary colleagues who have visited the colleges have come away hugely impressed by the enthusiasm among staff, pupils, partner primary schools and local sports clubs alike for the way in which those colleges are highlighting the importance of sport for academic success and personal well-being among young people. Specialist sports

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colleges will be at the heart of the school sport co-ordinator partnerships so that as many young people as possible can benefit from their ethos.

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the countries that did well in the Olympics were those where ambition and aspiration were at the centre of Government policy and that school co-ordinators and specialist colleges that encourage our children are the key to this country's success in future?

Mr. Smith: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, what he says is probably even more true of those areas of particular deprivation, where the physical environment is poor, where the employment and income prospects for young people are often not as good as in other parts of the country and where sport can provide a focus for energy, enthusiasm and ambition among young people. It is enormously important to ensure that they have such opportunities.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman has tried so valiantly to intervene and I am very soft hearted, so I shall give way.

Mr. Bercow: I am exceptionally grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. Earlier in his speech, he referred to school as providing the first opportunity for pupils to learn the skills and tactics of their chosen sport. Does he accept that, although that might well be true at the direct-grant, selective George Watson's college in Edinburgh, which he had the good fortune to attend, it is far from being the truth in many state schools, one of which I attended, in which the quality of tennis coaching, for example, remains pitifully poor? Does he agree that at the early stages when children take up sport in schools, the quality of tuition needs to be much greater, not least in tennis, if we are to have any chance of raising our game and producing the first British Wimbledon singles champions since Fred Perry in 1936 and Virginia Wade in 1977?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman's basic point—wrapped in a little partisanship—is right: the quality of coaching available undoubtedly matters throughout young people's primary and secondary schooling. That is why we are carefully trying to put in place a structure that will deliver that quality of coaching, as well as the physical facilities that are needed.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming today's announcement from the Lawn Tennis Association that it will put £30 million—in effect, the profits from Wimbledon—into grass-roots tennis coaching? Will he go further and say that the money must be used not only in schools but in grass-roots clubs, and that a partnership of clubs and schools will be the best approach?

Mr. Smith: I entirely agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman has just said. The Lawn Tennis Association has an honourable and proud record of using the profits from Wimbledon to spread tennis facilities and coaching across the country. Indeed, some excellent facilities have been developed in the inner city at Islington as part of that programme—very welcome it is, too—but that is only part of an enormous programme. One of the hopeful things is that the programme is about providing not just tennis facilities where they are needed, but the advice, coaching, guidance, training and personal support that are also needed.

The Government's sport strategy, "A Sporting Future for All", places a great deal of emphasis on recruiting, retaining and rewarding volunteers, as well as professional coaches. Sport relies very heavily on its volunteers. Those who give their free time to coach, officiate and administrate in sport are a mainstay of community sport. We propose to invest £7 million in 2002 to 2004 to fund training for 55,000 volunteers to act as mentors, leaders, coaches, officials and sports administrators.

Mr. Bob Russell: Will all those volunteers be required to pay £10 to be checked out by the Criminal Records Bureau?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It is important that parents can have complete confidence that the volunteers who are in close regular contact with their children have no criminal record of offences against youngsters. We are, of course, working with our ministerial colleagues to ensure that the best possible system to achieve that confidence is in place.

Up to 15 per cent. of the volunteers will be adults working alongside 14 to 19-year-old sports leaders in schools and clubs. That initiative, funded partly by the active community programme, will be co-ordinated and focused on some of the most deprived areas of the country in sporting and socio-economic terms. Sport England, the Youth Sport Trust and the British Sport Trust, working with the national governing bodies of sport, have already developed effective programmes and resources to train and develop volunteers. Those programmes have been tried and tested on the ground. Our proposals for 2002-04 will give a huge boost to sport volunteering in communities and create a clearly defined and supported path for young people who want to volunteer in sport, as well as for the vast pool of adults whose skills and experience are not being used to the full.

Our investment in human resources is complemented by a programme of investment in school sports facilities. The space for sport and the arts scheme will provide £130 million for investment in new and improved facilities for primary schools, which have had to improvise sports provision too often in the past. Under the scheme, which was launched in October, bids from 65 LEAs in areas of deprivation have been invited for projects to renovate or develop new sport and arts facilities in primary schools, which will also be used by the wider community.

The third round of funding from the new opportunities fund includes a £750 million programme of investment throughout the United Kingdom for new sports facilities in schools, which will be available to the wider community, together with other youth projects. That funding will be administered centrally by the fund and is one of a number of new initiatives, each of which is now

undergoing public consultation before implementation. If the public consultation supports our proposals, that money should come on stream in September 2001.

We expect priority to be given to areas of urban and rural deprivation, but they will not be the only ones to benefit. Innovation will be encouraged—in design, for example, and through groups of local schools sharing facilities, making them available to the wider community and attracting partnership funding. A key part of the proposal is that trained people should be in place to run new and improved facilities and that teachers and coaches should be on hand to run matches, training sessions and a wide range of sporting activities. As I have said, that funding will come from the new opportunities fund. I note that we have still not had a clear answer from the Opposition on what their policy would be were they, heaven help us, elected to government.

We are working closely with sport in all respects. A particularly strong example of that co-operation is provided by the Football Foundation—a new partnership between the premier league, the Football Association, the Government and Sport England that was launched by the Prime Minister in July. It will channel funds from football's TV deals and the lottery to create modern football facilities at the game's grass-roots in parks and schools. The foundation has some £24 million at its disposal this year. That will increase to more than £40 million a year from next year.

The foundation will help to provide equipment, improve pitches, build new changing facilities and reopen playing fields that have fallen out of use. One of the first places to get funding will be a park in Gateshead where the shipping container that serves for a changing room will be replaced with a brand new shower block. In south London, five overgrown pitches will be opened up again and new facilities will be built at pitches in Egremont in Cumbria where players have to get changed in their cars. In Ipswich, the foundation is creating a new grass pitch and artificial ones and changing rooms, while in Nottinghamshire, existing grass and all-weather pitches are being improved and extended, using land from adjacent former allotments.

We are making unprecedented investment in the foundations of sport, but we know, too, that we have to capture the imaginations of our children. The Sydney Olympics and Paralympics created huge interest in athletics and did wonders for sport in Australia. I am therefore proud that Britain will stage two major athletics events over the next few years: the Commonwealth games in Manchester and the 2005 world athletics championships at the Lee Valley stadium in London. I am confident that those events will help to put us back on the map as a major sporting nation.

The 2005 championships will not be held at Wembley. Instead, they will take place in a stadium specially built for athletics. We were right to reject spending £40 million of lottery players' money on converting Wembley. That expensive and cumbersome solution would have left the sport of athletics with nothing but memories. Instead, we have been able to aim for something much better. We are using the money saved, together with a committed £20 million returned from the Wembley lottery grant, to create a venue worthy of the 2005 games and to give the sport the legacy of a new national home. Progress on that work is good, and I was delighted to learn on Monday that Sport England has agreed a £1.3 million investment in detailed feasibility work for the Lee Valley project.

If the broad partnership between the Government and sport is to be effective, we must take steps to ensure that governing bodies of sport are equipped for their task in a world in which sporting standards constantly rise and commercial and technical developments present new and ever more challenging issues. Therefore, I can confirm that we shall make an extra £7 million available to our national governing bodies of sport to modernise their administrative systems and structures. They are crucial to the delivery of our objectives for sport.

We want to help governing bodies to gear up to expand their work in two areas: sending more coaches into primary and secondary schools to train children and spot talent; and running school leagues and cup competitions covering all schools in all parts of the country. That will place an extra cost on sport bodies and may require changes in how they work. We realise that, so we are making the additional funding available to help to ease the burden. In return, we want to put an end to the old-fashioned thinking that has bedevilled British sport for too long. Old ideas that certain sports are played only by people from certain social groups or genders should be left behind. As we celebrate the achievements of our Paralympians, we should ask sports governing bodies to extend access to participation in all sports to all potential athletes.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Secretary of State is clearly carrying the House with him on that point. Has he, however, reflected on the fact that countries such as Australia and France have been so successful over the past 20 years because they have made significant and continued public and private investment in sport—investment much greater than ours? Our position in the Olympic medals table encouraged us greatly, but if our success is compared with that of other countries on the basis of population and wealth, we appear halfway down that table, not near the top. Will he engage with his colleagues to enable the Government and the country to make the real investment—not just the 7 million quid—to begin the sustained development programme that he, the Minister for Sport and the country want to be established?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman's basic point is absolutely right. Three elements are necessary to achieving success in international sporting league tables: investment, broad participation in sport from an early age and individuals with real talent. Our approach is all about ensuring that those three elements can come together, which is precisely why we are substantially increasing the investment in sport across the board. The Exchequer money that goes to Sport England and UK Sport has been doubled, the new opportunities fund is providing £750 million for sport in schools and there is £130 million for the space for sport and the arts scheme. The targeted money for the national governing bodies of sport, which is part of that investment, shows our commitment.

I set this challenge for our governing bodies: if they reach out to all sections of the community, find and nurture talent wherever it exists and fulfil the country's

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potential in their sports, they will have our full support as well as direct and guaranteed funding to realise that support.

Improving coaching provision is a particular concern for governing bodies. There is much more work to be done to develop the pathway from the grass-roots to elite competition. To do that, we must be more effective at developing coaching skills. I followed with interest the reports about the appointment of the new England football coach. I said all along that the key test was not nationality, but getting the best person for the job. The Football Association has acquired a world-class coach in Sven-Goran Eriksson, and we wish him every success.

Football is not the only sport to have appointed an overseas coach. The recent success of our cricket team has been achieved under an overseas coach, Duncan Fletcher; our rowers in Sydney were coached by a German expert; and even the Welsh rugby team is coached by a New Zealander. Many other sports have brought in performance directors from overseas. However, towards the end of our top performers' playing careers, we have not encouraged them to become top coaches. There is clear evidence that we need to devote more resources and more imagination to developing top-class coaches. I am encouraged that one of Mr. Eriksson's responsibilities will be to bring on our leading young football coaches.

It is time to create a step change in the way in which coaches are recruited, trained and deployed. If we are to raise standards at the top of sport and provide quality opportunities for youngsters, we need to invest in coaches and their education. It is time to professionalise the structure and give coaches the recognition and support that they need to succeed because they are at the heart of sports development at every level.

The Government have never run sport in this country, and neither should they. However, we are well aware that policies at every level can have an impact on sport. Recently, there has been particular concern about the European Commission's challenge to the football transfer system. The Government believe that that system has benefits for the game as a whole, as it is important to the finances of smaller clubs and provides essential incentives to the development of young players. Of course, conditions of employment in football must comply with community and national law. However, it is essential that the law can be applied in a way that recognises the special characteristics of sport, and the original Monti proposals did not do that. The present transfer system is not perfect, but at least it recognises the investment that the club makes in the development of players.

We have been in close touch with our partner Governments across Europe on this issue, and I was encouraged to see that FIFA and UEFA both submitted proposals to the European Commission by its 31 October deadline. I hope that football will be able to unite in constructive discussions with the Commission to end the present uncertainty surrounding the transfer system.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the subject of transfer fees and the European Commission, can he offer the House any assurance about what the Government will be doing to stop the Commission proposals, which could ruin a great part of our national game?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Lady is behind the Government in that respect. We have already made strong representations directly to the Commission and to our fellow sports Ministers across Europe. Indeed, the Minister for Sport met with her fellow sports Ministers on Monday. We are in close touch with the football authorities in this country to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcome on this issue.

Everything that I have described adds up to a comprehensive and substantial programme of support for sport. I have set out today the way in which the Government are providing a range of new initiatives amounting to almost £1 billion which, taken together, will help to improve sports facilities and services and the provision of sport in primary and secondary schools. They will also provide the sports bodies themselves with new challenges to ensure that they deliver a more effective service to the athletes whom they support and the public at large.

No one can deliver overnight results in sport. I have presented a continuing commitment to support sport in the UK in its efforts to restore our position as one of the world's leading sporting nations. As I said, the Government do not want to run sport, but we are ambitious for sport and we can help by providing proper funding and getting the basics right in schools, which is what we have pledged to do.

10.34 am

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I welcome this opportunity to hold a debate on sport. I hope that one day it will be possible to hold a debate on sport with slightly more notice so that more of our colleagues are able to attend. I very much regret that owing to a long-standing meeting with head teachers in my constituency—at which, no doubt, sport will be discussed, as it always is at such meetings—I shall have to leave before the end of the debate. The Secretary of State was so generous in giving way that I shall probably be late. I should also declare an interest, as I am a member of the marketing committee of the MCC.

There is wholehearted agreement on both sides of the House about the importance of sport to individuals, communities and the nation. Sport brings enormous pleasure to millions of people, whether as spectators or participants, and brings enormous benefits to society. Impressions of the current state of sport in this country are inevitably coloured by the performance of our elite sports men and women. It was a great joy to witness their success at the Olympic and Paralympic games. As the Secretary of State pointed out, this summer, Britain enjoyed its most successful Olympics since 1920, and took home 11 gold, 10 silver and seven bronze medals. Our Paralympians followed that with a wonderful haul of 41 gold, 43 silver and 47 bronze medals, beating the total achieved in Atlanta in 1996. I have not met anyone who was unmoved by the achievements in Sydney. However often we saw Steve Redgrave winning his fifth gold, Jason Queally surprising even himself in the cycling, the triumph and modesty of Denise Lewis or Tammy Grey-Thompson going for gold, we were reminded again

of the power of sport to inspire, uplift and make us proud: and that was just seeing it on the telly—there were no Government-funded trips to Sydney for me.

Incidentally, I am delighted that the BBC won recognition from the International Olympic Committee for its excellent coverage of events in Sydney. I join the Secretary of State in congratulating all involved—including sports bodies, the British Olympic Association, the British Paralympics Association and all those who took part, whether or not they achieved gold—on that wonderful event. I look forward to Britain hosting a successful Commonwealth games in Manchester in 2002.

I hope and believe that sport will play an increasingly important role in the life of the nation, and I shall now consider the proper role of government in that. Some people question the need for a sports policy at all and believe that the Government have no business involving themselves in sport. I firmly reject the tendency of politicians, from the Prime Minister downwards, to intervene in operational decisions that are the proper business of governing bodies and managers. However, the social, health, economic and educational issues involved in sport amount to a very significant public interest indeed.

Sport can foster community spirit and a feeling of national identity in the best sense. It can offer a sense of personal accomplishment, teach people how to win and lose with equanimity and even improve cognitive skills, such as literacy and numeracy. It can also help to channel natural aggression, thereby helping to reduce crime. Sport makes a significant contribution to the economy. Reporting one of those statistics that are so disliked by the Treasury, Sport England said that for every £1 of central and local government support received, sport gives back £5 to the Exchequer.

We welcomed the Government's sports strategy when it was published last May, as it was a step in the right direction and built on initiatives that were launched under the previous Government. No debate on sport would be complete without reference to my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) who, as Prime Minister, took an enthusiastic and informed interest in sport and demonstrated a commitment to raising the game. Most notably, he established the national lottery and had the vision to ensure that sport was a beneficiary of that powerhouse of additional funding. Since its inception, well over £1 billion has flowed into sport, funding more than 3,000 worthwhile projects.

The present Government's approach to lottery funding is, at best, confused. They set up the new opportunities fund as a sixth good cause, the effect of which was to direct lottery funds away from sport. It is a fact that lottery funding for Sport England, even after adjustments for the diversion of funds to UK Sport, has fallen by more than £80 million since 1997-98 and is set to fall again in the current year. The Government's commitment to extra core spending in future must be seen against that background.

The Secretary of State has consistently refused to recognise that the new opportunities fund has had an impact on sports funding, but as a direct result of the Government's treatment of the lottery, elite athletes who were preparing to take part in the Sydney Olympics received letters from their governing bodies warning them that future funding would be cut. That did not make for good headlines. The Minister for Sport then announced that there would be no reduction in funding. Obviously, that is welcome, and the Secretary of State today provided further details on how that will be achieved. Presumably, the funding will continue to come from the lottery. However, that raises questions for the lottery distributors. They are concerned that the commitment to maintain high levels of funding at the high-performance end of sport may mean that they have to reduce their spending on other projects. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

The Government, not content with tampering with the overall funds that are available to Sport England, are also increasingly taking a hand in how the money is spent. The Secretary of State was at pains to say that he does not want to run sport, but the truth is that more and more funds are being ring-fenced for specific projects. Although those projects may be thoroughly worth while, the question inevitably arises of whether Sport England is to be trusted as an independent lottery distributor or to be constantly second-guessed by a Government who think that they know best.

Then there is the pledge, initially made by the Prime Minister, to direct £750 million over the next three years towards school and community sports projects. If those resources are properly used, I have no doubt that they will be very welcome. It is important, however, to recognise the concerns of local authorities about the revenue implications of such a major capital investment. I hope that the Minister will also comment on that.

Funding is to come from the new opportunities fund, and we learned today that it is also to be managed by the fund. The Government have, in effect, created another distributor of lottery funds for sport, adding to an already complex situation. Public funding for sport in Britain is now channelled through a growing multitude of separate bodies and initiatives, many with overlapping responsibilities. There is Sport England, with its core Exchequer funding, and the Sport England lottery fund, with its nine regional bodies which are also involved in lottery bids. There are separate funding operations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is UK Sport and, now, the new opportunities fund. There is also space for sport and the arts, Sportsmatch, the green spaces initiative and, in the public funding arena, local authorities, which spend nearly £1 billion a year on sport in England and Wales. Whatever else the arrangement may be, it is messy and confused. There is significant scope for rationalisation if we are to ensure that the maximum funds available for sport actually find their way into sport.

I regret to say that confusion and mess are in danger of becoming the defining characteristics of the Government's actions on sport. Let us consider the redevelopment of Wembley stadium, which the Secretary of State mentioned. We support the redevelopment of Wembley. We believe that the country needs a new national stadium. However marvellous the old stadium has been, and however much of an icon it is across the world, we need to redevelop it because we need a world-class national stadium.

However, many people in the sporting world are still trying to work out how a design, which the Secretary of State described as stunning, could have been rejected by the Government within just a few months. Be that as it may, athletics have been kicked out of Wembley, and with

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them dreams of constructing a national stadium for athletics. In November last year, the *Yorkshire Post* reported the Minister for Sport as saying:

> A national stadium should be just that—something that represents all sports. Because a lot of public money has gone into this via the Lottery, people have the right to expect that it shouldn't just be a football stadium.

Those were her words—I see that she is smiling and nodding—and many people would agree with that view, but within a few weeks of the design being launched, the right of people to expect that their £120 million of lottery cash would build a national stadium was removed when the Secretary of State axed the plan.

Mr. Chris Smith: Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that he would proceed with the platform solution at Wembley for athletics, at a cost of £40 million, taking six months to construct, six months to take down and leaving Wembley completely out of action for the whole of that period?

Mr. Ainsworth: The Secretary of State well knows that the Select Committee looked hard and long at the issue, and that is what it recommended. In an attempt to obtain the best, the British Olympic Association, in particular, has driven out the good. Although no one thought that the original design for Wembley was perfect, it was at least a solution. At the moment, it appears that we have none. Something rather than nothing is the response to the Secretary of State's question.

The consequences of the right hon. Gentleman's decision have yet to be fully played out. There is the matter of the £20 million repayment to Sport England by Wembley National Stadium Ltd. Under the terms of the original lottery award, Sport England had—or has—the right to reclaim its full £120 million in the event of a breach of conditions, and it was a condition of the grant that the new Wembley stadium would host athletics. However, Sport England was not an original party to the deal, which was reportedly spawned in Downing street and ratified in the Secretary of State's Islington home. Under the deal, a price tag of £20 million was arbitrarily determined as the cost of kicking out athletics. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that not a penny of that money has yet been paid? I wait in vain for an answer.

The Secretary of State has insisted—as he did again today—that a further £40 million will become available for athletics as a result of savings that come from clearing athletics out of Wembley. That is a phantom figure. The real savings, as he should know, are closer to £15 million. Assuming that the Islington deal is fulfilled, £35 million will be available for athletics, not the bogus £60 million that he has talked about.

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's figures are completely wrong. The cost of constructing the concrete platform at Wembley was variously judged at between £17 million and £22 million. For the sake of argument, let us call it £20 million. What he is leaving completely out of the equation is the need to construct a warm-up facility next to the stadium, which in any sensible location would have required the purchase of the land. That is where the other £20 million comes from.

Mr. Greenway: Well where is it?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend asks a good question.

In the meantime—this is pertinent to the Secretary of State's remarks—I understand that the consultants who were appointed to investigate the viability of a new athletics facility at Lee Valley have made a preliminary estimate of £95 million for building costs. That raises serious doubts about its viability. I note what the Secretary of State said about feasibility studies, but they will not build a stadium, and time is pressing if it is to be up, running and ready to use by 2004, when the International Amateur Athletics Federation has said that it will need it. Therefore, our ability to host the 2005 world athletics championships is at risk, as officials from Sport England conceded earlier this week. We can also wave goodbye to any hope of putting in a credible bid to host the Olympic games in London.

Even if the plans for Pickett's Lock go ahead—I hope that the Secretary of State's optimism is well founded—and it becomes a stand-alone athletics facility, what would be the implications of that for facilities elsewhere? The Minister might like to deal with concerns about that. What are the implications for athletics at Gateshead, Sheffield, Birmingham, Crystal Palace and so on? The Secretary of State's handling of the redevelopment at Wembley has been nothing short of a disaster. Instead of consistency, clarity and leadership, we have had to witness vacillation, contradiction and misjudgment.

There is a case for saying that the Government should keep out of sports developments and trust the private sector and independent sporting bodies to get on with the job. There is a case for saying that a major national project involving hundreds of millions of pounds of lottery money, major infrastructure improvements, large-scale regeneration and, at the end of it all, the hope of hosting the Olympic games deserves the full attention, support and encouragement of the Government. There is no case at all for what has happened. There is no excuse for a Government's dipping in and out of major projects, failing to co-ordinate, failing to consult, intervening sporadically, and doing so ineptly and on hasty advice.

There is no excuse for incompetence, but incompetence has become a bit of a trademark of this Department—take the bid to host the world cup earlier this year. The football authorities had put together a fine bid which, like the redevelopment of Wembley, we fully supported. The cost of the bid amounted to about £10 million. I congratulate Sir Bobby Charlton and Alec McGiven—and the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), who cannot be with us today because, he tells me, it is "Newham's day in the dome". I sincerely hope that he is enjoying himself. I know how much he would like to have been here.

I congratulate all those people on the immense hard work that they put in; but we now know that, in the opinion of the Minister for Sport:

> We never had a chance of winning. But people kept saying we did, and swallowed the words of Alec McGiven as if he were some kind of God.

All I can say is, "Thanks for telling us after the event." Might it not have been a little more honest to do so before?

What of the UK Sports Institute? Progress on that has been achingly slow, although there has been some: the Secretary of State told us a bit more about it today. We all know the official version in the Government's annual report, which states:

> This year saw the opening of the UK Sports Institute, providing world class facilities, coaching and support in Sheffield.

That was subsequently corrected by the Prime Minister to read:

> This year saw the opening of the UK Sports Institute, which will provide world class facilities, coaching and support in Sheffield.

Not even the most proficient of all the Government's spin doctors could conjure up a facility of that kind in Sheffield. The Government seem to have forgotten that they did a U-turn on Sheffield last year, and that the headquarters of the UK Sports Institute are to be in London.

The foundations of our future as a sporting nation lie with our children. I warmly commend the way in which Trevor Brooking, chairman of Sport England, has championed the cause of sport in schools. He does so with great passion and enthusiasm. I also commend the excellent work of the Youth Sport Trust. The TOPS programme in particular should be singled out for recognition: it includes the tots and TOP start programmes, which are aimed at very young children.

The Youth Sport Trust has reached 3.5 million young people in the last year, and has levered in half a million pounds of private sector money from sponsors such as Nutella, Medisport and Nike. I very much welcome their work. On the other hand, we have received numerous complaints from schools that the growing burdens of the national curriculum are marginalising the time available for sport. Research at Exeter university has shown that the majority of 11 to 16-year-olds get less than 20 minutes of proper physical activity in school each week.

In a debate last May in Westminster Hall, the Minister for Sport rightly said:

> As the Minister for Sport, I can make all sorts of pronouncements . . . but unless the Department for Education and Employment is fully signed up, we shall not make the changes.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 4 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 114WH.]

How signed up is the Department? A recent MORI poll commissioned by Sport England confirmed that the amount of time attributed to school sport and physical education is in decline, as is the time devoted to individual games such as hockey, gymnastics and swimming. The decline in swimming is particularly worrying, given its capacity as a life-saver. Earlier this week, a report by the Office for Standards in Education suggested that one in five pupils could not swim 25 metres by the time they went to secondary school. That is simply unacceptable.

A survey funded jointly by Sport England and Leeds Metropolitan university revealed that more than half a million hours of physical education had been lost in primary schools—squeezed out to make room for numeracy and literacy. I have nothing against numeracy or literacy, but sport, with its attendant benefits to health, personal development and academic performance, should form an integral—not peripheral—part of any sensible, holistic approach to education.

Under the Conservative policy of free schools, which would get the Government out of the classroom and give real authority to schools and parents, we would expect to see more time being made available for sport.

Mr. Bob Russell: If a Conservative Government would get out of the classroom, how could they insist that free schools provided more time for physical education?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am coming to that very point. The whole policy of free schools is intended to allow schools to determine their own priorities, in consultation with parents.

The hon. Gentleman may know that Sport England research has found that eight out of 10 parents believe that PE is as important as academic work. Sport is the most popular choice for after-school clubs; 96 per cent. of young people say that they like participating in sport; and fitter children achieve better exam results, and are less prone to truancy. There is the answer to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* If schools are going to set their priorities, they are going to listen to the evidence. The hon. Gentleman's laughter suggests that he has no confidence whatever in head teachers, governors or parents, and does not trust them to know what is best for their children.

We welcome the development of the school sports co-ordinators programme. However, it would be interesting to know from the Minister—the Secretary of State may have mentioned this; if he did, I apologise for having missed it—how many of those school sports co-ordinators are in post. We also welcome the extra money for after-school clubs. We believe, however, that sport will not secure the place it deserves in children's lives in the absence of a radical reshaping of the education system to give real freedom to schools. To reflect parental wishes, we would require Ofsted to provide a greater and more detailed qualitative assessment of the provision of sport and PE in primary and secondary schools, and to report on the amount of competitive games undertaken in and between schools.

Obviously, if young people are to benefit from taking part in sport, they need sports teachers and places in which to play games. There has been a disturbing spate of reports about the recent fall in the number of people taking PE courses at teacher training colleges. Another report says that as few as six hours in the initial teacher training programme are devoted to PE. I am sure that the Minister wants that deficiency to be addressed.

We have already discussed the question of school playing fields and the availability of space. It is worth remembering that it was a Conservative Government who first made Sport England a statutory consultee on proposals to dispose of playing fields. As my hon. Friends have pointed out, the present Government were elected on a pledge to stop the sale of playing fields, and they have not done so—as a parliamentary answer given by the Minister for Sport on 23 October freely admits. We believe that there is still a need for a proper database of recreational space. We would extend statutory consultee status beyond Sport England, and we would like the bodies charged with representing the interests of sport to be involved earlier in the whole planning process.

I believe in praising the Government when they do the right thing. I therefore welcome proposals that more public funds for sport should be devoted and devolved to

[Mr. Ainsworth]

governing bodies. By and large, they are best placed to determine their own priorities. But sport needs to look at ways of streamlining its own governance. Here again, I agree with the Secretary of State. It is not satisfactory that we now have more than 400 national governing bodies representing about 112 different sports. If there is to be a proper or even coherent dialogue between Government and sport, there is work to be done on both sides.

Earlier this year, we mounted a major consultation exercise with all the major sporting bodies. They acknowledged the need for reform. What they want from the Government, above all, is leadership, which is not the same as ownership. The Conservative party offers sport leadership without ownership.

There is a need for Government to get their act together. The Central Council of Physical Recreation believes that 17 different Departments have an impact on sport. We promise a Sports Minister with real clout who is able—with the authority of the Prime Minister—to co-ordinate policies throughout all Departments whose activities have a bearing on sport.

We are delighted to endorse the national action plan for women's and girl's sports and physical activity, launched with the Women's Sports Foundation in conjunction with Sport England, and we look forward to the Government following suit. Today, I was interested to note a Youth Sport Trust report which tells us that many girls drop out of sport aged 13 or 14. There has been similar evidence in other recent reports. Reasons given are humiliating clothes—the gymslip syndrome—and a focus on less popular sports. I mean no disrespect to netball when I say that I have never understood why there are not more opportunities for girls to play, for example, cricket or football. Schools need to deal with that issue.

We believe that all sports could take a leaf out of football's book in making a determined effort to rid sport of any remaining remnants of racism. All sports should kick it out.

For as long as it is necessary, we will work with the Government to support improvements in sporting provision—but we look forward more to having the opportunity to provide in government the leadership that sport wants and needs and that we are ready to provide.

11.2 am

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): This is the first time that I have caught your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your appointment.

I apologise to the House. I have to visit a cancer hospice. The appointment was this morning, but it is now this afternoon, so I shall not be here to hear the Minister's response.

Sport has been one of the great change agents in my life. In the early 1980s, when researching a book called "Winning in Sport", I had the chance to travel throughout America to interview Olympic gold medallists. I came across someone called David Hemery, who was teaching at Boston university—a Colchester man, as the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) knows. David had on his staff another amazing athlete called Joan Benoit, who was to go on to win the women's marathon in Los Angeles in 1984. Amazingly, six weeks before that, she had undergone major surgery.

David's story is worth telling. When he was a boy, his mother came into the garden to tell him that Roger Bannister had broken the four-minute mile. David was, to put it mildly, unhappy. As a young boy, he had wanted to be the first person to break the four-minute mile. He threw what I imagine we would call a tantrum.

David not only went on to win the 400 m hurdles in the 1968 Mexico Olympics but at the same time broke the world record. Double golds are very rare. It must be recalled that David achieved that after a false start, yet in his mind for many years he knew that one day he would be ready to go to that final. He had played it out in his mind time and again that he would win and break the tape. Today, he is chairman of UK Athletics and is giving something back to a sport that has given him a huge amount. David's mentor was Roger Bannister. For each generation, there is a Pele, a Best, a Nicklaus, a Woods, a Herb Elliott or a Steve Ovett. Sport needs heroes.

I mention David because we witnessed, as other Members have said, an amazing September and October in the Olympics and Paralympics in Sydney. I look forward to the day when there are not two separate Olympics and our people come together in one Olympics. I hope that we will not have to wait too long. It was wonderful.

It saddens me that the women's soccer movement and the young men's soccer movement are not allowed to compete in the Olympics as a result of parochial thinking in the soccer unions in the four countries of the United Kingdom. We are also struggling in cricket in world terms and in rugby league. Hockey needs a renaissance and my own sport, rugby union, has still regularly to threaten the hegemony of the southern hemisphere countries. In the so-called professional team sports, we are second—sometimes third—division. Until the base of the pyramid is more secure, it will for ever be thus, but I am pleased that, for the first time, we have a Government who are committed to trying to arrest that decline.

The Olympics showed that we have a rich sporting heritage and that excellence is possible, with or without state aid. We need to build on our Olympic success, but, two months on, where are we?

At 1 am, a large audience of just under 7 million, many of whom were children, watched Sir Steve Redgrave, as I hope he will become, win his fifth gold medal, and let us not forget Matthew Pinsent's fantastic achievements in rowing.

Where would those children have gone the next day if they had wanted to try rowing? How would they have found out about it? Where would they have gone the next week? What is true of rowing, which is our most successful sport in the Olympics, is true of other sports. Where would they have gone for cycling, athletics or sailing? Soon, all the good will created by the Olympics will have been dissipated, which is sad.

I suggest a change agent for the way in which we think about sport. Will the Minister consider the establishment of a post-Olympic fund to hire the likes of the Redgraves to act as Olympic ambassadors? We should not be frightened to award them a two-year contract worth £250,000. That is what the FA did for its 2006 World cup bid. It hired Sir Bobby Charlton and Sir Geoff Hurst. We need those ambassadors to act as full-time mentors for our children.

To make that work, we need to build from the grass roots a lottery-funded Olympic club in every constituency. Into the club would go the clubs and school teachers of the region, so that for once we would build one organisation that represented the entity of sport in a community. Into that would go the 1,000 sports co-ordinators and the ownership of the parks.

One of the problems is that, unlike the National Trust, we have no national trust for urban parks, which we need. That is why club houses are torched and cricket squares are dug up. That is why they become drug ridden and why prostitutes occasionally ply their trade in them. We need to get back ownership of the parks. It is easy to let local authority funds for parks go. It is wrong that a warden on a moped should have to try to ensure the security of three parks in a community. The ownership of parks is key because they are where green spaces are; they could be owned by the Olympic club in the constituency.

Each Olympic club could be linked quickly by a sporting portal on the internet, whereby people could seek information and find out about coaching, where coaches are, what their addresses are, where the facilities are, what time they open and so on. Members will have almost guessed what is coming next. Side by side with that sporting portal should be an Olympic sports channel on digital television.

I would have added that that should be a public service channel paid for by the BBC from the licence fee, but I am no longer sure that the BBC sees itself as a public service organisation. I shall dwell on its role in sports broadcasting.

If, over the next six months, we lose the debate about a dedicated sports channel, we will have to ponder whether the BBC should be allowed monopoly of access to the licence fee. There is a precedent. In the late 1960s, the Open university, another major change agent in my life, was supported by Harold Wilson and Jennie Lee. They put pressure on the BBC governors to allow a £3 million "allowance" to kick start the Open university.

I urge Ministers, especially my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to demand that the BBC provide a public service sports channel. If it does not want to do so, we should put out a tender document for it. We should take the £40 million required to run such a service directly out of the licence fee.

If the BBC refuses to do that, let us ensure that the White Paper on communications that is due in mid-December recommends that the licence fee will no longer automatically be paid to the BBC. I am serious. The BBC has wasted perhaps as much as £300 million on BBC Choice, BBC Knowledge and BBC News 24 for its own vanity. That is enough to operate an Olympic sports channel for seven years.

Sport is the largest cultural activity in the world. There are more members of FIFA and of the International Olympic Committee than there are of the United Nations. If we are to move sport up the political ladder, it is vital that we as a Government deliver a public service sports channel. We need such a channel for sport education, sports coaching, sports history, sports medicine and sports psychology, and for delivering the sports curriculum to our primary and secondary schools. It is very important that we win this debate in the next six months.

Whereas the Olympic ideal is more or less alive—that was proved in September and October—the same cannot be said of the IOC. I should like to dwell a little on the relationship between the IOC and the British Olympic Association. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee took evidence last year from Mr. Craig Reedie. He was in Manchester, which at the time was bidding for the 2000 games, preparing for the IOC allegations of misbehaviour by its members.

Despite the IOC's claims that it is now a transparent organisation, Mr. Reedie has declined to disclose the contents of the letter detailing the allegations to the media or to the joint leader of the Manchester bid, who is now the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer). BOA officials have variously claimed that they no longer have a copy of the letter or that, if they do, it is the copyright of the IOC and cannot be disclosed without its consent.

It is common knowledge that the two IOC members—Mr. Augustin Arroyo of Ecuador and Mr. Tony Bridge of Jamaica—behaved badly during their visit to Manchester in 1993. If we are to make an Olympic bid—I currently have some doubts about the validity of such bids—we must be confident that the IOC and our own BOA will behave openly and transparently. We must know whether the BOA report puts Britain's interests—or those of the IOC—first.

I should give the House a little more background on the matter. On 29 January 1999, as the Salt Lake City corruption scandal peaked, new allegations of corruption were spilling out of former bidding cities worldwide. In an attempt to staunch the disclosures, IOC President Samaranch sent a letter to the national Olympic committees of all countries that had recently bid for games. He wrote:

> I am certain that you are as concerned as the IOC in fully restoring the reputation of the IOC and the entire Olympic Movement. I hereby ask you for a full and candid report in response to this request, including all relevant facts, names and any available evidence.

Five weeks later, as I have already intimated, Craig Reedie, British IOC member and chairman of the BOA, and Simon Clegg, the BOA chief executive, gave evidence to the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. Mr. Reedie, when asked about the IOC corruption scandal, and speaking on the 1998-99 disclosures from Salt Lake City, said:

> To the best of my knowledge that was the first occasion on which there was definite evidence that a number of members had broken their oath.

The statement might seem to be at odds with the fact that Mr. Reedie was a member of the Manchester bid team and might have been expected to know of both the incidents in 1993 to which I have alluded.

Simon Clegg added:

> The British Olympic Association over the last month have conducted inquiries in conjunction with Birmingham City Council and Manchester City Council at the request of the International Olympic Committee. The findings of those inquiries have now been forwarded to the International Olympic Committee.

Later in the year, the IOC announced that none of the reports from bid cities, which were drafted by national IOC committees,

> was as serious as to merit a warning.

The committee announced that there were no "cases".

[Mr. Derek Wyatt]

What is the truth of the Manchester allegations? Did the British Olympic Association make a full and frank report that has been ignored by the IOC? We do not know. I ask the Minister to make a copy of the report available in the Library. It is important that that is done. Craig Reedie is a board member of the UK Sports Council and is a major player in sports administration. It is also important that, in the 21st century, the United Kingdom, which has given so much to the world of sport, maintains an integrity in the Olympic movement. That is much more important than winning brownie points. I also ask that there be greater transparency, particularly in relation to that report.

Today, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) tabled his Sex Discrimination (Amendment) Bill, which broadly reflects the contents of my own ten-minute Bill, the Equal Access (Public and Private Buildings) Bill. His Bill seeks to end discrimination in sport, which so many women endure daily.

I shall give a couple of examples of that discrimination. A woman who belongs to a bowling club in Faversham has to pay the same membership fee as a man but is denied a vote at the annual general meeting. There are many examples of such discrimination in women's golf. One hon. Member's wife was to play at a national tournament at the Royal and Ancient in Scotland, but was told that she could not change in the clubhouse as women were not allowed there. She therefore changed in her car.

The provisions of the hon. Gentleman's small Sex Discrimination (Amendment) Bill aim to deal with discrimination against women. The Bill gives us an opportunity to end the last remnants in sport of discrimination against 51 per cent. of our population, but, astonishingly, we are not willing to allow it sufficient time for consideration in this place.

Miss Kirkbride: Does the private Member's Bill propose to require women to pay the same membership fee as men at all clubs? As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, at many clubs, although perhaps not at the ones that he mentioned, women pay a concessionary fee. Many women much prefer that, as paying the full fee would add considerably to the family budget.

Mr. Wyatt: I am aware of that. I am aware, too, that there are differences of opinion on the issue between public and private golf clubs—which may be the specific example of which the hon. Lady is thinking. As she will know, there are stories—possibly apocryphal—about dogs, but not women, being allowed in clubs.

We are talking about equal access to buildings and facilities. At some private clubs, although women pay equal subscriptions, they are not allowed to tee-off on a Sunday morning. Such practices are anachronisms. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, there is a blazer brigade whose thinking is of the 18th and 19th centuries. The brigade has predominated in tennis, which has always been a class-driven sport. It is very sad that the brigade has realised only now, after 30 years of financial success, that tennis has a role to play in helping underprivileged children in the worst parts of our inner cities.

Mr. Bob Russell: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that there is no sex discrimination in darts?

Mr. Wyatt: I should like to reverse the question by asking whether darts is a sport. However, we have not yet defined sport. Perhaps we may have that philosophical discussion on another occasion.

Sex discrimination is a very important issue, and we have sat on the fence on the issue for too long.

Sport changed my life. I urge the Government to consider funding an Olympic sports channel, so that thousands of children may have access to it, on the internet and on digital television, and sports can change their lives, too.

11.18 am

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): "Government support for sport" is the title of today's debate as it appears on the Order Paper. Although that support is getting better, there is still a very long way to go. For years, successive Governments have held sport in low esteem. Although I do not want to be unfair to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport or to the Minister for Sport—both of whom, I know, are doing all that they can to give sport a higher profile—the stark reality is that, collectively, the Government do not give sport the importance that it deserves.

Here we are, on a Friday morning, in a near-deserted Chamber, debating an activity which—in scores of sports—is enjoyed by millions of our citizens. There are countless millions who would like to see a lot more done for sport, including those who no longer participate in sport and those who, as a result of infirmity, were never able to do so.

Today, we have at least moved to the main arena. The previous debate on sports, six months ago, occurred on a Thursday, on the practice pitch of Westminster Hall. It was held on the same day as the local elections, when it was known that the Commons would be as deserted as it is today. If the Government really want to promote sport, and to show that their heart is in providing substantial support to sport, they are hardly conveying the right message by the way in which they table sport as a subject for debate in the Chamber. Why is sport not given prime-time billing in the Chamber?

Having pointed out the Government's down-playing of sport, I join the Secretary of State in saluting those of our sports men and women who flew the flag for our country in the recent Olympic and Paralympic games and brought back from Sydney the best gold medal tally for 80 years—in a previous era of Liberal influence.

Without amending the broad thrust of my criticism of successive Governments, I would say that what investment there has been by the previous and present Governments clearly helped to improve the UK's success—and I am delighted to acknowledge that. I trust, though, that there will be no resting on laurels—just think how much more could have been achieved with even more investment.

Perhaps the Minister for Sport would care to respond today to a point that I first raised six months ago: is it not extraordinary that the British Olympic Association is one

of only two national Olympic committees that does not receive public money? In this connection—and please note that I am wearing a "Team GB" supporter lapel badge—I draw attention to early-day motion 1076, which I tabled, entitled "British Olympic Achievements". Naming the 22 individuals who won gold medals in 11 events, with special praise to Steve Redgrave for winning a gold medal in five consecutive Olympics, the motion congratulates all UK participants at Sydney; it goes on, in what is perhaps the most relevant part for today's debate:

this House . . . welcomes the advances made in recent years which enabled the United Kingdom to improve its medal success at the Olympics; but, in recognising that more needs to be done to continue this trend, calls on central and local government to provide greater investment in sporting facilities for all interests and age groups, together with the necessary qualified coaching staff; and urges that individual and team sports in schools are encouraged with pupils required to have a minimum two hours physical education every week.

In the past few days I received a generous letter of thanks from the chief executive of the British Olympic Association, Mr. Simon Clegg, who told me:

We would endorse the general thrust of the argument that additional prioritisation of physical education in schools and greater investment in facilities are an essential prerequisite of continued improvement in our national team's performance in sporting conditions including the Olympic Games.

I also wish to pay tribute to all from the UK who took part in the Paralympics in Sydney. They likewise registered many successes, showing how even those with disabilities can not only participate in sport but compete at the highest levels.

Mr. Wyatt: I note that members of the Australian rugby league team are sitting in the Strangers Gallery—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is out of order.

Mr. Russell: It is not all about winning international competitions. There is more to sport than catering for elite athletes, important though it is to support our elite performers, together with those with the potential to reach the top. What we need is sport for all, to coin a phrase from yesteryear. The more participation we have by the population at large the more likely we are to produce champions.

In summing up, will the Minister state when Ministers at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education and Employment last met to discuss the appalling failure to ensure that pupils undertake even the minimum required level of two hours of physical education every week? Will the Minister confirm that, according to the Office of Standards in Education, 75 per cent. of pupils do not have the minimum two hours each week? What are the Government doing to ensure that this performance standard is achieved within the normal school day?

Sport England tells me:

At present the Government's aspiration is that all schools should provide two hours of curricular or extra-curricular activities per week. Sport England believes that this level of activity should be achieved within school hours—and not through a combination of intra and extra-curricular time. The physical development of the child deserves the same status within the curriculum as literacy and numeracy.

If Ministers agree with that firm statement from Sport England, would they care to invite the Prime Minister to impress upon the Department for Education and Employment the need for action rather than aspiration? The Department for Education and Employment is clearly off-message when it comes to Government support for sport.

Incidentally, I am appalled that only 20 per cent. of pupils can swim 25 metres by the time they reach secondary school. It seems that swimming lessons have ended in many schools because the additional academic pressures imposed by the Department for Education and Employment mean that there is no time for an activity that is not only good for a child's health but is a potential life saver. It is also worth noting that the UK failed to win a single Olympic medal for swimming at Sydney.

Are all Government Departments signed up to what the Secretary of State said this morning about Government support for sport? Can Ministers recall when an education Minister last proclaimed that sporting achievements and academic standards go hand in hand? Indeed, when did an education Minister last make a speech promoting sport in school and stressing in particular the importance of ensuring that every pupil achieves the minimum two hours physical education every week?

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not wish to give the impression that Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment took no interest in sport. Indeed, the Minister for School Standards recently joined me at a conference on the importance of school sport, organised by the sports councils and attended by some 300 people from all over the country. My right hon. Friend and I made statements that were absolutely joined-up.

Mr. Russell: I am delighted to hear that and I look forward to the next debate on sport, when the Minister will no doubt be able to give us the excellent news that the Government have put their aspirations into action, and that every child—rather than 25 per cent. of children at present—will get a minimum of two hours' physical education a week during school time.

Last year, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport concluded that active participation in sport

complements academic elements of education; and it encourages social skills.

Why, in my opinion, is this view being ignored by the Department for Education and Employment? The reality is that sport is not encouraged in schools—it is discouraged.

The Government are all too quick to talk about wanting to raise levels of examination successes and higher expectations with league tables and other measurements of academic achievement, but they are not enthusiastic about encouraging sport in schools.

Such is the over-emphasis on academic results—regardless of anything else, it would seem—that we are producing a generation of young people hundreds of thousands of whom are missing out on what is known as informal education, of which membership of youth movements and sports clubs can play such an important part in developing the young adults of tomorrow as citizens with a rounded education and attitude to civilised society. Frankly, we need less emphasis on life in the

[Mr. Russell]

classroom and more emphasise on sport and physical education—and let us give our young people the time outside school hours to be involved in organised youth movements and other worthwhile pursuits.

I know that the Government are making a lot of noise about appointing schools sports co-ordinators, but they will be few when one considers how many schools there are. By 2003, it is intended that there will be 110 designated specialist sports colleges, but there are 3,560 state secondary schools and 18,234 primary schools in England. Surely sport should be for the many, not the few. If the Minister will not agree with me, will she at least agree with the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which says:

> There is no substitute for adequate time within the curriculum with well-trained teachers.

The Prime Minister has announced £750 million for secondary school and community sports facilities. To put that into perspective, the sum to be spread around the whole country is less than the cost of the millennium dome.

The figure of £750 million could also be topped by the new Wembley stadium if costs for this as yet to be started debacle continue to rise. The last figure I read was that it would cost £660 million. Wembley is turning into a new dome-style fiasco. The Government are replacing the most famous stadium in the world with a horrendously expensive modern structure, which will still be served by hopelessly inadequate transport links.

I make no apology for pursuing concerns that I have raised before—that we are producing a generation that is less fit than previous generations with the result that we have a health time-bomb ticking away that in due course will overwhelm our already hard-pressed health services. People will suffer from breathing, mobility and heart problems at an earlier age than my generation because they have not had sufficient physical education during their formative years at school.

It also needs to be said that there is evidence that young people who take part in sports—not necessarily those who excel but those who do it for enjoyment—find that being fit and healthy benefits their academic achievements. It makes sense to be healthy. But far from helping our young people, the Government will next year make it more difficult for voluntary youth organisations, thanks to their proposed tax on volunteers, otherwise known as the Criminal Records Bureau. I support the establishment of the bureau, as, in a collective sense, does everyone associated with the youth movement, but to expect all potential volunteers to pay £10 for a check to be made to see whether they have a criminal record and are therefore unsuitable for youth work, is a financial deterrent to volunteering.

I suspect that most organisations keen to recruit new volunteers will pay the £10 for the potential volunteer.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the £10 fee may act as a deterrent, but will it not deter many of the people who should be deterred?

Mr. Russell: I do not think that anyone with a criminal record will volunteer knowing that there are to be checks, so the bureau has served its purpose.

I want to explain why I think that the £10 is wrong, and I do so in the certain knowledge that every voluntary youth organisation that I know concurs with my view. I suspect that most organisations keen to recruit new volunteers will pay the £10 rather than leave the volunteer to pay it. Across the youth movement collectively, which includes many sports clubs, that will lead to millions of pounds being taken out of budgets for young people in order to pay for the bureaucracy of the Criminal Records Bureau.

There is an easy solution. If the Government are serious about encouraging people to volunteer to help in the youth movement, including in those clubs catering for a wide range of sports, they should agree that there should be no charge for volunteers. Now that really would be a positive measure of Government support for sport.

Will Ministers today give a pledge that they will raise this issue with the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary? This tax on volunteers should be dropped. The cost should be met by the Government, not volunteers or youth groups, many of which are already struggling to survive in the face of escalating costs.

The Government can also help sports clubs by ending what the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which speaks for 256 national governing bodies of sport and recreation, describes as

> the unfair tax regime on voluntary sports clubs.

Will Ministers give an assurance that they will press other arms of government to remove all business rates from community amateur sports clubs? Such a measure would at a stroke release money for clubs to invest in improved facilities, better equipment and higher-quality training, encouraging them to extend fundraising for even more improvements.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have much sympathy with the sentiment that he is expressing, but I wonder whether his party has done any research into what the measures that he advocates would cost.

Mr. Russell: I was about to pay tribute to my noble Friend Lord Phillips of Sudbury for his efforts to secure a tax exemption for such clubs. The CCPR says:

> Whilst schools provide the universal foundations of sporting participation, sports clubs provide opportunities for lifelong participation and the natural pathway to international sport.

Unfortunately, the number of sports clubs has decreased since 1996.The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) will know that, once we start putting things into compartments, we can make all sorts of arguments. I will throw one back to him: if we can keep 44 young people out of prison, that will save the public purse £1 million.

The Government can give further practical financial assistance to sports clubs by cutting the 17.5 per cent. VAT on sports club building works. Two days ago, the Chancellor announced his intention to cut VAT on church repairs to 5 per cent. Let us follow his spiritual lead and likewise reduce VAT on sports clubs. The CCPR reports that it has been calculated that the Government take four times more money from sport in taxes than they return through central and local government combined. Perhaps sports people could learn a thing or two from pensioners and fuel protesters.

Mr. Hawkins: Have the pledges that the hon. Gentleman is giving as his party's spokesman been fulfilled where his party is the junior partner in coalitions? Have any of his colleagues in Scotland and Wales persuaded the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly to do any of what he is advocating?

Mr. Russell: I recognise the validity of the question, but I am speaking as my party's sport spokesman in a debate in the House of Commons, and I will not be diverted down that blind alley.

Sport England makes the plea that either the Recreational Charities Act 1958 should be modernised or tax exemptions should be introduced to help to secure the future of many community and amateur sports clubs across the country. It says:

> Charitable status can strengthen a sports club's financial well-being through a combination of tax exemptions and people's increased willingness to give time, money and advice to an organisation which is adjudged to be pursuing charitable objectives.

Do Ministers agree that adopting Sport England's proposals would be a practical measure of Government support for sport? I give a pledge to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) that my speech will be conveyed to my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly so that they can follow up the excellent proposals being made today by hon. Members of all parties.

Mr. Greenway: I can help the hon. Gentleman. There is a different policy in Scotland, and many of us think that what applies there should apply in England and Wales, but I suspect that his party's Treasury spokesmen will be as difficult a nut to crack as my party's and the Government's.

Mr. Russell: In a previous speech, I said that

> sport will be taken seriously only when it has a department of its own with its own—greater—resources.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 4 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 134WH.]

The CCPR says:

> Seventeen different Government departments have an impact upon sport and recreation. Moves to strengthen the voice of sport within the Government process would be supported. It is felt that there is a strong case to be made for a Minister for British Sport within the Cabinet to co-ordinate Government policy for Sport.

What does the Secretary of State think about that? What does it say about the current effectiveness of the voice of sport in the Cabinet?

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am happy for the hon. Gentleman to concentrate purely on England. Will he have a word with his Liberal Democrat colleagues who run North Wiltshire district council, whose meeting this week was made famous by Councillor Ruth Coleman sitting through it knitting a bobble hat? At that very important meeting, the hon. Gentleman's colleagues agreed to sell playing fields for the building of 595 houses in the town of Corsham, on Peel circus, Pockeridge farm? Will he advise them to listen to Sport England, which advised strongly against giving that planning permission?

Mr. Russell: If I do not convey that information to the Liberal Democrat group on the hon. Gentleman's local council, I am sure that he will. To the best of my knowledge, knitting is not yet a recognised sport.

We hear a lot a about joined-up government but much more still needs to be done when it comes to sport and the impact of other Departments. I have already mentioned the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Health, the Treasury and the Home Office. I now add another to the list: the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

While the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister for Sport dream of expanding sports provision, out there in the real world local government is facing the nightmare of yet more cuts that will inevitably mean a reduction in the level of service and the provision of facilities. Which of today's Ministers will have the courage to tell the Deputy Prime Minister that his local government spending cuts are affecting sport? While the lucky Minister is with the far-from-sporty Deputy Prime Minister, can he also be asked what progress the DETR has made to tighten planning guidance of PPG17 so as to safeguard all sports pitches—not only school playing fields but those owned by local government and the private sector?

The sale of school playing fields is an important issue, but we are fooling the public if we ignore the much bigger threat of the loss of private playing fields owned by companies that for many years have in effect provided a public amenity for the communities in which they are based.

In my constituency of Colchester, it was announced just 48 hours ago that a social club, bowling green and tennis courts owned by GEC Estates are to close and the land is to be sold for development. Also in Colchester, two months ago Royal London Assurance closed its modern, purpose-built sports centre and the adjoining playing fields, including four football pitches—again in the hope that the land can be developed.

The same thing has happened in many places around the country—as well as the loss of school playing fields. The loss of these open spaces will continue unless the planning rules are tightened to protect the green oases in our urban neighbourhoods that such privately owned playing fields provide. Otherwise, even more faceless company accountants will be recommending to boards of directors that their sports fields are a disposable asset.

Government Departments may behave no differently from the private sector. I invite the Minister to remind her colleagues in the Department of Health and the Ministry of Defence that, morally, they are subject to the same planning constraints as schools when it comes to disposing of playing fields. In my constituency, football pitches have already been closed by the national health service, and more are to be lost on MOD land.

Last evening I had a meeting in the House with three members of the east region sports board. The Minister for Sport will be pleased to know that in September the eastern consortium for athletes services was established to serve sub-world-class athletes in the six counties of eastern England. Its aim is to help them to become elite world-class athletes. That is the good news. The bad news is that funds available to the consortium, part of the English Institute of Sport, are virtually non-existent. Will the Minister give an assurance that she and her team will see what help can be promised for the eastern consortium?

As with the national heath service, I guess that there will never be enough funds for all sport's requirements. However, the Government can do more. I have already

[Mr. Russell]

mentioned ways in which sports clubs can be helped financially by changes to existing Government policies on VAT and business rates, and by scrapping the tax on volunteers. In addition, the Government could return to sport the lottery money that they have switched into education and health—services that should be funded by central taxation, not the proceeds of gambling. Only this week it was revealed that sports, arts and charities have been deprived of a further £300 million of lottery money.

Another source of funding is football. The professional game in England has never been so rich in money—although, paradoxically, never so bankrupt in talent when it comes to leadership of the game off the pitch and playing ability on the pitch. Does the Minister agree that a tax system should be introduced for football that would bring about a redistribution of money within the game based on the turnover of clubs, benefiting the smaller professional clubs? Some money from the top flight of football trickles down, but it is little more than petty cash when one considers the mega millions sloshing around, with grotesque salaries going to a relatively small number of players who are aided and abetted by parasitic agents sucking vast sums of money out of the game.

It should be possible for the Government to introduce financial strategies to enable football's wealth to help grass-roots football. Junior clubs and youth teams would benefit greatly. I invite the Minister to ask her Treasury colleagues to look at the proposal. It would not involve additional public expenditure, but the money available to football would be used in a better and fairer way.

On the so-called minority sports, more than 100 activities are recognised as sports but they do not always receive the public recognition and support that they deserve. Rowing is an example. Its Olympic success was well in excess of that achieved by some other sports. It is thus in the national interest that we encourage minority sports, not just because success in them will gladden the nation's heart when other more popular sports do not shine in the medals table but because they add choice and variety to the sporting menu.

To what extent do minority sports feature in the Government's support for sport? I am aware that the Minister has communicated with the president of the Colchester and district sports council, Mr. Bill Tucker, MBE, on the matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) has asked me to draw the Minister's attention to the campaign, which he supports, for the British Gliding Association to be allowed access to lottery money for training and development of teams.

I mean no disrespect to those who play korfball, which is recognised as a sport by our national sports bodies. I cannot recall it being featured by the media—local or national—in print or on television, but nevertheless it has the status of a sport and I wish all participants every success and enjoyment.

In contrast, the country's most popular sports activity, which, by common consent of the public and media is a sport, is not recognised as such by the sports bodies. I refer to darts. Can the Minister confirm, however, that the sports mandarins are now less opposed to recognition than they once were? Does she agree that the hitherto snobbish opposition is gradually being replaced with an acceptance that darts really is a sport and should be treated as such? Should the nation's millions of darts players be encouraged by the Secretary of State's comments today about the changing attitudes of the sports authorities? Will the hon. Lady give an assurance that in the coming week—in the spirit of demonstrating Government support for sport—she will make representations to the relevant sports bodies and ask them to recognise darts as a sport?

Sport England, which I wish to congratulate for all that it has done to lead the development of sport, tells me that the increase in Government support for sport has been very welcome. It says, however, that much needs to be done if the commitment shown by the Government is to be translated into significantly higher levels of participation and performance. What is the Government's response to the challenge posed in that second sentence?

Liberal Democrats genuinely welcome the progress that has been made for sport in the widest sense, but from what has been said in today's debate, coupled with the views of organisations such as Sport England and the Central Council of Physical Recreation, it is clear that the Government can do a lot more to support sport.

The importance of sport is obvious. It improves the health and fitness of participants, and is of significant educational value. Sport is big business—it creates wealth and jobs, and is a net contributor to the public purse. That is why I believe that the Government should be doing more to support sport, and I believe that the Minister for Sport agrees. I wish her every success in her endeavours to persuade her Government colleagues that sport is so important that it needs greater support. There is everything to play for.

11.46 am

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): I particularly welcome the funding package announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, which will enable school children up and down the country to receive the quality of sporting education that is deserved by all.

There is no doubt in my mind that sport for young people is a big piece of the jigsaw that is urban and community regeneration. Sport is an integral part of community life for many communities—it is the focal point. Sport is far more than incidental in turning around neighbourhoods with multiple disadvantages, whether in inner-city or rural areas. Through sport, we are not only able to tackle the symptoms of social exclusion but to crush its very causes.

Many of my constituents will celebrate today's announcement by my right hon. Friend, because plans to invest an additional £1 billion in sport between 2001 and 2004 is a signal of aspiration and ambition for our children and our country. It brings to an end the mediocrity that was the brand image of sport under the Conservatives. For 18 years, the Tories neglected our schools, selling off their assets, their sports grounds and facilities, leaving deprived schools with degraded facilities and low expectations. This investment is a breath of fresh air blowing through the decrepit gyms that the Tories left behind.

The wider effects of low investment in sport are clear for all to see. It is perfectly obvious that play promotes children's development, learning, health, creativity and independence. I say this because I am sure that I would

not have the confidence to be in this place today were it not for the role of art and sport in my formative years. I received my school education in urban, inner-city London and in suburban middle England. How surprised I was when, at 11, I left London and the cement playgrounds that are all too frequent here for the playing fields of East Anglia. Too often, in the past, we were content for urban children and children in industrial areas to be satisfied with their Gameboys, Mars bars and Walkmans, rather than hockey sticks, footballs and swimming pools.

Miss Kirkbride: Surely the hon. Gentleman's comments reflect what Conservative Members have said. In inner London, which tends to be run by Labour authorities, he played on cement grounds, but when he moved to the Tory shires of East Anglia, he found green fields.

Mr. Lammy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that the guidelines and framework adopted by the Conservative Government led to that problem. That Government also imposed significant cuts on sports provision, and we do not want a repeat of that. That is why I welcome today's announcement, because I want to see a Tiger Woods, a Cathy Freeman and a Michael Jordan coming from constituencies such as my own.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will look at the role of universities and colleges in supporting and promoting sport in this country. Clearly, in the United States and Australia, universities and colleges play a big role in coaching and providing the stars of the future. Although universities have not been mentioned today, I hope that they will play an integral role.

Everyone in this House will appreciate that it is an honour for me to represent a constituency that can boast some of the finest footballers in London; the club down the road at Highbury notwithstanding. Those footballers are local heroes, not just because they are skilled players, but because they unite and inspire people in my community. Most of those men began their lives in parts of the country not dissimilar to Tottenham. They are inner-city lads who had talent, but also support and encouragement and, above all, investment made in their skills and abilities. That is what I want for all British children and that is precisely the commitment that the Government are making.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will know that the appetite for investment runs deep. I wish to give three examples of sporting projects in my constituency that will benefit from today's announcement. A few weeks ago, I attended a basketball match between a local team called Interbasket and a team from Teesside in the north-east of England. My team lost, sadly, but the dedication and camaraderie shown by both teams—coming as they did from deprived communities—was a joy to witness. It was a joy because I was not in America, where this sport and the skills of its stars have been a beacon of light in some of the worst urban environments in that country. I was in my home, in Britain. I was delighted that because of Interbasket's partnership with our local council and local schools, it will benefit from today's announcement. I hope that the Department will continue to promote minority sports such as basketball.

Last week, I attended a youth amateur boxing club tournament, with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche). The event was sponsored and paid for by Tottenham Hotspur football club and supported and organised by our local police service. That is a tremendous credit to my constituency; a partnership that has ensured that young men in my constituency can harness their energies in a constructive and regulated manner. Those young lads will benefit from today's announcement.

Only this week, I visited a school in my constituency, Park View academy. Until two years ago the school was subject to special measures, but it is now turning the corner through the Government's excellence in cities programme. That school is in a groundbreaking partnership with our local football club and the council. Later this month, Park View will be celebrating the official launch—by the Spurs captain, Sol Campbell—of its own coaching academy, run by staff of the club at the school. That has provided a positive role model for children living in the area.

Investment in people is fundamental to the health of my community and that of many others in this country. I commend my right hon. Friend's announcement today.

11.56 am

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Madam Deputy Speaker, I join other colleagues in offering my congratulations to you on being chosen as Deputy Speaker.

Like other Members, it may not be possible for me to stay for the entire debate. Four weeks ago, I gave birth to a 9lb 1oz baby and I am afraid that he is a more effective tyrant than a husband or party Whip can ever be. I need to get back for his requirements and I hope the House and the Minister will forgive me if I am unable to stay for the full debate.

In many ways I commend the Government on their investment in sport. Sport does not need to be a party political issue, although some of the remarks from my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) on the complicated picture relating to the distribution of lottery funds have resonance. Nevertheless, the money going into sport is extremely welcome.

My speech is somewhat hypocritical, because when I was at school, I shared some of the views recorded in the report about the kind of clothes that we had to wear. I remember the horizontal rain on the playing fields while I was forced to go out in my shorts, thinking that I hated hockey and never wanted to play it again. We need practical solutions to encourage girls to participate in sport; bearing in mind what they have to wear might be one of them.

We should encourage sport in schools because its important overall effects cannot be disputed. Personal development is aided by team sports, which I am glad to see being reintroduced in schools. The benefit to health is also extremely important because, sadly, we are producing a nation of couch potatoes. The use of computer games and the fact that fewer children walk to school are other reasons why participation in sports in schools is important.

We were glad to hear the Minister confirm from a sedentary position that she has the full support of the Department for Education and Employment for the

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

Government's proposals. Sport England, however, has said that the curriculum is a barrier to participation in school sport, and she should be vigilant on that. Much remains to be done, and we should monitor the situation. Improvements are still needed.

We welcome the £750 million for sport in schools. I echo what others have said about the importance of coaching. In these litigious times—not always helpful to the public purse or individuals—we all understand why teachers do not want to take sporting lessons without proper qualifications and an understanding of how to teach sport. However, we must ensure that there are enough teachers to give physical education lessons and coaching in tennis, football or whatever might engage the interest of youngsters in a sporting career, whether for Spurs or for a local football team. Young people who take an interest in sport at school enjoy healthier lives later. The Government's proposals are welcome, therefore, and the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport will take a keen interest in them. Thus far, I can agree with what has been said today.

The Conservatives, none the less, continue to be concerned—as is the Select Committee, which endorsed the views of my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey—about whether the correct decisions have been taken on Wembley. The Government's manifesto contained a pledge to bring the Olympic games to the United Kingdom. I fear that that is unlikely to receive a tick in the Government's report. That would be a great disappointment to us all, and the decision taken on Wembley makes it even more unlikely.

The best available option was a Wembley complex for all sports, not just football. We welcome development of a new national stadium for football, which is needed, as well as development of a stadium for other events. It is hard, however, to see how the Pickett's Lock proposal adds up financially, and there are questions over whether it will be constructed in time. The Secretary of State was being disingenuous when he told us of savings. The £40 million that he said would be available for Pickett's Lock lies in the future. The figure of £20 million for purchase of the land was hypothetically based on our bidding successfully for the Olympic games. If we do not, there will be no saving of £40 million.

Kate Hoey: I should point out that the £20 million was not for the Olympic games, but for land for a warm-up stadium for the world athletics championships.

Miss Kirkbride: I understood that the world athletics championships would not be as expensive as that. The bodies concerned would have been happy to accept improved sporting facilities at a local school, which would have cost much less than the £20 million set aside for the Olympics. That would also have had the advantage of improving the school facilities. Concern remains about whether £40 million currently exists to build Pickett's Lock.

The Olympic games would not be held in the UK for some years to come, but bodies that distribute money for sport are concerned about how much is being paid out in any financial year. Pickett's Lock would have to be built before 2005 if the Olympic games were to be held there, and we would wish it to be built by 2004. Yet budgets are under pressure today for the building of a new athletics stadium. Sport England is concerned about that because it wants to spend more money in all our constituencies. Incidentally, I congratulate Sport England on helping to build two excellent facilities in my constituency. There are wonderful facilities at Haybridge high school for the community in Hagley, and we have a new bowling complex that many of my pensioners could not do without.

I fear that Sport England and other bodies responsible for distributing lottery money may not be able to continue to provide such facilities because of the pressures put on budgets by the international athletics stadium. Questions remain about whether enough events can take place at the stadium to ensure that it is viable. If the new stadium is used heavily, that will have an impact on the income of other national stadiums.

The Department should ask itself some difficult questions. There is much concern in the sporting world about whether the correct decisions have been taken. It may be too late to go back on them, but I think that the Department has a case to answer. It will have to reassure the sporting public that it has made the right decisions and that other sporting programmes will not be denuded.

I was pleased that the Secretary of State referred to the European Commission's intentions on the issue of transfer fees, which will have a great impact on our sporting activity in the short term. The right hon. Gentleman did not answer the questions that arise. I was delighted to hear what the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) said about his local football club and what it is doing in schools in his constituency by providing opportunities for youngsters, especially from deprived backgrounds, given the nature of the school that he described. The club is giving them an opportunity to learn to play football and, in their wildest dreams, to play for Spurs.

The Commission's proposals could threaten precisely that activity. Denuding football clubs of money to find talent in the local community—they will no longer have money from transfer fees—could cause a huge problem. I think that the UK has the biggest league in Europe, or one of the biggest. We have more professional football clubs than most other European countries. The role of many clubs is talent spotting. They have been doing what we would like other sports to do, which is to go into the community to find talented youngsters who will play for them in the longer term.

We all benefit from that approach, including the individuals who are spotted, the clubs and the fans. God help us, one day the English football team might benefit from it. Sadly, that has not happened yet. The European Commission is threatening to destroy the way that we have run our national game. Its proposals would reduce the opportunities for our young people to play for a big sporting club and to earn a huge sum of money, which most of us in this place can only dream of. There is the opportunity as well to play for England.

The Secretary of State said that he welcomed football's interest in what the Commission is doing. However, I am concerned that the Government's response in trying to stop the proposals being implemented seems to be lacking. The situation is extremely serious. That the Commission is even contemplating implementing its proposals seems to be an own goal.

I do not understand how the Commission makes a parallel with the wider labour market. If someone has a particular talent and is employed by a company as its chief executive, he will normally be employed on a contract. If he walks away from the company or is employed by another company, it is normally necessary for him to be bought out. His talents, contacts or customers, for example, are bought by the company that offers the contract. That company has an expectation that if the contract is broken, it will receive some recompense. At that level, the company, for example, is paying for a particular skill, whatever it may be. There is a well-used contractual obligation, which I think should apply equally in football. I do not accept the Commission's assertion that football's arrangements should be different, but I am afraid that the Government, fearing that they will lose the argument, will not fight strenuously enough for British football and will fail to emphasise the problems that will be caused in British football if the Commission's views prevail.

Although I hope that the Minister for Sport will be able to provide reassurance, I fear that the bottom line is that she cannot prevent the implementation of the Commission's proposal. I do not know whether the Commission derives its right to interfere in the game from social chapter arrangements or from previous agreements in Europe, but its action is extremely unwelcome. The only people who will benefit from the proposals are football players—but only those who are lucky enough to be established in the game already and who are, therefore, marketable commodities.

It is hard to emphasise too strongly how great the problems will be. Britain will lose its smaller clubs; they will be forced to become amateur clubs, because if they cannot find and sell on young talent to richer clubs, they will have no financial bottom. They will be unable to continue their proactive role in the community and probably be unable to continue playing at their current level in the league. They will no longer be able to take older players from the larger clubs, which enables the players to slow down in the sport and creates spaces for younger players to move up.

In short, our base of footballing talent will shrink. Clubs at the top of the league, who will continue to derive lots of money from the big gates they command among fans who will continue to pay in the hope of seeing their team win on Saturday afternoon, will go out into the international market and buy their players abroad instead of looking for talent in smaller British clubs. That will do our young footballing talent no service, and it will make finding those precious players who can play for our national team even harder, because there will be fewer players who can be picked.

I hope that I have persuaded the Minister for Sport that the Opposition will support her efforts to fight alongside the football authorities against the European Commission. The Commission must see sense. The hon. Lady might be tempted to accuse the Conservatives of Europe-bashing at every possible opportunity, but the Commission's proposal beggars belief. If the Government want an opportunity to prove that they are willing to stand up to Europe and that they are not as federally minded as we often claim, they have an opportunity to do so and to do our national game a great service. I wish the Minister well in those negotiations.

12.13 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your appointment.

Because I have not had an opportunity to do so since his election to Parliament, I take this opportunity also to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy). I knew his predecessor well for many years. He might not know that Bernie Grant was a cricketer—I believe a fast bowler—in Guyana before he came to Britain to spread his customary sweetness and light in his adopted country.

I echo the comment of the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) that it is a shame that the Chamber is so empty today, on a one-line Whip on a Friday. However, I have a suggestion: perhaps the next time they have an Opposition day, the Liberal Democrats will consider making sport the subject of debate, rather than some of the other subjects that they have recently chosen.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and other speakers have mentioned Britain's achievements in the Olympic and Paralympic games. I am sure that I am not the only Member of Parliament present who stayed up late at night, or rose early in the morning, to watch some of our sporting triumphs. The events acted as a sort of beacon: my two elder children, aged five and four, watched excerpts and continue to this day to ask me when the Olympics are going to start again. They think it is going to be next week or next month. I keep telling them that the next Olympics will be in four years, but they do not seem to be able to grasp that concept.

Another enormous achievement is that of Lennox Lewis, who has become Britain's first undisputed world heavyweight champion since Bob Fitzsimmons, who lost the title in 1899.

Although I have lived in the south-east since I was 18, I originally come from Yorkshire, which has a strong sporting tradition, especially in cricket. Since 1945, Yorkshire has provided more international cricketers than any other county—I believe that that is still the case. Cricket is a fiercely contested sport in Yorkshire. The area where I grew up was part of the Bradford league, which is one of the most professionalised and fiercely competitive leagues in the country.

I know that you will be interested, Madam Deputy Speaker, in how fiercely contested cricket games are in the Bradford league, so I shall give a few examples. Many years ago, before I was born, a game took place which has gone into folklore in Yorkshire. It was a game between Saltaire and Windhill. On the last ball, the team batting needed six to win. It was the last wicket. As often happens, the batsman hit the ball to the boundary. The ball was caught on the boundary with one hand, by a man standing right on the boundary rope. The umpires had to adjudge whether his hand had been over the boundary rope or inside the boundary rope. The decision would obviously change the result of the game. The umpires ruled that the batsman was caught—that the ball was caught inside the boundary rope—and Saltaire therefore won. The umpires needed police protection when they left the pavilion that evening. That shows just how fiercely contested some of the games are.

[Mr. John Cryer]

At that time, many of the cricketers in Yorkshire, Lancashire, the midlands and other parts of the country were drawn from the old heavily industrialised areas. That has declined over the past 40 or more years. In the inter-war and post-war years, the great fast bowlers in particular tended to come from mining areas, or at least heavily industrialised areas.

Harold Larwood and Bill Voce, who were the spearhead of the England attack in the 1930s, were both miners and worked in the pits long after their cricketing careers were over. They were the spearhead during the Bodyline tour of Australia and brought back the Ashes for the first time since before the first world war. However, they were denigrated by the British establishment, which shows how class-ridden the British cricketing establishment was then—and, I suspect, still is to this day. The two bowlers who won the series for us got into a bit of hot water for being so successful and beating a team that was thought to be invincible. They were turned on by their own people back in England. Harold Larwood never played for England again after the Bodyline tour.

There were other great players—Bill Copson, for instance. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is a great fan of Copson, the Derbyshire strike bowler, who was a former miner. F. S. Trueman, the great Yorkshire and England fast bowler, was also a miner. When the Tories closed the pits, the steelworks and the shipyards, that basis of sport was lost. It may not have been deliberate, but I tend to think that it was. I believe that such things are deliberate when the Tories do them. When they politically attacked the mining areas and destroyed the heavy industries, there was no longer that great social and industrial base to provide players for the England cricket team.

In Wales, rugby has declined in a way that would have been unthinkable 25 years ago. One can chart that decline and see that it corresponds closely to the decline of the pits. The pit teams used to be the source of players for Wales, and until comparatively recently, the Welsh rugby team was still drawing players from the pit valleys and villages. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins)—I keep wanting to say "the hon. Member for the chicken run"—insisted that the decline of England in sport was due to left-wing activists. That is moving into the realm of fantasy. Let us consider another example, boxing, which has not been discussed. All the big public schools have abandoned boxing as a sport. If we believed the hon. Gentleman, one would start to believe that wild-eyed Trots from the lunatic fringe had infiltrated all the public schools and forced them to abandon rugby. Actually, it is a matter of fashion.

Mr. Hawkins: The hon. Gentleman's ludicrous and class-based analysis of cricket is shown to be spurious by the fact that the most reviled person on the Bodyline tour was its captain, the extremely wealthy Douglas Jardine, who was very much an establishment figure. He suffered far more prejudice and attacks than Larwood or Voce ever did.

Mr. Cryer: That is complete fantasy. Jardine continued to captain England. I could become very passionate about this subject, because I am that sort of person. Jardine captained England against India and continued to be a first-class player and captain. Larwood and Voce were both ditched by the establishment.

Mr. Bob Russell: In what year did that happen, and what does it have to do with this debate, which is on Government support for sport?

Mr. Cryer: The hon. Gentleman should stop nitpicking. It happened in 1932-33. We should be aware of our history, whether in sport or anything else, because it enables us to know where we have come from and where we are going. That should be self-evident to all hon. Members, apart, perhaps, from those on the packed Liberal Democrat Benches.

During the past 10 or 20 years, we have seen an influx of big money into sport, especially football, in which there has been a shift of focus from the collective effort of the club and team to the individual. That movement towards a more individualised process has been largely due to the big money. I am not speaking about Government investment or sponsorship, although I must say that it always irks me to see cricket grounds covered in sponsors names and so on. I refer mainly to television money, which has had an especially long-term and corrosive effect on football. It has tended to take the sport away from supporters and to put it in the hands of a few individuals who form an elite right at the top.

Such money has also had a corrosive effect on professional boxing, although it cannot be said that there has ever been a golden age in the professional game. For example, there was no golden age during the 1950s and 1960s in America, when boxing was largely controlled by the Mafia. Frank Carbo was the most notorious person involved in boxing in those days. He ran, among others, Sonny Liston, the heavyweight champion. These days, however, the big money comes from television, which demands blood and a spectacle of the sort that was not demanded 40 or 50 years ago.

Some of the greatest British boxers in past decades, such as Alan Minter, Howard Winstone, Tommy Farr and Len Harvey, were comparatively light punchers. None of those boxers had especially big punches, but managed to build up their points by clever counter-punching. A particular boxing hero of mine when I was growing up was Herol Graham, the great Sheffield boxer. He was a superb counter-puncher and should have been world champion. Unfortunately, various circumstances denied him that achievement. That era seems more or less over, with the current demand for big punching and blood and gore.

The British Boxing Board of Control does a pretty good job of governing the sport. The professional game is a great deal safer in Britain than in America. Far fewer serious injuries and fatalities occur here, where amateur sport is very much safer. As I said earlier, most public schools have given up boxing, which has been abandoned by the vast majority of schools in Britain. Only a handful of schools still provide amateur boxing, which is ridiculous. The statistics for injuries accrued in the amateur ring compare roughly with the statistics for injuries in swimming. I was a competitive swimmer for 20 years and I saw one serious injury in the pool.

I think that Winchester was the last big public school to give up boxing. If my memory serves me correctly, it did so approximately 10 or 12 years ago. Radio 4 broadcast a programme about it at the time, which included an interview with one of the boys who had been an enthusiastic boxer. He was appalled. He spoke about the school's track record in rugby and pointed out that in the previous couple of weeks, there had been two broken noses, a broken leg, a concussion and various other minor injuries. That does not happen in a year in the boxing ring, but schools have decided to abandon the sport, which is a great shame.

In my constituency, there is a large variety of clubs covering the whole range of sport. We have a successful amateur boxing club at Elm park and several cricket clubs. Rainham cricket club is in the south of my constituency. Rainham—a former village near the River Thames—is not a wealthy or particularly privileged area and Rainham cricket club struggled for years to raise the resources to put nets on the pitch. I have played cricket—pretty unsuccessfully, but I could on-drive, cut, hook and pull absolutely superbly, but unfortunately largely without making contact with the ball. Cricket has always been a great passion of mine.

Rainham cricket club had no nets until it managed to get the money from a local landfill trust. Anyone who plays cricket will know that youngsters, or people of any age, cannot be attracted without practice facilities, so there must be cricket nets on the pitch, where people can go and practice week in, week out and hone their skills. The club was able to put up the nets, but they were then vandalised. I like to think that I played a modest part in raising the money for the nets, so I was enormously angered when the secretary of the club told me that they had been vandalised two weeks after I had opened them. They have since been repaired, but I was particularly appalled that they were wrecked by mindless yobs—probably half out of their heads on drugs—given that volunteers devote their time to Rainham cricket club. They give of their own time and struggle—week in, week out; year in, year out—to make the club a success, to get the proper facilities and to attract youngsters, which they are starting to do.

I have discussed with the Home Office and the local police how to make our public parks safer. My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) raised that issue. It is particularly important in places such as Rainham, which have few facilities and where even those that exist are not particularly great and do not receive much investment.

Swimming is another sport close to my heart, because I competed in it for so long. There are several successful swimming clubs in my area—probably the most successful being a club called Killer Whales.

Mr. Bob Russell: I have heard of it.

Mr. Cryer: Yes.

Killer Whales is one of the most successful swimming clubs in the country. It has sporadically managed to compete with the really big clubs, such as City of Leeds and City of Bath, which employ a lot of full-time staff and have big turnovers. Killer Whales has a tiny turnover and is run almost entirely by volunteers, yet it manages to compete with the very best. However, the swimming facilities in Havering—the borough in which my constituency lies—are not particularly great. Chaffords swimming pool in Rainham does not even have any showers—a pretty basic requirement for a swimming pool. It is bang next to a school—also called Chaffords—which should provide a great opportunity for children to swim. They use the pool, but it is not a good facility; it needs investment. The council has put in some money, but it needs more.

I welcome the Government's investment in sport. We are seeing the fruits of that investment, and we shall continue to do so in the future, but some places, such as Rainham, are receiving no real investment.

I should like deal with safe routes to schools. That issue might not have an apparent connection with sport, but if we could invest more in creating safe cycleways, children could cycle to school and they would be fitter. The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) mentioned the fact that current generations are much less fit than previous ones. That is true, and the culture of not walking, cycling or engaging in physical activities is part of the problem.

In my constituency and, I suppose, most parts of the country, many parents drive their children to school, even if the school is just around the corner. We will not get those children on to bikes or get them fitter unless we create roads on which people on bikes feel safe. In Greater London—even in Havering, which is right on the edge of Greater London—people do not feel safe on bikes. I know that because I use my bike regularly. I often use it to get to constituency events. People feel very vulnerable on Britain's roads today, and real investment is needed to overcome that.

The problem is that many borough engineers come from an era when the car was automatically regarded as absolutely supreme, but we are moving on to a different era. Those engineers seem to think that painting a few lines on the road is enough to encourage people to cycle, but they will cycle only when they feel safe. When they feel safe, they will, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, swap Playstations for playing fields.

On school sports, which is an important consideration, the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is not in his place, mentioned tennis coaching at his school. I assume from his comments that, like me, he went to a comprehensive. The sports facilities at my school were, to say the least, pretty third rate and tennis coaching, so far as I can remember, was non-existent. I do not know whether his comments were intended as a criticism of comprehensive education—he is not here to clarify his remarks—but if they were, that would be deeply unfair.

Comprehensive schools face two problems: they have never been properly resourced—there is no comparison between the resources available to public schools and those available to comprehensive schools—and, traditionally, many children at comprehensive schools, including me, played sports outside school in the evenings at cricket, football, boxing and rugby clubs. However, that is not a reason for not starting to pump money and resources into the provision of proper sporting facilities in all state schools.

Trevor Brooking's role with Sport England was mentioned earlier. He regularly visits my constituency, where we hold a half-marathon each year, and does an awful lot of work, much of it in his spare time, to encourage children to take part in sport, particularly football and cricket.

[Mr. Cryer]

I understand the point that the hon. Member for Colchester made about the £10 fee for police checks. I raised that matter when I was a member of a Standing Committee that considered a child protection Bill. I should rather have a £10 fee, which is modest, and a check than no fee and no check, which would mean that people would not be properly vetted. However, it would probably be better to consider abolishing the fee and use state funding to carry out checks. Although the fee will turn people away, many of those who will be turned away will be people whom we want to be turned away from children's organisations.

In view of the various factors that have influenced the decline in many sports in this country, we need, in the longer term, to invest in schools and to make facilities available in schools—all state schools—so that children can participate in their chosen sports. We also need to invest in clubs outside schools, such as Rainham cricket club and Killer Whales. Such facilities will produce the champions of tomorrow. The telling fact that we did not win a swimming medal at the last Olympics, despite our successes in other sports, was mentioned earlier. If swimming receives investment and facilities, we will start to produce champions.

12.34 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): As vice-chairman of the all-party sports committee, may I say that it is a pleasure to contribute to the debate.

I start, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on a non-partisan note: I welcome the fact that I am speaking while you, as a great supporter of sport throughout your life, are in the Chair. However, I regret that the chairman of the all-party sports committee, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry), is unavoidably absent. I know that all Members—not only those present in the Chamber today—recognise the important part that the hon. Gentleman's chairmanship has played in the work of the committee. The Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) will agree that the hon. Gentleman, who is a distinguished former shadow spokesman on sport for his party, is normally vocal in his support for sport of all kinds. I know that the hon. Gentleman would particularly welcome the comments on boxing made by the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer).

I shall speak about several different sports and one or two constituency issues, and shall also make a couple of points about policy. May I start in a non-partisan spirit by saying how much I welcome the Minister's support for Sportsmatch? She and I were privileged to be at Wimbledon as the parliamentary guests of Sportsmatch and the Lawn Tennis Association Trust only two weeks ago, when she presented Sportsmatch awards. She is well aware that all of us in different political parties who have supported Sportsmatch over the years greatly welcome the fact that the Government have reconfirmed their commitment to and expanded their support for it. For hon. Members who are not aware of it, let me explain that the scheme encourages business sponsorship by a match funding scheme. I was involved in Sportsmatch when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to a previous Secretary of State in what was then the Department of National Heritage and have always thought that the scheme is very valuable. It has received consistent support since its launch under the previous Government and has also been supported by the present Government. I greatly welcome what the Minister said on the happy occasion to which I referred.

I should like to pay tribute to the work of the Central Council of Physical Recreation and to that of Nigel Hook, who always provides splendid briefings for Members of Parliament for debates on sporting issues. I should also like to pay tribute to Sport England, the team led by its chief executive Derek Casey and Trevor Brooking, and all the people who work for it, including Caroline Weber and Ian Wilton, whose work is greatly valued by Members of Parliament who take an interest in sporting matters. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), who is shadow Secretary of State, was right to pay tribute to the contributions of Sport England. I shall refer later to the work that it has done in my constituency.

Despite our political differences, I greatly welcome the remarks of the hon. Member for Hornchurch on swimming and cricket. We may disagree on points of cricketing history from time to time, but I enjoyed playing cricket for the Lords and Commons XI with the hon. Gentleman's late father, a distinguished parliamentarian whom we all miss greatly. It is a great pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman continuing in the family tradition of supporting sport, in the Chamber and more generally. Having done a great deal of competitive swimming myself and having played a lot of cricket, I was delighted to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about those sports. He may be interested to learn that I know the Saltaire cricket club, as my parents lived in Saltaire when my father taught at Bradford university, and I have also played at Windhill against many Bradford league clubs. I was especially delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman's story about those two clubs.

Hon. Members have paid tribute to the work of the Youth Sport Trust. The work of people like Duncan Goodhew, himself a successful British Olympian, is extremely valuable. As other hon. Members have said, there is no doubt that the contribution made by volunteers throughout sport is vital. It is important not to decry the work of the governing bodies. There is a temptation to say that too many old-fashioned ideas are held by those who wear blazers and sit on committees. We often forget that those people were successful sports men and women when young; that they give freely of their own time; and that many of them spend a lot of their own money contributing to the work of committees. I am sure that the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale will recognise in their winding-up speeches that the administrators are unsung heroes who are often forgotten or decried.

In a speech lasting just over an hour, the Secretary of State began by talking about the way in which some parts of the British press put British sports men and women on a pedestal one day, only to enjoy knocking them down the next. Commentators within and outside the House have often said that we probably have the best broadsheet press and the worst tabloid press in the world, and it is fair to distinguish between them, even if both ends of the spectrum are sometimes under the same ownership. People often unfairly lambast the press as a whole without recognising that most of our broadsheet papers write far

more balanced comment on sport. Only the tabloids tend to go in for the ludicrous business of putting people on a pedestal only to knock them down.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale would agree that it is sad when people who are not sports reporters are sent out to track down sports men and women so that they can attack them for activities that have nothing to do with their sporting prowess. I see the Minister nodding. I greatly regret that practice, and believe that we would have a far better coverage of sport in this country if we could stop it. I hope that people in the various official bodies that supervise the media will pay attention to the problem.

Experienced sports commentators have a much more balanced approach. I pay tribute to columnists in papers such as *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Independent on Sunday*. Sometimes a person who has been a distinguished editor of a paper writes a column for another paper. For example, Donald Trelford often has some interesting comments to make on sport. I should also mention Paul Fox, who writes extremely well on sports coverage by the media, especially by broadcasters. I always enjoy reading those columns, as I am sure all hon. Members do.

As many hon. Members have said, it is sad that so few hon. Members are present. That is partly because so little notice was given of the debate. Many of my friends in the all-party sports committee, including such active supporters as the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), would have been here had enough notice been given. Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey, I hope that the Minister will be able to persuade the Leader of the House to give us more warning of a sport debate next time.

To be here myself, I had to rearrange a visit to Ravenscote school in my constituency. Fortunately, I have been able to rearrange it for next Monday morning. I am delighted to say that that school is one of many in my constituency with a strong sporting tradition. The president of the Amateur Rowing Association told me at the Sportsmatch reception that she has worked closely with the headmaster and the governing body of Ravenscote school.

As for other schools in my constituency, I want to pay tribute in particular to the work of Mr. Bob Linnell, the headmaster of Ash Manor school. I am sure that the Minister, with her interest in sport and her sporting career before becoming a Member of Parliament, will be pleased to join me in welcoming the fact that Ash Manor school has had a very successful ladies cricket team. The school had problems before Mr. Linnell became headmaster, which was before my time in the House. During the past few years, supported by a good set of governors and a strong parents association, that school has been transformed and parents are now travelling large distances to ensure that their children can go to it. The school's sporting success is but one feature of what is now a very successful school.

I am very fortunate in that every secondary school in my constituency has a good reputation and all are committed to sport. I am well aware that that is not the case in every constituency. I am lucky that the primary schools and infant schools are also good and many of them are interested in sport. However, I am sure that the Minister would agree that we need to do more. The briefings that Sport England and the Central Council of Physical Recreation provided to hon. Members for this debate stress that there is not enough physical education in schools, especially for secondary school pupils—and there is certainly not enough swimming coaching. The hon. Member for Hornchurch and I share an interest in competitive swimming. There is a problem because, as an Ofsted report only four days ago pointed out, one in five pupils cannot swim 25 metres by the time they reach secondary school, and there is a direct correlation between the time available for swimming tuition and achievement—or lack of it, as the case may be. I am sure the Minister will want to remedy that problem, but important points have been made about the need for DFEE Ministers and civil servants—I stress "civil servants"—to buy into the importance of sport in schools. I heard the Minister say earlier that she would be appearing on platforms with her ministerial colleagues, but I fear that the mindset among many civil servants is that sport is not important.

As we have all said today, there are two crucial factors. First, there is clear evidence that those who participate in sport do better academically. Secondly, more people care about sport than care about politics. We should recognise that when it comes to political priorities, and we should make the case whenever we have an opportunity to do so. As Sport England has said, we need more people playing sport, more places in which they can play sport, and more medals as a result of higher standards of performance.

The creation of an additional good cause, the new opportunities fund, has reduced Sport England's annual lottery income by about £90 million since the Government came to power. Let me echo the tributes paid earlier to my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), and to all that he did for sport through both his personal commitment and his policies during his time as Prime Minister. I think that in the fulness of time, when the history of the last 25 years comes to be examined, we shall see that John Major's creation of the national lottery was one of the most significant features not only of sporting life—which it undoubtedly was—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman does not need me to remind him that we must use the correct parliamentary terms.

Mr. Hawkins: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is important to recognise the involvement in sport of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon. I trust it is in order for me to say that I hope the national lottery will one day be renamed the Major lottery.

I agree entirely with Sport England that more needs to be done. Like other Conservative Members, I am glad that the Government are showing a commitment to sport. I do not seek to criticise the current Minister for Sport: I know that she is personally very committed. What concerns me is that, with the best will in the world, she does not always persuade all her ministerial colleagues, and that not enough is being done to persuade the civil servants in particular.

As Sport England has pointed out, recent Ofsted figures, independently analysed, show that at key stage 1—ages five to seven—an average of one hour 20 minutes a week is devoted to PE or sport. At key

[Mr. Hawkins]

stage 2—ages seven to 11—the average is one hour 35 minutes. Key stage 3—ages 11 to 14—is the only stage at which the recommended two-hour minimum applies. Personally, I would like the minimum to be three hours, four hours or more. At key stage 4—ages 14 to 16—the average drops still further, to one hour 15 minutes.

Conservative Members have consistently called for the reintroduction of what was our policy, and was enshrined in law. We want sport to be a compulsory part of the curriculum for those aged 14 to 16. We think the current Government were entirely wrong to end that, and I hope that one day it will indeed be reintroduced, although that may require a future Conservative Government—and, hopefully, we shall have one very soon.

I pay tribute to all that Sport England has achieved. Since 1994, it has distributed more than £1.3 billion to more than 3,200 sports projects, benefiting 62 sports in every part of the country. In my constituency, it assisted much local fundraising by my constituent Margaret Bartlett and her colleagues, and helped the Lightwater playing fields association to establish the new Lightwater leisure centre, opened by Trevor Brooking not long ago.

Tennis was mentioned earlier. Over the past few months, I have had the great pleasure of being involved in the opening of two new sets of courts. His Royal Highness Prince Edward opened the Bagshot playing fields association's new courts, and I—along with the current mayor of the borough of Surrey Heath—opened the Camberley lawn tennis club's courts. It is wonderful to see all those new facilities being opened, but one has to recognise that even more could be done if even more lottery bids succeeded. If Sport England finds that it has less money from the lottery than it had a legitimate right to expect, there will be a problem.

I heard what the Secretary of State said about his announcement about the new taskforce and the new analysis of world-class performance by the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). It is interesting that the Secretary of State said that he was announcing that to the House today. I found that slightly surprising, given that all hon. Members were sent a briefing from one of the sporting bodies saying that they welcomed the fact that the right hon. Member for Copeland was taking on that role. That release was issued four days ago. It may be good to have a review—although I hope that it will not involve any junkets—but it is extraordinary that the Secretary of State claimed to be announcing something to the House when it was in a press release, issued four days ago, given to sporting bodies and then incorporated in their briefings to us in advance of the debate. Conservative Members have many times expressed concern at the fact that announcements are often made outside the House when they should be made to it.

I pay tribute to the people who were involved in our Olympic success. All of us have welcomed it. The school that I attended when I was fortunate enough to win a free place on the basis of the 11-plus—it was then a direct-grant grammar school—has its first Olympic gold medallist. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, know the school well because your son attended it, too. Tim Foster, one of the successful gold medal-winning four, is an old boy of Bedford modern school. Rowing was one of the sports that I did not get involved in at school. I pay tribute to all the people who are involved in rowing coaching not only at my old school, but at many other schools throughout the country.

Steve Redgrave has paid tribute to the fact that, under the Conservative Government, the lottery came into existence. He said that he had to win his early gold medals out of the five all on his own, without any support. It is the lottery that has transformed our world-class performing athletes, whose success we saw. It must not be forgotten that all that is down to the initiative—against much opposition from both inside and outside this place—by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon.

I turn to the problems with Wembley, although it is not something on which I have particular expertise. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), who sat through and participated in the Select Committee's analysis of that latest Government fiasco, has spoken about it, but I am concerned that all the problems of Wembley and the potential problems that are alleged to exist with Pickett's Lock in the Lee Valley could turn into as big a fiasco as the dome. I hope not, but I would like to have seen a lot of the money that has been wasted on the dome go into sport.

It was announced that £7 million was being provided to assist volunteers in sport, but that pales into insignificance compared with the amount of public money that has been wasted on the dome. At the Sportsmatch event, I talked to John Crowther of the Lawn Tennis Association about all the things the organisation was doing in tennis. On the radio this morning, I heard Roger Taylor, a distinguished and successful former British tennis player—I remember watching his many matches at Wimbledon and his brave performances over the years when I was a child—talk about the importance of tennis facilities in the inner cities. The hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) made a distinguished contribution. I agree with much of what he said about the importance of sport in the inner cities. Roger Taylor himself said that he began playing tennis in a public park in the city of Sheffield. We must not forget the needs of inner-city children. A lot of the money that was wasted on the dome could have been far more profitably spent on inner-city sport and sport generally.

I was lucky enough to attend a moving event in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), who cannot be here today. Three of the wards in my constituency are part of Guildford borough, so I was invited to a sport-for-all day at the successful Guildford Spectrum sport centre. It was an extremely moving occasion. We had a very large number of disabled children, some of whom, I hope, will some day be Paralympians.

I have been very involved in raising money for Paralympic athletes, and I hope to continue doing so. I have also attended national sporting events for disabled athletes preparing for future Paralympic games. We should recognise the particular dedication shown by all the volunteers who help disabled athletes.

There are concerns about many sports. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) and I share a passion for rugby. We also recognise that many problems have been caused by the apparent collapse of the Andrew plan and the resignation of Rob Andrew, which I greatly regret. I hope that rugby, a sport about which I care deeply, gets its act together soon—as, happily, cricket has recently done.

I apologise to the Minister for the fact that, like many hon. Members, I am unable to stay for the replies to the debate. As I told her this morning, I have a constituency surgery today that was arranged long before I knew of this debate.

There is a great deal of good going on in United Kingdom sport. This has been a good debate, and I hope that we have more like it. I also hope that every hon. Member will remember that, even if they are not interested in sport, most of their constituents are.

12.56 pm

Mr, James Gray (North Wiltshire): As someone who makes no claim of any type to sporting prowess or even to sporting knowledge, I should like to say what a great pleasure it has been to listen to the debate and to learn much from hon. Members on both sides of the House. I include in that not least my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), who demonstrates his general commitment to sport by acting as vice-chairman of the all-party sports group.

I was also very impressed to hear from the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), who introduced into an otherwise non-partisan debate a rare flash of good old Labour class warfare.

I was also glad to hear from the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), who claims in his constituency one of the finest football teams. Although it was not his maiden speech, it must be close to it, and he should be congratulated on it. He has a distinguished future ahead of him, perhaps as the Opposition spokesman on sport. I hope that he will be in that position in the next six months or so, after the general election.

In saying that, I am not for a moment suggesting that I am not looking forward to the day when the Minister for Sport is promoted to the shadow Cabinet as the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and is replaced as shadow sports spokesman by the hon. Member for Tottenham.

I should like to take this opportunity to mention several constituency matters—although I hope to be able to draw some general conclusions from specific cases in my constituency. People might think that North Wiltshire has less distinction than Tottenham, for example, in the sporting world, but they would be quite wrong. Anyone who had the good fortune, as I did, just before the summer to attend Wembley for the final of the Football Association vase would have seen Chippenham Town come a very noble second to Deal Town as it was pipped at the post by one goal.

Such sporting prowess is achieved by the factors that we have been hearing about in this debate: the training and practice made available to both boys and girls—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath on that—in towns such as Chippenham, where we are fortunate to have two first-class comprehensive schools, both of which have excellent sports fields.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is currently considering whether to allow Hardenhuish school, in Chippenham, to sell part of its playing fields for the building of new houses. The sale would achieve some very worthwhile improvements in schools across my constituency. If the sale is allowed—I hope that the Secretary of State will make a decision on it soon—the school will still have gigantic playing fields that are vastly larger than any reasonable school could want. Therefore, rather contrary to the general tone of today's debate, I am rather in favour of such action in this case and hope that the Secretary of State will give his permission for the sale.

By contrast, as I mentioned earlier, the Liberal Democrat-controlled North Wiltshire district council has, this week, given planning permission for 595 houses in Corsham in my constituency, which will be built at least partly on a former Ministry of Defence sports pitch. Although the pitches themselves will be saved, the ash running track around the side is to go, as are the changing rooms. The houses will be built on a large greenfield site and the general amenity provided for the children of Corsham will be severely diminished. Again, I appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, who I know will be considering the district council's application for permission shortly, to give careful consideration to whether he should allow the development to go ahead. My view is that he certainly should not.

By contrast, in Chippenham 500 children play football every Saturday on what can best be described as a waterlogged and deeply unsatisfactory set of pitches. Again, I call on the Minister to give every encouragement to the district council, the county council, which is building a new school nearby, and others in the town to find a way of providing some decent sporting facilities for the children of Chippenham. If we do not do so collectively and individually, I fail to see how we can possibly hope for the prowess that was demonstrated by Chippenham Town at Wembley before the summer to continue.

One aspect of sporting prowess that we in north Wiltshire can claim, apart from football, has not been mentioned during today's debate. Equestrianism was an area of sporting prowess at the Sydney Olympics and much of its excellence is down to constituencies such as mine. Part of the Badminton great park is in my constituency. Many hon. Members will not be aware that the largest publicly attended sporting event in the world is the three-day event at Badminton. The Minister acknowledges that she does indeed know that. It is contested by Minneapolis, I believe—

Kate Hoey: I was privileged to spend a whole day at Badminton last season.

Mr. Gray: We were delighted to see the Minister there. She was lucky not to have been there the previous year when the rain was such that it was more like a swimming baths than an equestrian course.

Badminton, Burleigh and the other three-day events are centres of excellence in a sport that is often not given much thought. I am happy to pay tribute to my constituent Jane Holderness-Roddam, who is a gold medallist and does distinguished work with the disabled and others to encourage her sport.

In this context it is often thought that those who ride horses tend to be the gentry and are worthy of less support from the Government and elsewhere than those who play football, for example. I have some difficulty with that. People who take part in equestrianism are often very ordinary people who struggle significantly to find the

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massive amount of money necessary to attain the great achievements that they manage to accomplish. It is important to remember that people do not appear from nowhere and suddenly become Olympic gold medallists; some of the people who learn to ride in riding schools throughout the country go on to great things. As chairman of the Horse and Pony Taxation Committee and a consultant to the British Horse Industry Confederation, I am most concerned about the sharp decline in riding schools. Some 234—5 to 10 per cent.—of riding schools in England went out of business last year. If that process continues, we shall face a severe decline in the nation's equestrian prowess.

The issue was addressed to some degree in the recent Government announcement about the diversification of farms, when the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food stated that he would consider reducing the rates charged on farms that offered equestrian facilities. That is all very well, but since then two things have happened. He announced subsequently, first, that the measure would affect only extremely small equestrian businesses, and secondly, that it would apply only to new equestrian businesses, thereby putting existing equestrian businesses on farms out of business. Nor did the Minister say anything about reducing rates for existing riding schools. Therefore, farm businesses diversifying into equestrian activities would be competing unfairly with existing riding schools and might well exacerbate the decline in the riding school industry.

We are talking about ordinary, sensible suburban riding schools, with children learning to ride on Saturdays. That facility is progressively disappearing. If I may use the Minister as a conduit to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, will he please consider making it easier for farms to diversify into equestrian businesses, by changing planning regulations and reducing the rateable burden on farms? Will he also bear in mind existing riding schools, and at least find ways of cutting the rateable burden on them by 50 per cent., which is what the industry has been calling for for some time?

When I saw the title of today's debate, I looked up the references that have been made to sport over the years. In the old days, it used to be said that football and rugby were not sports but games and that sport referred to two things: the sport of kings—racing, of course—and the sport of the gentry, which is fox hunting. The Minister is one of the rare people in the Labour party who are outspoken in favour of the ancient sport of fox hunting—but perhaps that is the subject for another debate.

I make one plea on behalf of the sport of kings. The VAT regulations on the breeding of thoroughbred horses in the United Kingdom mean that breeding is progressively being exported, in particular to southern Ireland, where no VAT is charged on blood horse breeding. Southern Ireland has an unfair advantage over the United Kingdom. I hope that the Minister will make representations to her colleagues in the Treasury, so that we can change the VAT regulations and curtail the progressive export of blood horse breeding.

We must not think of sport as being only football and rugby, as this country also offers excellence in badminton, ping pong, equestrianism, swimming and other sports. We must include a broad spectrum. Unlike the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), I believe that darts is a splendid sport. His constituents will certainly have noticed that—extraordinarily—he does not consider it a legitimate sport.

We have a proud tradition, over hundreds of years, of being the best at every kind of sport. The national lottery has been a significant influence in turning round the decline in recent years, as was demonstrated in Sydney. I hope that the Government will build on the achievements of Sydney and take into account some of the detailed points that I have made on equestrianism so that, once again, we will be one of the great nations in the sporting world.

1.8 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): It is always good to debate sport—some people talk of little else. This has been a valuable debate. Several hon. Members have referred to the sparse attendance today, but there is no doubt that we have had a high-quality debate. The attendance says more about Friday sittings and the current state of our transport network than about our enthusiasm for the subject. As there is 2 ft of water standing in my constituency office in Old Malton, there is not a great deal that I could have done with my constituency secretary in sorting out constituency post this afternoon had I been there. I look forward to seeing the state of the problem tomorrow.

I remind the House of my interest as the president of York City football club. I do not think that we will have a waterlogged pitch tomorrow. We are due for what is colloquially known as a nine-point match—at the bottom of the third division, there are no six-pointers, there are nine-pointers—against Torquay United tomorrow. May the best team win.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) emphasised the importance that the Conservative party attaches to sport. That was reflected in the initiatives of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), to which several hon. Friends have referred. The first fruits of those initiatives have been spectacularly realised in recent weeks in Sydney. We warmly congratulate all our athletes and sports men and women who took part, especially the medal winners.

I know that some names of those who were successful have been mentioned. I would single out as my favourite Denise Lewis, whose performance gave me the most joy when watching the events in Sydney on television. She is a tremendous ambassador for the sport of athletics, for women in sport and for this country. The hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) said that anyone from any background, in any walk of life, should be inspired to achieve the very best on the world stage, and my goodness, Denise Lewis has done that.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) said that even very young children got hooked on watching the Olympics. I hope that that will be reflected in a greater interest in sport among children, in schools and in clubs.

There is no doubt that the world-class elite programme has made a huge difference, and Conservative Members warmly welcome the athletes' acknowledgment of that. I am not making a party political point, but it is not often that politicians are thanked, and I was greatly gratified that so many successful sports men and women acknowledged the importance of the lottery. We welcome today the Government's commitment to maintain the

funding. We look forward to the review that the Secretary of State announced. We also look forward to an explanation in due course of where the funding to maintain the world-class elite programme will come from.

There is a case for a review. In particular, I hope that we can maintain support for swimming. We have won a lot of medals on the water—in sailing and rowing—but none in the water. Considering the present floods across the country and the danger that they present to young children, we really must encourage more children to take an interest in swimming. Great Britain should win a lot more medals in swimming than it has in the past.

A good example of the importance of the world-class elite programme was explained at the Sport England annual meeting which I attended in London on Monday evening. We were presented with a brief explanation by Stephen Baddeley, the chief executive of the Badminton Association of England. It is important to concentrate on the link between the world-class elite programme and the grass-roots of sport.

Some 8 million people play badminton on a casual basis—a terrific number—and 2 million play regularly. In 1996-97, the elite play expenditure started off at £140,000. In 1997-98, the figure increased to £1 million. In the current year, the figure is £2.4 million. In 1997, badminton was awarded £3.6 million capital funding from the lottery for the new badminton centre opened in Milton Keynes in March 1999. We also have high performance centres in Loughborough and Bath. That means that competitive players at the grass-roots level can feel encouraged, knowing that world-class facilities are available to them in this country if they wish to proceed to international sports. The cherry on the cake was that Britain won its first Olympic medal in badminton at Sydney. We congratulate Simon Archer and Joanne Goode on their bronze; we hope to see silver and gold medals at future Olympics.

Lottery funding, through the sports lottery fund, has become indispensable. Arguably, it is the most significant development for generations. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey referred to some of our concerns about the Government's treatment of the lottery. I shall not dwell on that, except to say that I hope the Minister recognises that it is not just Opposition Members who are concerned about the riddle of the relationship between Sport England and the new opportunities fund and the money that the Government want to go to capital projects.

The funding of sport was a top priority for lottery proceeds under the previous Conservative Government and, under a future Conservative Government, sport will continue to enjoy a substantial stream of lottery income, year on year. We would hope to streamline the process, which many applicants find difficult.

We want the Government's proposal to provide more facilities for schools to succeed. It is important to stress that those new facilities must be for school and community use and that the investment is not just for the benefit of schools. How much, if any, partnership funding will be required from the £750 million over the next three years for the projects? The Secretary of State referred to partnership funding but I was not sure whether there would be a requirement for as much as 20 per cent. funding or, in some rural or inner-city areas, whether it might be possible for 100 per cent. funding of projects.

Local authorities and the Government must work with Sport England to identify where the need is greatest. In the Conservative party's consultation document—referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins)—we suggested an audit of facilities and fields, and that has become very much in vogue. We should see not only what we have, but where we have gaps. The funding announced by the Government can fill those gaps, and I know of some in my own constituency.

Mr. Bob Russell: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that this audit should include sports fields that are owned by Government Departments and private companies?

Mr. Greenway: Yes, in many ways I do. We need to know where assets are that could be used for the greater good. Partly because of reductions in lottery funding, Sport England has less money, more of which is pre-committed, and is telling local government not to ask for money for capital projects until strategic reviews, covering all available clubs and facilities, have been done.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch rightly said that many businesses, firms and industries used to provide sports club facilities, but that is no longer so. In the greater York area, substantial support was once provided by several businesses, some of which no longer exist. The old civil service sports club playing fields are in a desperate state. The club is short of money, and is being carried on almost as a private club. We need to know where facilities are so that we can best use the money available.

As well as trying to ensure opportunity for all, which implies having facilities everywhere from Bournemouth to Bolsover and from Ryedale to Rye, we must note the difficulties that new facilities entail for revenue funding to keep them in good enough condition to support sporting activity. There are huge revenue implications for every major sporting capital project. That is a problem for local authorities, which increasingly find it difficult to support and maintain existing facilities, let alone new ones. York has a huge headache over the future of its swimming baths, and is not the only local authority with a problem. The hon. Member for Hornchurch and my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath also referred to problems with swimming pools.

At Sport England's meeting on Monday, a governor from St. Aloysius school in north London—Islington and Hornsey—raised a problem with the school's playing field. I hope soon to visit the school, and I see the hon. Member for Tottenham nodding in recognition of that. The school has a tremendous record of success in soccer. In the last academic year, it did the treble, winning the district cup, the county cup and the all-England schoolboys cup, played at Molineux. Among its former pupils currently playing in the Football League are Joe Cole, Gary Breen and Danny Granville, and 20 more lads have signed with professional clubs. Because the local authority does not have enough money, the school's changing rooms, which are used by just under 1,000 boys a week, have deteriorated so far that they have been condemned. Even worse, the school may lose use of its playing field. Every effort to win financial support has fallen on deaf ears.

I do not mean to make a partisan point about the Labour local authority. The hon. Member for Tottenham referred earlier to decrepit, run-down facilities, of which those at

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that school are a good example. As school governors, each of us knows of such problems and what needs to be done. I raise this case because, although the Government rightly say that capital expenditure is available to create new facilities, we must keep an eye on schools with existing facilities that need major renovation. People are desperate for support. That was why the governor went to the school. Knowing the Minister as I do, I know that she and I will try together to do something to help that school. There are plenty more examples around the country. The maintenance of new facilities and pitches will also need thought and attention. I note the extent to which district councils in shire county areas particularly are becoming increasingly involved in resource issues. However, that is not a statutory requirement. They are not provided with significant funding to undertake that role.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch referred to sports clubs in the context of funding and sports facilities. Those clubs are feeling not only neglected but unwanted. It is entirely understandable that the Prime Minister wanted to make a high-profile announcement that £750 million more would be provided for sport in schools. However, the clubs are feeling left out. Many of them cannot obtain money from the lottery for capital projects for the reasons that we have gone into.

It is vital that we encourage and foster a partnership approach and energise all volunteers, and the Secretary of State said that he wants to do that. Sports clubs can often provide a better opportunity for coaching and competitive team sport for many youngsters than can schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) referred especially to coaching.

As we see this policy progressed, I hope that we shall see a partnership approach between schools, clubs and local authorities so as to get the very best out of the money that is being made available, and to ensure that we have a comprehensive coverage of sporting opportunity for children and local communities throughout the country.

Several hon. Members have referred to the school curriculum, into which I do not want to go in any detail except to say that once again, in many parts of the country, children are playing team games competitively much more through clubs than through schools. I hope that school sports co-ordinators will embrace the opportunities that clubs provide.

If a child is one of 50 or 60 pupils at a tiny rural school on the North Yorkshire moors, he will not be able to play soccer for that school, let alone play in a team of one age. However, many children play at local sports clubs where, thanks to lottery money, we have seen significant improvements in many facilities. Through the co-ordinators, there is a great chance to ensure that all the children who should have a chance have that chance. It does not matter whether it is a school or a club. What matters is that children have the opportunity to play. Unless we expose every youngster to opportunity, we shall not find the new young talent which, when properly coached by a qualified and experienced person, can enable us to enjoy more international success for either Great Britain or England, depending on the stage, in the years to come.

We need also to encourage more business sponsorship of sport. Business in Sport and Leisure is well placed to achieve that. Sportsmatch has been mentioned as a successful initiative. There is also the sponsorship of events. I am slightly surprised that it has not been mentioned, but there is still the vexed problem of replacing tobacco sponsorship in a number of sports. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) referred to darts. I think that there are only three more years in which to save the sport. Thus far no alternative sponsor has been identified to provide anything like the support that it now receives and enjoys from Imperial Tobacco. We need to keep that in mind.

We welcome the Secretary of State's update on progress with the sports institute. Once identified, youngsters of real potential will gain a great deal from the facilities that are being established throughout the country through the English Institute for Sport. The initiative was much delayed, and that is to be regretted, but we welcome the progress that has been made. It is a vital part of the vision of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon of the sporting life of our country in future. Like the Minister for Sport, we welcome the development of the Football Foundation. It is extremely important that the grass-roots facilities that the foundation has helped to finance have multi-sports use.

Although it has been said that the number of schemes and sources of finance is confusing, I believe that Sport England should be the lead body. Several speakers have mentioned playing fields. Now that it is going through the audit of facilities and playing fields, Sport England is best placed to decide and advise on whether a playing field can be sold off, or ought to be retained. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire gave two examples. I remember discussing the issue with the Minister for Sport in a Westminster Hall debate, and I have been the governor of a school that decided to sell. If a school can create a new gym or library while retaining lord knows how many acres of pitches, selling makes sense; however, in many other cases, what is sold off is the birthright of sporting opportunity. Sport England must be given a bigger say in determining whether sale makes sense.

Several speakers have mentioned Wembley and Pickett's Lock, and I have an observation to make in connection with Wembley. I do not think that the high cost of the project has been touched on today. We want the new stadium to be the best in the world and we have every opportunity to make it so. Notwithstanding the arguments about athletics, the high cost of new Wembley is giving rise to great concern among supporters about ticket prices. I am sure that the Minister for Sport agrees that the cost of the project, much of which is associated with development unconnected with the actual pitch, must not be reflected unfairly in excessive seat prices.

Fans in London will carefully watch the development at Arsenal, which, like me, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Sport will be eager to see. To have 68,000 at Old Trafford on a Saturday, but only 30,000 at Highbury, is like competing with one arm tied behind one's back—the competition is not entirely fair, given the sums of money available in football these days. If Arsenal can build a stadium that seats 60,000 for £200 million and keep ticket prices reasonable, fans will want to know why they face the possibility of having to pay two or three times as much at Wembley.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove who, understandably, has gone to attend to domestic duties, asked whether Pickett's Lock would be viable. I visited Pickett's Lock on the day the announcement in Paris was made, and I saw the excitement among those who wanted the development to take place. I said that the timetable—to get the facility in place by 2004—was extremely challenging and that it might not be possible to adhere to it. That was April; now, in November, we are about to embark on another feasibility study. I understand the need for detail, but we need a formal, definite decision that the project will go ahead.

There are to be no athletics at Wembley, which clears the field, so to speak. Athletics is out. One assumes that £20 million will be paid back soon, and that once it has been paid, athletics could take place at Wembley only if a commercial rate were negotiated. That is unlikely, as I do not believe that the relevant bodies could afford it.

Urgent progress on Pickett's Lock is needed. Other centres will be affected—Gateshead, Sheffield, Birmingham and possibly Crystal Palace—but if the Government are committed to an athletics stadium based in north London, we support that, and we want to see some action.

On the subject of international sporting events, there is still in the background the issue of an Olympic bid. The Secretary of State would no doubt agree that any Olympic bid would not be credible if the world athletics championships that we have promised to host in London in 2005 were anything other than a rip-roaring success. I believe that the Commonwealth games will be a great success, and that proportionately, Manchester will be every bit as successful as Sydney.

Several hon. Members referred to the charitable status of sports clubs. From our exchanges and interventions, we all made it clear where we stand. The hon. Member for Hornchurch said that many sports clubs that used to have the support of business or industry no longer do so. That should concentrate the minds of those who run the clubs as to whether they are getting support. They do not get revenue help, but it is not easy to find a way through the problem of charitable status. I hope that that will be possible. The Opposition are committed to free access to criminal record checks for the volunteers who do such sterling work in many of those clubs.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire rightly introduced into our debate the future of sport and the horse. Although I shall not comment on the equestrian aspect, I agree that we must ensure that the VAT issue is successfully resolved. I was one of the three officers of the all-party racing and bloodstock committee who persuaded the previous Government to allow the VAT derogation, if that is the correct word. That is again under threat. I am not sure whether the Secretary of State is aware of that.

We must ensure that the vast horse racing and training industry, which is extremely important in my constituency, continues to enjoy support. It was good to see the Minister at the point-to-point dinner recently, and the charming photographs in the press. I know that her visit was warmly welcomed.

On a matter which, although it is not part of the right hon. Gentleman's brief, but part of his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's, nevertheless relates entirely to the Government's support for sport, we welcome the Chancellor's indication this week of a change in general betting duty, brought on largely by the haemorrhage of betting to the internet overseas. We want the Tote to be sold to a racing trust as quickly as possible, and we support the proposal to abolish the levy. Through this debate, I encourage racing and bookmaking interests to reach an early agreement. The industry is important for all those who work in it, and particularly for the rural areas.

On the football transfer system, the right hon. Gentleman and I exchanged views during parliamentary questions on Monday, from which it is clear that there is some agreement between us. The matter is vital to clubs and their supporters. I was in Brussels two weeks ago today, trying to discover the EC view. I know that some of the hon. Members who raised the matter have had to leave, but they will doubtless read *Hansard*. As I understand the position, the Commission wants to ensure that if another football player—there are several cases pending in Belgium—challenges the legality of the existing system, the transfer system will have been amended in such a way that the Commission could support it in any court case. If that is what the Commission is trying to achieve, its approach is wholly desirable. However, the threat of the 31 October deadline, about which most clubs did not know until the middle of August, gave football the impression that the sword of Damocles would descend and that the idea would be scrapped. It does not matter whether that is true; it was perceived to be the case.

We should try to gain some EC support for a reform that would help to resist any court challenge. However, it must not be at the expense of football's having to agree to a system that would wreak havoc on soccer as we know it. I hope that we can find a compromise, and that the crucial elements about which the Secretary of State and I agreed on Monday are included in any arrangement that commands the support of football and the agreement of the Commission.

I shall refer briefly to a rather different sport, which no one else has mentioned, although we have referred to the floods. The sport is angling, which more than 3 million people in this country enjoy and is worth approximately £3.5 billion to the rural economy. I commend to the Secretary of State and the Minister for Sport the early-day motion on the coarse fishing close season that the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) has tabled. As shadow Minister for Sport, I cannot sign it.

The salmon and freshwater fisheries review group recommended the removal of the close season, which runs from mid-March to mid-June, on rivers and streams. I am told that the recommendation has met with considerable opposition from Britain's 3 million anglers. I have been lobbied about it, and a recent opinion poll showed 80 per cent. support for retaining the current arrangements. Today's debate affords a good opportunity to highlight the importance of the issue. The fishing industry believes that it is underfunded by the Environment Agency. I appreciate, however, that that body currently has its work cut out with the recent flooding.

The debate has shown that there are some differences between the parties. We are worried about the Government's treatment of the lottery, however well intentioned. We believe that an arm's-length approach and additionality are important principles, which are being undermined. The Secretary of State knows that we are less than impressed by the Government's handling of the

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Wembley project. We remain deeply anxious about ensuring a suitable venue for the world athletics championships in 2005. Nevertheless, we share the overriding objectives of strengthening our international performance, securing an even bigger role for sport in society, and ensuring that all youngsters have a sporting chance and are given greater encouragement to play sport. The Youth Sport Trust report, which is published today, highlights the importance of that.

We pride ourselves on being a sporting nation, but we cannot take pride in the current state of sport in schools or the community, and especially not in the facilities that many young people have to use to play sport. The programme of action to put that right began in 1995 and it must be seen through to a proper conclusion. The Opposition are as committed to that as anyone else.

1.44 pm

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): We have had an interesting morning. Although we are few in number, as all speakers pointed out, the debate has been good tempered and of good quality. We heard a little bit of cricket history, from which we learned a lot.

It is not often that a debate is watched by one of the greatest sporting teams in the world—the Australian rugby league team was listening to our every word earlier. I am not sure what that will have done for the team's knowledge of sport in this country, but it gives me an opportunity to welcome the fact that we are hosting the rugby league world cup and to pay tribute to all the work that has gone into organising that event. I hope that the best teams will be in the final at Old Trafford in a couple of weeks, and that one of them will be England—but saying that might raise objections from hon. Members.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have returned from watching the Olympics and Paralympics and other hon. Members have referred to watching them on television. Those who care deeply about sport have been invigorated by the results at the Olympics. Although we were not given much notice of this debate, we all had the same notice, and it is important that we are not complacent but build on the strength of our Olympic and Paralympic success. Therefore, our commitment to maintain—and, indeed, strengthen—the lottery funding for elite sport and our world-class performance programme is important.

The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) did not question our commitment to maintaining that funding, but asked where the extra money would come from, as did the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). It is important that I clarify that matter. There is now simply more money in sport than ever before. Of course, we would all like there to be even more money, and it is absolutely clear that this country needs long-term investment in sport—and we are beginning to see that long-term, sustainable investment in sport.

Hon. Members will recall that the Chancellor announced the doubling of Exchequer funding for sport. From April, £4 million will go directly to the United Kingdom Sports Institute via UK Sport. Until now, people would have had to apply to each of the home countries for funds—the vast majority of which come from Sport England—to help towards the completion of the institute. That direct Exchequer funding will release extra money from the home countries sports councils and the lottery sports panel during the next three years. That money can be used in whatever way those organisations see fit.

As hon. Members have said, all our athletes at the Paralympics and Olympics drew attention to how much that support allowed them to have warm winter training and the back-up of sports doctors, scientists, medical experts and psychologists, all of whom gave those talented people the extra help that made the difference between winning and losing medals. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, the Gold Coast camp for all our Olympic athletes was the envy of many of our competitor countries.

We are committed to maintaining that funding. There is more money in sport than ever before, and the Government have to set strategies and targets. Clearly, we want those in sport to decide how they should spend that money. That is precisely why we have set up the review, which is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). It is important to deal with those aspects of lottery funding that did not work so well.

Last week, I met the performance directors of all the Olympic sports. They praised the amount of money involved, but of course some things could be done differently and better with less bureaucracy and red tape. That will ensure that the money is targeted so that there are no anomalies by which people in one part of the United Kingdom receive different funds from those in another area for representing the British team and the country. The small review group should come up with such proposals soon and reconsider ways in which to ensure that the institute works with different regional centres. We look forward to its report, which will appear by the middle of next year.

I shall respond to various points raised in our debate. I thank hon. Members from both sides of the House for their general support for the principles of "A Sporting Future for All". It is generally accepted that it sets a clear strategy to meet the relevant needs. The implementation groups that we set up contain people from sport. They do not specifically represent governing bodies or education, but involve people from local government, sport, governing bodies and community groups. The aim is for those groups to produce an action plan, and they are about to make a report.

For the first time, many people in sport feel empowered and able to express what they believe is needed to turn "A Sporting Future for All" into a reality. The report will go to me and, at least with regard to its education aspects, to Ministers in the Department for Education and Employment. The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who discussed joined-up government, will be interested in that.

Several hon. Members discussed the collaboration between my Department and the DFEE. There are close working relations between the Departments at ministerial and official level, although civil servants from different Departments can often speak in different languages when discussing the same things. The appointment of Sue Campbell, the chief executive of the Youth Sport Trust, has helped the collaboration between the Departments and there is now a much greater understanding of what is meant by physical education, school sport and good-quality physical education provision. The implementation groups,

which contain a wide range of expertise, are considering, for example, whether it is better to spend two hours on good-quality physical education or a longer period on physical education of not such good quality. Their results will bring about a sea change in attitude and in the relevant structures.

A crucial feature of "A Sporting Future for All" is that it recognises the need to begin with schools—even at pre-school—but it stresses that one cannot suddenly say, "Youngsters leave school, after which everything else is fine and will be looked after." There has been a good system at the top, and the situation may be improving at the bottom, but the situation in the middle—the link between schools and sports clubs, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Ryedale—is crucial. That was stressed in the document and by the implementation groups. When the report is published, we expect it to contain some imaginative ideas that will make a difference. We cannot deliver without close co-operation between the schools and sports clubs.

That brings me to the role of sport co-ordinators. It is important that they work with sports colleges as they are the pinnacle around which all the other schools in an area will operate. The families of children in primary and secondary schools will be involved, and the sports colleges will lead the way by raising physical education standards in sport in schools and the local community and by using sport as a vehicle to raise a school's academic standards.

Mr. Bob Russell: Is the Minister flagging up the possibility that the minimum requirement of two hours physical education in the school timetable, which is already missed by 75 per cent. of children, will be diluted? That would remove the aspiration, let alone the achievement, of the two-hour target.

Kate Hoey: Absolutely not. The two-hour target is a firm aspiration, to which my Department and the DFEE are committed. The strategy and the work of the implementation groups, school sports co-ordinators and the sports colleges are geared towards providing good-quality sporting and physical education opportunities in schools. The additional £750 million for the improvement of facilities will also be used in that effort.

We must not get too hung up on the question of two hours, as there could be one hour 55 minutes or two hours and five minutes for sport. I want every child to have a good opportunity to get involved in physical education and learn about the things that it can give them so that they can get involved in sport. Some of that will happen in school, but some will happen after school hours, given the time that it takes to organise competitive matches. However, the two things must go together and physical education teachers, especially those who become school sport co-ordinators, will have the role of working on existing links.

Governing bodies have development officers working in the locality, as do local authority sports development officers, but no one is making it all fit into a coherent pattern. That will be the role of school sport co-ordinators. Having visited many sports colleges and seen the fantastic work that they are doing, I think that they will be a model for the way in which we can improve opportunities.

The hon. Member for Colchester talked about matters that, in effect, have been covered by the Bill on amateur sporting clubs introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) under the ten-minute rule. I have made no secret of the fact that we need to look at the way in which our amateur sports clubs are penalised when, perhaps, other amateur cultural organisations are not. We are in dialogue on that matter, but the final decision, as with many matters, lies with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. There has been important cross-party support for that measure in relation to all sports, and it would be a terrific morale boost if it were introduced. However, there are many difficulties that we have to try and overcome in giving more support at grass-roots level.

The hon. Member for Colchester mentioned PPG17 and the important issue of the protection of sports facilities in private or corporate ownership. I hope that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will publish a revised draft of that documentation for consultation. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the recent Green Paper on local government finance which, for the first time I believe, made specific reference to sport, as its annexe dealt with seeking views on rate relief for sports clubs. It is important that hon. Members read and react to that document.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the British Olympic Association does not get Government funding. Only two countries in the world do not get direct Government funding. Many use the BOA as an overall body for sport in the same way as they use UK Sport and the sports councils. The position may change, but the BOA has cherished its independence from Government. For example, when Margaret Thatcher tried to prevent our sporting team going to the Moscow Olympics in 1980, it was able to stand up and say that it would go if it wanted to. There has been no argument in favour of changing the BOA's position, but it could happen.

We congratulate the BOA on the huge amount of money that it has managed to raise. It has done a terrific job with sponsors and supporters. All the sponsors who saw the success of the teams who went to the Olympics and Paralympics will be very pleased indeed that they put their name to that. Those who did not sponsor the teams may well hope that they can get involved in sponsoring the teams for the next games in Athens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) told a nice story about his two children looking forward to the next Olympics and wanting to know when they were going to start. I realise that the Commonwealth games are two years away, but we should tell them how important they are. When I was out in Australia, it was interesting to discover how many Australians thought that the Commonwealth games were really important. They will come with a united Australian team, but we will compete as home countries and might not, therefore, have the same success in the team events that we had at the Olympics.

Work is going on to make the Commonwealth games an important sporting event for the nation, and for Manchester and the north-west in particular. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has provided additional money to ensure that we have high-quality opening and closing ceremonies. It is always difficult to think of

[Kate Hoey]

emulating an event as successful as the Sydney games, but we will produce the Commonwealth games differently and make them a high-quality event.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend mentioned boxing, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy). I have been a great supporter of amateur boxing. Boxing clubs in my constituency get youngsters into a disciplined atmosphere that provides them with skills and attributes that they would not get at that age in many other sports. I share his disappointment that boxing is no longer a school sport. I recently met the English Schools Boxing Association, which is considering areas of the country that might pilot boxing schemes. I am sure that it will read his comments with interest.

I was also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch said how important it is that the money from television is going to the grass roots through organisations such as the Football Foundation. We have to find ways to get money from the very rich sports into sport at a lower level. The Football Foundation is only a start and I hope that, as television money increases, more money will be put into it. Cricket, tennis and rugby also put substantial sums into their sports. We need to look at the longer-term future of sport and consider how we can get money into those sports that do not attract huge money from television.

My hon. Friend mentioned cricket. That sport also receives a great deal of criticism about what it has done over the years for its sport at the grass roots. I have been very pleased with the enormous amount of work that the England and Wales cricket board is doing around the country. We hope that money will be put into those sports that have not modernised because they have not recognised how sport has changed. It makes a difference when governing bodies realise that they can no longer assume that people will come to watch their sport. There are so many other opportunities for young people, and much more has to be done. The governing bodies have to get out there and sell their sport.

I join the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) in paying tribute to the work of Sportsmatch, which does a terrific job. I am very pleased that, as part of the Exchequer funding, we have been able to increase the Government's contribution to it. Sportsmatch makes a difference and helps to provide excellent local community facilities. I also join the hon. Gentleman in supporting the work of the Youth Sport Trust.

Just yesterday—I think it was reported in the news today—I launched with the Youth Sport Trust and Nike their report on girls in sport, which the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) mentioned. The report is important. The support of the sponsors has meant that a great deal of research has been carried out. They are now going to schools throughout the country. They have the results on why young girls are turned off sport and physical education. Some of the problems are practical, such as what girls have to wear and attitudes to showers. The report has been welcomed by physical education teachers. It is important that we get results from it because too many young women are missing out on having an interest and involvement in sport, which might last the rest of their lives.

The hon. Member for Bromsgrove mentioned women's sport. Increasing numbers of girls and young women are playing football, rugby and a range of other sports that traditionally have not been seen as women's sports. I am pleased that I have been able to give those sports as much support as possible over the past year.

In an interesting speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham made clear the similarity between our two constituencies. I strongly agree with what he said about the power of sport in communities, and the difference that sport can make to people's lives. I also agree with him that so-called minority sports need assistance. I try hard to spend a lot of time listening to spokesmen for such sports, who often have useful ideas about what could be done to make a difference, with not huge but quite small sums.

Rowing, which was cited as a minority sport, has now become one of our most successful sports—

Mr. Bob Russell: Successful minority sports.

Kate Hoey: Successful minority sports, then.

I pay tribute to the Amateur Rowing Association, whose success this year has not come about overnight. It has organised itself properly, and I would hold it up as model of a governing body that is working with the grass roots. Its "Project Oarsome" has been a terrific success throughout the country, introducing young people still at school to rowing, but it also has a very clear idea of where it is going and what it wants. Its members work together as a team, and they are a credit to minority sports—if we have to use that term.

Let me say a quick word about football transfers. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear, we take them seriously, and we are working closely with the football authorities. It is important for football to speak with one voice, not just in this country but in Europe generally. I am pleased that the UEFA-FIFA joint paper has now been submitted, although it is a pity that it took so long: they knew that this had been coming for a long time.

Mr. Greenway: The clubs did not.

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman is right, but that was neither the Government's nor the clubs' fault.

At the EU Sports Ministers meeting on Monday, there was a real feeling that this was an issue that we had to fight. There was particular support from the German Minister, but there was also support from Ministers representing a number of other countries. We are speaking with one voice—and, as hon. Members know, the German Chancellor also made a statement. What makes football in this country is the fact that it is spread throughout the community. We must support the smaller clubs in whatever way we can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) made a number of points, about which I shall write to him. He had some interesting ideas about Olympic clubs and ambassadors. It is important that we should not create another layer of bureaucracy, but some of my hon. Friend's ideas should clearly be considered.

A number of questions were asked about the huge number of organisations involved in sport. Given the amount that my Department and the Department for Education and Employment spend on sport—indeed, there is spending throughout Departments; some of the Home Office's anti-drugs initiatives may be sports-related—there clearly needs to be more co-ordination in regard to how the money is spent. We have therefore announced the establishment of a new forum, the strategic alliance for school sport. It will constitute a partnership between the Youth Sport Trust, which is predominantly the delivery mechanism for DFEE initiatives, and Sport England, which is predominantly the delivery mechanism for our Department's initiatives. They will come together with representatives from the two Departments and the new opportunities fund.

That alliance will bring together the key stakeholders in the future development of sport in schools. It will help to ensure that all the money is spent in the best way. It will be chaired by Trevor Brooking, chair of Sport England. It is another way of the two Departments working more closely together and of ensuring that what one Department is spending does not contradict what another Department is spending.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important and useful clarification, but can she say at what point the local government organisations will be involved in that process? It seems that they will very much be part of the delivery of that.

Kate Hoey: Local government has an important role to play in the delivery of sport. As we know, huge amounts of money go in, but this is specifically money that is related to schools sport. It will not be just a simple bidding process, where every local authority puts in for a certain amount of money. We must look at where the need is and which area has not had any support. That is the sort of thing that that body will do, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I meet regularly with the Local Government Association to discuss sport. There is an important role for local government. Indeed, in "A Sporting Future for All," there was more mention of local authorities and local government than there had been in any other sporting document. We cannot deliver our sporting opportunities without local government being involved.

I think that I have covered all the main points. We have made great strides. There has been an acceptance that there has been a lot of neglect in certain areas of sport over many years. We are now putting into place a funding system and funding that will be sustainable and long term—not just a one-off amount of money. We must see it long term. We cannot get a sporting nation that will continue to be successful at the top and become even more successful if we do not get the basis right, if we do not get the foundation right, and if we do not get it right in our schools. We are beginning to make those strides.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Teesside Development Corporation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

2.12 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to have this Adjournment debate. I return to a subject that I have raised in the Chamber and on which I have tabled many parliamentary questions: the murky legacy to my constituents and to the wider public of Teesside by the Teesside development corporation.

I have often criticised the attitude and ethos of that former urban development corporation. In an Adjournment debate in January 1998, I raised the circumstances that preceded the winding-up of the body. I have echoed, and will echo, the views of many people on Teesside that TDC played fast and loose with public moneys and public investment. Those moneys were not small sums.

Over TDC's 10-year lifetime, many hundreds of millions of pounds were channelled through the organisation. Playing fast and loose with large sums concerned many on Teesside and they have continued to raise concerns in the local media, including *The Northern Echo* and *Evening Gazette*. Those fears were crystallised by my meeting on 15 December 1998 with the then Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), at which a dossier of allegations and fears about TDC were shared with him. I thank him and his successor, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, for ensuring that the DETR's internal audit section was tasked with the job of examining those fears and allegations and pronouncing on them. It was obvious that, if the allegations had substance, action would be taken.

I regret to say that the completed report—which is now in the public domain and a copy of which is in the Library—is a document that, in the words of the Middlesbrough *Evening Gazette*, raises "more questions than answers". The report deals with matters and raises issues that most reasonable people would think demand further probing, and I should like to deal with those elements of the report in this debate. I also suggest that, on the basis of the incomplete report, the Minister should further investigate TDC's activities.

I do not doubt that the audit was conducted with good intentions. However, although I realise that the time taken to complete the report—from February 1999 to October 2000—was necessary to conduct interviews, the finished report laid on Ministers' desks for a very long time. It was not released until June 2000, so that, with the ensuing summer recess, only now is it possible to debate it.

I suspect that civil service advice has been that it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. I realise that some people will argue that TDC and all the other former urban development corporations no longer exist, and that only little good will come from raking over allegations of possible corrupt practices and maladministration. Such an argument, however, is fatally flawed. The true story of TDC's failings and malpractices must be exposed, especially as we are again considering an urban

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

regeneration company for Teesside. It is extremely important that the lessons of TDC's mismanagement be learned.

TDC took very easy options in deciding to erect an out-of-town shopping centre on the former Stockton racecourse and to build a marina at an empty dock in Hartlepool, but more difficult issues were not addressed. After 10 years, the old Middlesbrough dock area, next to the new Riverside stadium, still looks like a world war battlefield, and large tracts of contaminated land adjoining the Teesport dock have been completely ignored. Despite the exuberant promises that TDC made using its massive publicity budget, it did not accomplish many of its objectives. The nature of its high-handedness and its chief executive's management were clearly exposed by the DETR's audit team.

I should like to examine some of the allegations and make some suggestions about possible action. Although some of the conclusions in the report merited follow-up action, so far they have been ignored.

The audit team was given the names of individuals, organisations and companies and invited to question them. Section 3.3.1 of the report details allegations that moneys were used to facilitate the establishment of an environmental body, the Teesside Environmental Trust. By a miraculous coincidence, the board of that body contained various former TDC board members and favoured contractors.

In section 3.3.4, the audit team said that the commitment of moneys for such a long time

was irregular if not improper.

If such a verdict were delivered on a local authority, for example, intervention by a district auditor would quickly follow. I do not believe that any other public body would have been let off as lightly as TDC has been.

Section 3.4 of the report deals with allegations that assets were doubled-counted by both TDC and Middlesbrough football club in the development of the new Riverside football stadium. The auditors lamely concluded that the files that would shed light on the matter "were not available", and that Middlesbrough football club's files "were not readily available". Are we really saying that the files on one of the most prestigious, high-profile projects in which TDC was involved were not available and that a premier league football club could not or would not accommodate the request of a team of DETR investigators? As PricewaterhouseCoopers acted as auditors of the football club and of TDC, surely it would have been a simple matter to have interviewed the staff involved in both audits.

Section 3.5 of the report contained the serious allegation that City Grant, a Government-backed and audited financial instrument, was misused by TDC in relation to a land development for industrial units. The report concludes that two tranches of cash were granted to a developer, Foster Church Business Centre Ltd. in Billingham. The size of the first grant was not disclosed; the second tranche was for £2.18 million. It seems that the agreement made in 1992 between TDC and Foster Church stated that the development was to be some 81,750 sq ft and that a grant of £2,188,459 would be given to help it happen.

No works were carried out on the site. The developers went bust and the site was sold by the receivers for £1.2 million. What did the audit team say about that? It said:

we did not make any other enquiries

and were unclear about whether the second tranche had been paid as

it was all a long time ago.

Any other public agency that had mislaid £2.18 million would by now have received serious attention from its auditors, if not from the police. It gets worse. After the centre went into receivership, the *Financial Times* in April 1995 advertised the building for sale and advised potential purchasers that it had a net area of some 48,000 sq ft. It appears, therefore, that TDC gave a grant for a building that ended up much smaller and cheaper than that at which the grant offer was originally pitched. Again, no one seems interested in investigating the matter.

Section 3.6 of the report contained the allegation that the chief executive of TDC had failed to declare an interest as a potential chair or director of a "Tall Ships Centre" that was to be sited near the former Middlesbrough docks, before the determination of a planning application that would help to release the cash needed to bring the centre into being. The auditors say that they "were told of this", but it was not just a vague verbal allegation—it was admitted as such by Mr. Hall under questioning by the north-east regional Sunday paper, the *Sunday Sun*. A copy of the article was given to the audit team, but the team says that

no actual impropriety took place,

presumably as the tall ships development never took place. However, the intent surely was there.

Another allegation contained in section 3.7 of the report was that there were fire sales of land immediately before TDC was wound up. The sales were precipitated by the fact that without them TDC might have gone out of existence with more liabilities than assets.

It was further alleged that these deals were made without full market testing of site value and without proper advertising. Again, it seems that the audit team did not or could not talk to the principals involved in these deals, which could have short-changed the taxpayer.

There is no evidence that the audit team talked to the Commission for the New Towns or the national office of English Partnerships, the residuary body. The audit team says in its conclusion that because TDC

was no longer in existence, there was no need to investigate possible maladministration.

Again, I can conclude only that this would not mean that possible maladministration by a local authority reorganised out of existence by the recent local government review would not be looked at by the local government ombudsman.

It was common knowledge on Teesside that the shredding of documents was taking place on a massive scale at TDC's Stockton headquarters. Unfortunately, the auditors did not seem inclined to ask why that occurred or whether the huge gaps in files that they commented on so often in the body of their report had occurred because of those practices.

There seem to be other huge gaps in the record about who exactly the auditors talked to. There is no evidence that they talked to the Commission for the New Towns or

English Partnerships or to the civil servants at the Government office of the north-east who were responsible, at least in theory, for oversight of TDC. There is no evidence that they talked to TDC's own solicitors, Richardson, Boyle and Blackmore.

I have a list of questions that have to be asked. Was a list obtained of disposals and acquisitions for the final months of TDC? Above all, there is no evidence that the auditors talked to Duncan Hall, TDC's chief executive; to Sir Ron Norman, its chairman; or to the ex-employees of its finance department. Today is the ideal time to ask my hon. Friend the Minister those questions. There is a need for totally open and transparent answers.

Even now, after the publication of the report, fresh stories are coming to light. Recently, our local paper, the Middlesbrough *Evening Gazette*, reported that English Partnerships had to pay £2 million to get itself out of the mess left to it by TDC.

TDC started life in office accommodation in two blocks in Middlesbrough, but after buying those premises it decided to move to bigger premises, Dunedin house, on the Teesdale business park in Stockton. There, it entered into a 25-year lease from 1991, at a rent of £310,525 a year. The former premises remained empty. Needing cash to balance its books, it decided to market the properties; but it was also committed to paying rent on the empty properties at a rate of £124,000 a year. Those liabilities transferred to English Partnerships on 7 December 1999. It had to buy back the Middlesbrough properties at auction for £1.15 million and to pay the owners of Dunedin house another £1 million to get out of the lease.

The people of Teesside need an explanation of what happened and how. Existing and potential board members of quangos need to be aware of what they can and cannot do. They need to be constantly reminded of good practice and of what can happen when the organisation's objectives override good governance.

I believe that there is still time for that to happen, and I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister to recognise that the audit report is incomplete and that far more thorough work must be done by the National Audit Office. I believe that the matter should also be examined by the Public Accounts Committee. I have already written to the Chairman with that request, and I look forward to his answer.

Those are the actions that I want to see, and I believe and hope that my hon. Friend will now understand why further work is needed.

2.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) on securing this debate and on the assiduous way in which he has campaigned on this matter and persisted in raising in many places what he feels to be serious issues concerning the way in which the former Teesside development corporation conducted its affairs.

In many ways, I can understand my hon. Friend's concerns, and the genuine frustration that he feels, because, from his perspective, matters have not come to a satisfactory conclusion. I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record what my Department has done in response to my hon. Friend's concerns and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) and for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who have also raised some aspects of the issue.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Ms Hughes: My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East talked exclusively about the report prepared by the internal audit services division of my Department, which we made public this year. I want to set out some of the stages along the road to its publication.

Nearly two years ago, my hon. Friend met my predecessor in the Department and made a number of allegations about the way in which the former Teesside development corporation had operated and wound down. Those allegations were discussed with the National Audit Office. The NAO made it clear that it did not wish to undertake an investigation at that time, particularly in view of the possibly criminal nature of some of the allegations. Nevertheless, it reserved its position for the future.

My Department's internal audit services division therefore talked to my hon. Friend and followed up the leads that he gave them. At the same time, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North also approached my Department with information concerning a company in his constituency and its relationship with the corporation. The auditors agreed to follow up that information as well. During the course of the investigations, it became clear that a number of people had deeply held concerns about the way in which the corporation had gone about its business.

My hon. Friend has criticised the scope of the investigation and the report, and the way in which the investigation was conducted. Let me make it clear what this internal report was designed to do. Because of the large number of allegations against TDC and its officers, it was agreed that the team would first conduct a preliminary investigation by interviewing my hon. Friend and his colleagues to explore the availability and whereabouts of evidence. On completion of the initial investigation, the team reviewed the results of those interviews and agreed that further work should concentrate on the three allegations which seemed to provide reasonable prospects of obtaining evidence of wrongdoing. My hon. Friend has referred to those three allegations.

It became apparent during their investigations that the auditors were being referred from one person to another. They went to considerable lengths to identify people who might have relevant information and persuade them to provide tangible evidence.

The auditors never doubted the motives of the people to whom they spoke. However, for one reason or another, most of those people were unwilling or unable to produce any evidence. Some suggested that the auditors should question the judgments of professionals—individuals and companies—who had acted for the corporation. The implication was that they might not have acted with due diligence. As will be appreciated, making such

[Ms Hughes]

suggestions is potentially slanderous, and great care is needed to ensure that unproven allegations are not carelessly bandied about.

With the best will in the world, the auditors were largely unable to obtain the evidence that would have allowed them to take matters further. This left them in an unfortunate position—they were unable to disprove all the allegations, as my hon. Friend said, but were not given the evidence to substantiate them.

Shortly before the auditors finalised their report last year, they were shown papers suggesting that the proceeds of a grant made by the development corporation to the Haverton Hill Engineering Company had been transferred out of the company's bank account. The company co-operated with the auditors to obtain confirmation from their bank that this was the case. The result of that line of inquiry was that the auditors passed their papers over to the police.

During subsequent discussions, the police and the auditors reviewed each of the allegations and all of the papers that the auditors had assembled on the matters to which my hon. Friend has referred. The final report by the auditors was sent to the Minister for Local Government and the Regions shortly before Christmas, against the background of police investigations being under way. My hon. Friend criticised the time scale but, although my right hon. Friend the Minister received the report just before Christmas, the police investigation was continuing. It was felt to be important that the people affected by the report had the opportunity to comment on it, so my right hon. Friend sent a copy to the former chair of the corporation and later met with both him and former deputy chair. She also met my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East and for Stockton, North before the report was made public—as a matter of courtesy—to talk about its findings and the way forward.

As a result of those meetings, it was decided that a copy of the report should be placed in the Library. The House was informed on 7 June in an answer to a written question. I must stress to my hon. Friend that, during that period, the Cleveland police remained active. They made official visits to the offices of English Partnerships to look more closely at all the corporation's files, which were now that body's responsibility.

The police investigation continued from early this year—after the report had been written—until very recently. In the last few days, my officials have been told by the police that they do not intend to refer to the Crown Prosecution Service any of the evidence relating to the grant diversion and that they will be filing all the papers unless and until further evidence comes to light.

I must conclude from that that, although the police have investigated the range of material with which the auditors presented them and investigated the leads that that information presented, they have now decided not to refer the matters to the CPS. I have no hard information, but we all know that the normal reason why the police do not refer to the CPS is that, in their view, the evidence is not sufficient to support the allegations. That was the problem that the auditors themselves found in terms of their investigation.

The National Audit Office—the body that oversees the proper use of public funds and the behaviour of public bodies—has been fully informed of developments along the way. My hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot speak for the NAO as to its future intentions; it must be independent of Government and it will decide about the inquiries it wants to pursue. However, the NAO has received a copy of the auditors report and is aware of the involvement of the police. I can only suggest that my hon. Friend talks directly to the Comptroller and Auditor General about whether the NAO wishes to pursue the matter.

Dr. Kumar: What about my suggestions concerning the many people who were not talked to and are still available? Will the Minister ask the audit team to talk to those people, as they might shed some more light and bring some more evidence forward?

Ms Hughes: If people have not been interviewed, the question is who is best placed and has the appropriate powers to pursue investigations further. The Government have no wish to see any form of whitewash, but believe that we have fully tested all the internal audit systems available to us. The auditors have done what they were asked to do by following up the allegations. My hon. Friend must bear in mind the fact that the auditors have no special powers. Unlike the police, they cannot demand that people be interviewed or produce documents. They must rely on people's co-operation. In some cases, for that reason, their leads did not take them far.

We have made all our information available to the police. We have no reason to believe that the police have been anything less than assiduous in investigating the matter or in following up all the leads that presented themselves in the documents. The police were apparently unable to find anything substantially new. We have kept the NAO informed at all stages, and it too has seen the audit report. I assume that the NAO was aware of the police involvement.

It is open to my hon. Friend to pursue other avenues and ask why the police did not pursue the investigation further. He can discuss the matter with the CAG at the NAO. That role does not fall to the Government, because the NAO is, rightly, independent of the Government. Unless the police or the NAO pursue the matter further, there appears to be no immediate prospect of further criminal investigations. There is no new firm evidence of wrongdoing. I realise that my hon. Friend may be disappointed by that, but he must understand that the limited powers available to an internal audit of a Government Department have been fully tested and that we have given all the available information to other bodies that have greater powers to further the investigation.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 13 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK/Australia Pensions

1. **Mr. Robert Maclennan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): If he will make a statement about the ending of the social security agreement between the United Kingdom and Australia and its effect on pensioners reaching pension age after 28 February 2001 who have spent periods of their working life in Australia. [136106]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): People who are already receiving benefit with the help of the agreement with the Australian Government will not be affected when it terminates. We are aware that there are implications for people currently residing in the UK who had previously lived in Australia and are not yet retired. We are actively considering the full implications of the Australian Government's decision, and in particular what we can do to protect the position of those people.

Mr. Maclennan: More fundamentally, will not the Government end the discrimination whereby they index-link the British pensions of British pensioners living in the United States and European Union countries, but not those of pensioners living in the Commonwealth countries—Australia, Canada and New Zealand? Will the Government at least make arrangements to protect the thousands of United Kingdom pensioners who will retire after 28 February next year and who are unable to count their years in Australia towards their basic pension, and who do not have the opportunity to supplement their pension?

Mr. Rooker: We have no plans to change the present policy. I must make that clear, so that we do not give anybody false information. I have already said that we are looking actively at what we can do to protect those people who retire after the agreement finishes at the end of February. A perverse arrangement could come about whereby the UK Government could gain from the change. I do not see that that would be morally justified, so we want to do what we can to protect such people. However, there are a few myths that we must knock on the head. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that there is no basic state pension in Australia: it is all means-tested. *[Interruption.]* It is not all means-tested in this country. If the Government did change their policy in respect of Australia, we would be paying to the Australian Treasury. The only people who would gain in Australia are those who are so well off that they do not get the age pension in Australia.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): What is the justification for the disparity in arrangements between Commonwealth countries, as compared with the United States? There is no logic in it. Is not there a need for a conference of social security Ministers of the key countries where ex-pats live? Is not liberty also involved? People want mobility in retirement, and the current arrangements are an impediment to that, particularly when abroad they can enjoy not necessarily the support of the taxpayer, but the love and succour of their families?

Mr. Rooker: I have already said that I am not prepared to defend the logic of the present situation. It is illogical. There is no consistent pattern. It does not matter whether a country is in the Commonwealth or outside it. We have arrangements with some Commonwealth countries and not with others. Indeed, there are differences among Caribbean countries. This is an historical issue and the situation has existed for years. It would cost some £300 million to change the policy for all concerned. We must also consider that as the European Union expands—pension upratings are, naturally, paid in the EU—the issue will not go away. I accept that.

Pensions Upratings

3. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What assessment he has made of the relationship between the indices used to calculate annual pensions upratings and patterns of expenditure by pensioners. [136108]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Each year, when considering the uprating, consideration is given to a wide range of factors, including the retail prices index. We recently announced our intention to increase the basic state pension by more than prices, and indeed by more than earnings.

Mr. Heath: Will the Minister confirm that in two years the basic pension will be uprated on the basis of the same index as that which gave us the miserable 75p this year? Is it not odd that it contains elements that are not relevant to pensioners, and does not include items that are highly relevant, particularly to the poorer pensioner? Is it not time to stop messing about with indices, and to move instead to an independent review body? That is good enough for judges, generals and even for Members of Parliament. Should it not be good enough for pensioners?

Mr. Rooker: I did not hear a thank you in that, or any reference to the fact that the pension is to increase by 7.4 per cent. next April. I heard a reference to poorer pensioners, many of whom will get a £14 a week increase next April. That is the reality. I am more interested in making sure that we deliver what we promised next April than in discussing the hypothetical issues relating to two years hence.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): On patterns of expenditure, does my right hon. Friend agree that the old motto, "From each according to his means, to each according to his needs," is still a good one and might apply to pensions? Pensioners with means should accept some responsibility. Is my right hon. Friend aware that in my constituency there is concern about the application of the difference between personal and nursing care for the old in long-term care? Will he continue to keep this sensitive matter under review, as it causes deep concern to pensioners in Rotherham?

Mr. Rooker: I cannot give my hon. Friend a substantive answer, but I understand that the matter will be sorted out in forthcoming legislation, subject to the contents of the Queen's Speech.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall using the lowest possible index to increase state pensions last year and the highest possible index to raise duty on petrol last year? Does he further recall saying that any concessions on fuel tax would mean no more money for pensioners? Can he now explain to us at what point the Chancellor of the Exchequer decided to do a double U-turn?

Mr. Rooker: We considered many issues in relation to the uprating that we announced. We did not use an index.

State Pension

4. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What recent representations he has received on the level of the state pension. [136109]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Many pensioners have welcomed the increase in pensions and the winter fuel payment of £200, which is being paid from today.

Mr. Amess: Although, according to my mother, any increase in the basic state pension is welcome, will the right hon. Gentleman explain why, under this rotten Government, the number of pensioners living in poverty has increased by 400,000? Does he regard the basic state pension as adequate at the moment? If it is only adequate now, will he explain why the Government, supported by the Liberals, have sustained the basic state pension at an inadequate level when the Chancellor of the Exchequer does nothing but boast about all the money he has?

Mr. Darling: Somebody kindly gave me a copy of the Conservative party briefing for this Question Time. I see that the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) has opted for suggested question No. 4. To be fair to him, I must say that he added one original observation, about his mother.

First, he is right that a growing number of pensioners were living in poverty. The 400,000 figure to which he referred relates to the period immediately prior to the introduction of the minimum income guarantee, which he and his party oppose. As a result of the policies that we are implementing, Britain's poorest pensioners will be getting nearly £20 more a week from next April, through the increased minimum income guarantee. That demonstrates that we now have a Government who are helping not only all pensioners, including the hon. Gentleman's mother, but the poorest pensioners in the country, who, thanks to the Government, are some £20 a week better off. We have done more for pensioners in five years than the Tory Government did during 18 years in office. At the previous election, the hon. Gentleman ran away from Basildon; I think that he will run away again at the next election.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Has my right hon. Friend received representations from the mother of the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) or anybody else about the fact that the Conservative party's fraudulent one-year pensions increase offer will be paid for by stealing £2 billion from pensioners every year and by abolishing the winter fuel payment, the free television licence and the Christmas bonus? Were there any representations about the fact that, although the Liberal Democrats called the 75p increase an insult, it was precisely their policy for this year?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend is right. The Conservatives' commitment to pay pensioners £10 more a week, about which we can read in today's edition of *The Daily Telegraph*, is a complete fraud. What the report does not say is that they are proposing to remove the £200 winter fuel payment, free television licences for over-75s and, indeed, the Christmas bonus—a payment that the shadow Chancellor previously called a much-appreciated addition for older people.

On top of that, the Conservatives ignore the fact that about 500,000 pensioners have no entitlement to the basic state pension and would lose all their £200 winter fuel payment. One million people have only a reduced entitlement to pensions and would also be worse off. Of course, 1 million men aged between 60 and 64 would get absolutely nothing.

We can see clearly that if people vote for the Conservatives at the next election, it will cost them £200 a household. I think that they will see that the Tories are once again trying to con them into believing that they can do more for pensioners, when the truth is that they could not, as they would not have the additional money to spend. People will remember that, in this Parliament, the Government are doing more for pensioners than the Tories ever did during the 18 years that they were in office.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The Secretary of State likes to be known as the pensioners' champion. Last winter, he oversaw the highest level of excess winter deaths among pensioners for nearly a quarter of a century. Is he content that he has taken sufficient steps between last winter and the one that we are about to enter to prevent tens of thousands more unnecessary winter deaths among pensioners?

Mr. Darling: As I told the hon. Gentleman last week when he asked the same question, we introduced the winter fuel payment because we recognised that too many pensioners were dying, in many instances because they could not afford to heat and eat adequately. That is why we have increased pensioners' incomes through the minimum income guarantee, which I think the hon. Gentleman is against. He was when I last asked him about it. Perhaps this week Liberal policy is slightly different. The MIG will mean that incomes will increase for the

poorest pensioners by nearly £20 a week. In addition, from today every pensioner household will receive a payment of £200 to be used towards winter fuel payments. That is much more than the Liberals ever promised to deliver.

I think that the hon. Gentleman will accept that we are taking action to deal with a serious problem and one that should have no place in a civilised society. However, that is the legacy of 18 years of Tory Government.

Pensioners

5. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What plans he has to help pensioners who do not qualify for the minimum income guarantee and who are in receipt of modest occupational pensions. [136110]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Madam Speaker—*[Interruption.]* I beg your pardon, Mr. Speaker. The pension credit will guarantee a minimum income of £100 a week plus an added payment to reward those with savings.

The clear message is: whatever people can afford to save or to put by, it will always pay to save.

Dr. Iddon: In general, will the single pensioner with minimal capital with a small occupational pension who qualifies for the pension credit be better or worse off than a single pensioner on the basic pension who receives all the passported benefits including housing benefit, council tax benefit and the minimum income guarantee? Does my right hon. Friend agree that to encourage people to take up occupational pension schemes, they must be seen to be better off as a result?

Mr. Darling: I agree with my hon. Friend. Pensioners will be better off. First, the pension credit, which we are introducing from 2003, will mean for the first time that if people do what successive Governments have asked them to do and save for their retirement, they will receive a cash top-up to reward them for their effort. That is crucial if we are to get more people to save. We must be clear that there is a real incentive to save. I am glad that last week so many insurance companies and the Association of British Insurers welcomed the pension credit. They recognised that it will help people to save.

Secondly, where someone has an occupational pension or a small sum at the bank, he or she should receive some help from the state. Under the system that we inherited, one which the Tories want to perpetuate, someone could obtain help only if he or she was very poor. There are about 5 million pensioners who have modest occupational pensions or a small amount of money at the bank. For the first time, the pension credit will help them to ensure that it pays to save.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the right hon. Gentleman now regret introducing the element of means-testing into pensions? What will he do about pensioners who are approaching 75 years of age who have been told that they must buy an annuity, possibly costing about £250,000? If they were to die, they would lose that capital sum.

Mr. Darling: The annuity rules have been in force for some time. As the hon. Lady knows, people can defer taking out an annuity until the age of 75. I believe that the present arrangements are beneficial to the majority of pensioners.

The hon. Lady raises the question of means-testing, in common with the rest of her colleagues. The only way in which we can do much more for poorer pensioners is, first, to ascertain who they are. That means that an assessment of their income is necessary. Secondly, we must then pay them more.

Under the policies that the hon. Lady and Conservatives generally are advocating—I am assuming for this purpose, although it is not a universal assumption, that she finds herself in support of the Conservative Front Bench—the poorest pensioners would lose out. The Conservatives want to return to the system where miserly increases are given to all pensioners, which does nothing for the poorest pensioners. Pensioner poverty has no place in the fourth largest economy in the world. That is why we are increasing the amount of money that goes to the poorest pensioners by £20 from next April.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, according to his pensioner credit document and, assuming that every pensioner who is eligible claims the pension credit, in 2003 half of all pensioners will still have an income of £136 a week or less? Does he also accept that his document assumes a national insurance pension increase of £1.50 a week in 2003? Does he agree with me that a re-elected Labour Government will find such an increase unacceptable and will substantially increase it?

Mr. Darling: As my right hon. Friend knows, the pension credit is to be introduced from 2003, and its effect will build up over the years. We shall have to wait and see what we do about pension increases in 2003. We have announced increases for next year and the year after as we move towards the credit. The principle established by the credit, which was welcomed by one of my Conservative predecessors, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), as a reform that should have been introduced some time ago, will make a change, because for the first time ever people who save and make sacrifices during their working lives will be rewarded for doing so.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): The Secretary of State claimed on the television yesterday that 2.5 million letters have been sent to pensioners asking them to take up their entitlement to the minimum income guarantee. How many successful new claims for the minimum income guarantee have resulted from his take-up campaign?

Mr. Darling: I am glad that someone was watching the television programme yesterday, because half way through it occurred to me that there would not be that many viewers on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Clearly, there was at least one. For the sake of completeness, I can tell the House that my mother was also watching.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have been running a television advertising campaign, and we have just finished writing to 2.5 million pensioners. We have received about 600,000 responses so far, and of those we have processed 60,000 applicants, almost half of whom have been successful. It may also interest the

hon. Gentleman to know that from the figures so far we can tell that the other half were not successful because just over half of them have too much income and just under half have too much capital. Both those problems will be addressed by the pension credit, which the hon. Gentleman opposes.

Mr. Willetts: May I give the Secretary of State the exact figure from a parliamentary answer? Of the more than 500,000 people who Ministers say are eligible but not claiming, 24,746 extra pensioners have received the benefit, which is a 5 per cent. success rate. Does that not show that pensioners do not want to claim the minimum income guarantee? If they do not want to claim that complicated, new, means-tested payment, why on earth should they go cap in hand to claim the pension credit—the new means-tested handout that the Secretary of State has invented? I would be interested to hear from him his estimate not of how many people will theoretically be entitled to the pension credit, but of how many pensioners will claim the new pension credit.

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman is right that people do not want to claim the minimum income guarantee, it is curious that 600,000 people have so far responded as a result of the campaign, which is about the number that we have always thought may be eligible. That implies that there is not a reluctance to get in touch to find out. All those people have made the effort—most of them by telephone, and the others have written in. Up till now, the problem with the minimum income guarantee has been the problem that we inherited from the previous Government.

If people have too much money in the bank or if they have a modest income, they get no help whatever. The hon. Gentleman has made it abundantly clear that if the Tories were returned to power they would scrap the pension credit. The result of that would be that for ever and a day pensioners who had saved or had earned an occupational pension would not be helped: they would be kicked in the teeth by an incoming Tory Government.

Mr. Willetts: May I explain to the Secretary of State what the figures really show? Of the 600,000 pensioners who phoned the helpline or tore off the slip in the newspaper, only 60,000 made a claim, fewer than half of whom were successful. That means that there have been only 24,000 successful claims.

Why is the Secretary of State trying to repeat the same mistake all over again with his new means-tested benefit? After years of progress on reducing the number of pensioners on means-tested benefits, he will take us back to a world in which more than 50 per cent. of pensioners are entitled to means-tested benefits. That is not the world in which pensioners want to live.

Mr. Darling: The Conservatives doubled means-testing during their 18 years in power. I want to return to the minimum income guarantee before dealing with the pension credit. The fact that 600,000 people responded implies that they are sufficiently interested to contact the Benefits Agency to establish whether they have an entitlement. Of those claims, only 60,000 have been processed so far, of which just under half were successful. I repeat: the two main obstacles to success are having too much money in the bank or too much income from an occupational pension. The pension credit will deal with both.

The main point about the pension credit is that the fundamental problem with the social security system is that it penalises people who save. If they save too much and do what successive Governments told them to do, and we should remember that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) wants people under 30 to opt out of the basic state pension and to save for their retirement—

Mr. Willetts: If they want to.

Mr. Darling: Well, the hon. Gentleman knows full well that if those people saved only a modest amount, he would not help them at all because he does not accept the need for a credit to reward saving. Interestingly, independent observers—of course, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield is not entirely independent, but he has some experience in this context, unlike the hon. Gentleman—have welcomed the pension credit almost universally as a way to help people to save. That reform, which is the most radical change to the social security system made during the past 50 years, is long overdue. Far from being complicated, it is quite simple. At the moment, people are penalised for their thrift, but in future it will always pay to save. That is something that the Tories can never say.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): It is a good job that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) is not counting the votes in Florida—otherwise, we might not have a result before the next presidential election.

I welcome the pension credit, the increase in the minimum income guarantee and the basic state pension, and the £200 winter payment, which was announced last week. My right hon. Friend knows that in calculating the income that pensioners receive in interest from their savings, the formula used assumes—if I may put it this way—a rather high rate of return. Has he any plans to tackle that anomaly?

Mr. Darling: Yes, we do. I announced last week that we shall get rid of that ridiculous tariff income, although the hon. Member for Havant apparently wants to keep it. It is ridiculous to assume that pensioners or anyone else can get a 20 per cent. return on their savings. That is not possible anywhere, so far as I am aware. That is why we will scrap the arrangement.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome. There is a clear difference between us and the Conservatives. We are increasing the amount of money going to pensioners through the basic pension and the pension credit and by helping poorer pensioners. The Conservatives, on the other hand, want to penalise saving by taking £200 from every pensioner household and to begin the process of privatising the basic state pension by encouraging people under 30 to opt out.

Winter Fuel Payments

6. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on winter fuel payments. [136111]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Winter fuel payments have been increased to £200 this week. Payments will be issued from today.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Is not the real fraud that is being perpetrated on pensioners today the fact that a Social Security Minister promised in July that all payments for past winters would be cleared by the end of September? However, nearly 1 million pensioners are still waiting for their winter fuel payments from previous winters. Would not it be far better to consolidate winter fuel payments in the basic pension and to give a benefit, no questions asked, to all pensioners, which they would receive when they needed it, not when the Government decide that they should get it?

Mr. Darling: I note that the hon. Gentleman has the brass neck to refer to the subject of Question 5. He sheds crocodile tears about the winter fuel payment and his comments are unconvincing because the Tories are committed to getting rid of it. He is concerned about men between the ages of 60 and 65 who have not yet received their winter fuel payment, but the total is only 3 per cent. and claims are still being processed. He must tell those men that under the Tories they would not get any help whatever because they would lose £200 per household. His concern has no credibility.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Two days after Christmas 1996, I took a group of Labour Members to No. 10 Downing street to urge—to plead—for some help to be given with heating costs because of the freezing weather. No action was taken.

Am I not right in thinking that before we came to office there were no heating additions at all unless the weather was freezing for seven consecutive days—and it had to be seven consecutive days—in which case some £8 was given only to those on income support? Is that not the difference between what we did the moment we came to office, and what the Tories did? They should hang their heads in shame.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. The cold weather payments scheme meant that it had to be cold for a long period, and that happens less than people might think, even in parts of the country where it appears to be cold all the time. The difference is that under our scheme every pensioner household receives a £200 winter fuel payment. The payments are being made between today and Christmas, which means that pensioners will have the money when the weather is starting to get cold, and will not have to worry about turning up the heating this winter.

What pensioners must realise is that, were the Tories to return to office, that £200 would be taken away. It is benefit-free and tax-free. However, 2.5 million people who either do not receive the pension or do not receive the full pension will lose out as a result of the Tories' policy.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): We will put it on the basic pension.

Mr. Darling: The House of Commons Library looked at the hon. Gentleman's figures, and said that the best he could claim was that pensioners would be 42p a week better off. I am more than happy to stand by what we are doing, in contrast to what the Tories are promising to take away from pensioners.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): Why are women who reached the age of 60 last month unable to receive the winter fuel allowance this winter?

Mr. Darling: Because, as with many other provisions, there has to be a qualifying date. Otherwise, it would not be possible to ensure that all the payments were made. There has always been a qualifying date; nothing has changed this year.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the new £200 winter fuel payment will be payable to men aged 60 to 64? Is he aware of the importance of his assurance to constituents of mine such as Mr. Hutchings, who has rightly campaigned for prompt payment of the benefit to those in his age group? There is no doubt that men aged 60 to 64 would lose out following the implementation of Tory plans to axe the benefit and replace it with absolutely nothing.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. We have received more than 1 million claims from men aged between 60 and 65; 990,000 have been met, while about 3 per cent. have yet to be processed but will be met shortly.

The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) shouted that men aged between 60 and 65 would receive the money in their pensions. They will not, because they are not retired. They will lose £200 as a result of the Tory policy.

Ageism

7. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): What contribution he made concerning age discrimination in his capacity as Minister with responsibility for older people to the framing of the European Union directive on discrimination in employment. [136112]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We have worked closely with colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment throughout negotiations on the EU directive to ensure that the final text provides a clear and workable foundation on which all member states can base their legislation.

Mr. Burstow: Can the Minister confirm that the Government backed a six-year delay in implementation of the age discrimination aspects of the directive? Does he agree that it is very much a case of cold comfort for 50-year-olds who face discrimination now to be told that they must wait until they are 56? Will the Minister and his colleagues take steps towards legislating to implement the measures that are necessary to protect people from age discrimination now, rather than waiting for another six years?

Mr. Rooker: I understand why the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue, but I remind him that the European directive is not just about age discrimination. In any event, measures could not be introduced overnight.

The directive affects discrimination on the grounds of disability, age, religion or belief, and sexual orientation, so implementation will have a significant impact on the UK and other member states. We have allowed six years to consult on the implications of the directive and introduce it. Before the hon. Gentleman does down this country, I might add that the only countries in Europe that are ahead of the UK in employing over-50s are Sweden, Denmark and Portugal. We are therefore the fourth biggest employer of over-50s in the European Union.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister accept that one group suffers a triple discrimination—namely, older people who are disabled and on social security? In the context of the new European initiatives, will he look at speeding things up to try and ensure that there is no inbuilt discrimination within the system, as referred to in last week's statement? That would enable any changes in policy to be introduced quickly instead of waiting for the European directive.

Mr. Rooker: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. First, six years is allowed to do everything in the directive, but much can be done in less than six years. Secondly, regarding age discrimination in employment, as opposed to other aspects that I have talked about, we have introduced a voluntary code of practice. We want that to work and will meet employers tomorrow and listen to the issues that they want to raise. We have already said that if the code does not work, we shall take other measures, as we are not going to let the idea wither. We are attempting a voluntary approach to start with, but if that fails, we shall look at other approaches.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In anticipation of the possible—indeed, likely—passage of the directive, what review has the Department undertaken of its own employment practices?

Mr. Rooker: Tied in with the directive is the publication of "Winning the Generation Game" by the performance and innovation unit, which relates to older people right across the board. Departments must certainly look at ensuring that they set an example. It is no good Ministers telling industry to do certain things if we do not take action in our own Departments. My Department is taking a lead in allowing people to work beyond 60, and I want that to be extended across Government. Some Departments have yet to resolve certain issues—such as the Home Office, which must deal with a cut-off point that applies to some members of the prison service but not others.

We must justify our actions before forcing people to retire early. There must be good grounds for that, and we must not simply say, "This is how it has always been". That is not sufficient.

Fraud

8. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What recent assessment he has made of the amount of money fraudulently obtained from the benefits system since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [136113]

15. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge): If he will make a statement on the amount of benefit fraud since May 1997. [136122]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The estimated loss due to fraud is £2 billion per year. That figure refers to the fraud we know about. We have now increased the targets for reducing the amount of fraud and error in the system. We are aiming to reduce the losses from fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance—the two most vulnerable benefits—by 25 per cent. by March 2004, and by 50 per cent. by March 2006.

Mr. Robathan: Despite all the rhetoric, according to a study by the Department, which was revealed in *The Sunday Times* in May, the cost of fraud in benefit may be as high as £7 billion—although, according to the Public Accounts Committee, it is £4 billion. Will the Minister confirm that, under the Labour Government, successful prosecutions for housing benefit fraud have halved since May 1997? Will he also confirm that, according to figures that he released to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), there are about 20 million more insurance numbers than there are people in this country?

Mr. Rooker: May I deal with the last point first, as it is part of a myth? There are indeed more national insurance numbers on the system than people in this country, and a good example will suffice for hon. Members to understand why that is so. To pay a widow's pension based on her husband's contributions, we need to maintain the national insurance number for the deceased. We must also maintain numbers for people who leave the country, because we do not know whether they will come back. There is an extensive programme for managing the national insurance number system because, clearly, there can be problems with it. However, the system is not operated willy-nilly and it is not right to say that, because there are more numbers than people in the country, 20 million of them are open to fraud.

I dispute the point. What I said was: "fraud we know about". By definition, we cannot count the exact amount. There are estimates given—the hon. Gentleman has given the PAC's estimate, and the higher figure that appeared in a newspaper report this year—but may I explain? Changes that we have made in income support alone since 1997 will save £1 billion in this Parliament. One in three payments of income support was made in error when we came in, so we can save £1 billion.

There is now much more cross-checking than ever before of Department of Social Security records with other Government records—I have said it before at the Dispatch Box—for data-matching purposes, to find out where people are on the fiddle. So far, we have saved £150 million. We will soon cross-check benefit and tax records to flush out benefit cheats in the building industry.

We have continued the prosecution policy. There are some 200 prosecutions a week in respect of the Benefits Agency. I make a final point as an example. By March 2001, specialist identity checks will be introduced

nationally. Those have been piloted in the Balham area of London since June 1997. The pilot projects alone have led to more than 200 arrests.

Mr. Randall: How many initiatives does the Minister think his Department has launched to cut fraud since the Government came to power in 1997?

Mr. Rooker: I would not dream of counting them. The main one is to get a strategy for dealing with fraud—that is, to get the benefit right, paid to the right person and maintained properly in the system. If we do not do that, it gets out of control. Therefore, we have taken that strategic step.

All the other measures relate to a myriad different benefits, some means-tested, some contributory—we must still watch fraud on those—and others are neither; those include disability benefits. We must have action on that. We have strengthened the fraud investigator's powers. As time permits in the House, we will take steps at an early opportunity, for example, to introduce measures relating to those who have defrauded the Benefits Agency twice—two strikes and they are out of benefit.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Is it not a generalised truth that rumour, hearsay and sometimes malice exaggerate the amount of fraud?

Mr. Rooker: The answer is yes, but we must accept that we pay in benefits a total of £2 billion a week—dozens of benefits to millions of people. For example, we issue 1 million order books a week. Our system is under attack by organised crime—organised criminals. I am not on about someone who is working and claiming, although I am not condoning that. I am on about organised crime.

We have measures to deal with that. There are attempts at multi-million pound scams on our benefit system, so we have to take steps. One of them, which has been suggested many times in the House as a step towards stopping that, will be the payment of benefits via credit transfer to stop fraud on instruments of payment: the benefit books, which are thieved, manipulated and changed so that the public are defrauded. So we must take the matter seriously; but we must also accept that there is rumour, and malice on the part of people who want to undermine the system.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Protection against fraud is extremely important—the Minister is right to point that out—but so too is common humanity. I have in my hand a letter to one of my constituents who was declared dead while living in a homeless persons hostel. His income support was stopped, his housing benefit was stopped and his community care resettlement grant was stopped. He was not dead, however. As a result of an anti-fraud protection measure, he now finds himself living in a council flat in my constituency without the benefit of his community care resettlement grant of only £285; and it cannot be reissued to him for a further six weeks.

Later this afternoon, I will contact the Department of Social Security in Newcastle upon Tyne about the matter. I hope that I have the Minister's support in saying that such an anti-fraud measure does not display common humanity and must be corrected.

Mr. Rooker: Clearly, a gross error has occurred. I hope that my hon. Friend is not going to wait to contact Newcastle, but will give me the information immediately after Question Time.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The Minister of State has just said, to use his exact words, that he is concerned about stopping people "on the fiddle" in relation to benefits. He has also talked about the need to tackle organised crime, and for co-operation between various Departments and agencies. Can he therefore explain the extraordinary guidelines given to the Department's staff telling them not to supply information to police in cases involving car theft, muggings or burglary? Does he realise that the Department's guidelines suggest that those are minor crimes and that it is more important to protect customer records? Is he surprised, therefore, that Mr. Glen Smyth of the Police Federation has described the new guidelines as a "criminals' charter"?

The guidelines are not the best way to start an anti-fraud strategy—which, as we have already had 42 initiatives, must be the 43rd. Will the Minister take this opportunity to repudiate the new guidelines and to issue instructions for them to be torn up?

Mr. Rooker: They are not new guidelines—they are exactly the same as those issued by the previous Government. Nothing has changed whatsoever, except that the Police Federation has an axe to grind. I do not know what number initiative we are on now—

Mr. Pickles: It is 43.

Mr. Rooker: Then let us have 44 initiatives. We are taking the issue so seriously that senior staff in my Department are being joined by the former head of investigations at Customs and Excise and by the former deputy director of MI5.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Are not some of the worst examples of benefit fraud committed by predatory private landlords who exploit some of the most vulnerable and poorest members of our society and milk the benefits system for all it is worth? What action is my right hon. Friend taking to improve the benefit system, so that not only is better housing provided, but fraud by those latter-day Rachman landlords is cut?

Mr. Rooker: We have—at the risk of adding to the number of initiatives—a verification framework to ensure that those who are claiming housing benefit are who they claim to be; that they have legitimate reasons for giving the address that they give; and that there is no collusion with landlords to fiddle the rent amount. We have also provided local authorities with remote access terminals so that they can cross-check with the Benefits Agency on the matters that have to be checked. We have also set up the Royal Mail "do not redirect" service, as a way of stopping giro drops. Although I know even from my own

constituency that there have been complaints about how those measures have slowed down claims, they are a way of cutting fraud.

Some landlords and other people are willing to exploit the system. Sometimes landlords collude with tenants. We have to take the action we can to get those people out of the system and to prosecute when possible.

Pension Funds

9. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will estimate the amount which a person retiring would need to have invested in a pension fund in order to be better off than a person retiring on the basic state pension. [136114]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Building on the basic state pension, people can contribute to the state second pension, or to an occupational, stakeholder or personal pension. Under the pension credit, no matter how much people save, they will be better off.

Mr. Brady: I note that the Secretary of State avoided answering the question and was not prepared to say how much someone needs to have in a pension fund to be better off. The accurate answer—as he will know if he has read the excellent briefing note prepared by the Conservative research department—is about £100,000. If he doubts that figure, he could provide his own.

People now know that they have to have a very significant sum in a pension fund to be better off than if they had saved nothing. That is why the savings ratio has declined by 70 per cent. since the Government have been in office. Cannot the Secretary of State understand the long-term damage that he is doing to people's long-term behaviour by discouraging savings and deterring people from making proper provision for their future?

Mr. Darling: I had of course looked at the Conservative party briefing, and the hon. Gentleman's question was all too predictable.

Mr. Brady: What is the right hon. Gentleman's figure?

Mr. Darling: I remind the hon. Gentleman what he asked: how much someone would have to save to be better off than someone retiring on the basic state pension. Everyone in this country who contributes gets the basic state pension. The point that I was making is that, under the system we have introduced, if someone saves a pound more than that, they will receive a credit for having done so.

On the savings ratio, the amount of money going into funded, personal and occupational pensions last year was £25 billion—the highest ever, and much higher than when the Conservatives were in office. The only reason for anyone to be concerned about the basic state pension is the prospect of the Tories getting in. The Tories are beginning the process of scrapping the basic state pension and want everyone under 30 to opt out of it. The hon. Gentleman is right; under the Tories, people would have to save because they would not have even the basic state pension. I believe that a mix of basic state pension and second pension is the best way of making sure that people can retire on a secure and decent pension.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does my right hon. Friend share my amazement that the only thing the Tory Front-Bench spokesmen could say last week about the proposals to reward pensioners who save—whether in a pension fund or otherwise—was that the proposals would put strain on the tax system? What about the strain on pensioners for all these years? Will he confirm that when the pension credit is introduced, a pensioner on the basic state pension who has saved and has an income of about £20 a week from those savings is likely to receive an extra credit of £12 a week as a reward for saving?

Mr. Darling: I do not know whether we should be amazed or not, but as far as I am aware, the Conservative party is the only organisation that is against the principle that someone who saves ought to be rewarded and not punished for it. The Conservatives have made that abundantly clear—not just today, but in their helpful briefing, which I am more than happy to circulate among my hon. Friends so that they can better see exactly what they are up against. The briefing makes it abundantly clear that the Conservatives are opposed to a credit which will mean that people with an income of under £135 will be better off if they save. Surely it must be right that the social security system rewards thrift and does not punish it.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Will the right hon. Gentleman consider future pensioners? Is he aware that last week's pre-Budget statement will lead to a shortage of gilts in the market and hence a bad deal for people with defined contribution pension schemes? Is he aware that the delay on the Myners report until after the election, because it is too difficult, is a bad deal for people with occupational pension schemes? Is he further aware that the increase in the minimum income guarantee means that a man aged 45 will now have to save £50 to £55 a month in a stakeholder pension to do better than the minimum income guarantee? Does he agree that the Government have created a hat-trick of disincentives for future pensioners to save?

Mr. Darling: I am beginning to wonder whether Conservative party spokesmen have actually read the consultation paper on the credit, because the principle is clear—for every pound someone saves, they will get a cash reward. Under the system that the Tories want, people will be punished for saving. Under the present system, people who have too much money in the bank or who get a small occupational pension lose out. Under our proposals, 5.5 million pensioners will gain as a result of the credit. If those people vote Conservative, they will lose out.

On the Myners report, the hon. Lady must be aware that opinion as to what should be done in terms of the minimum funding requirement is divided. No clear view is emerging, other than the fact that the present system is not working. We are consulting at the moment, with a view to putting in place another reform: a review which is long overdue and to which the Conservative party has contributed not very much at all.

Pensioners

10. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What measures he is taking to help pensioners on low incomes. [136115]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We plan significantly to increase the minimum income guarantee to £92.15 next year, rising to £100 the year after. In addition, the new pension credit will benefit 5.5 million pensioners on low and moderate earnings.

Mr. Chapman: Is my right hon. Friend aware that 3,000 pensioners in my constituency will enjoy a substantial boost to their incomes when the minimum income guarantee is increased in April next year? Does he agree that it is right and proper that we focus our attention first on those pensioners who need help most? Does he further agree that if we are not to return to the pensioner poverty that we inherited from the previous Government, we need to review the minimum income guarantee in future years?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. Two structural reforms were necessary to the present pension system. One was to make sure that we got rid of pensioner poverty once and for all. The only way the pensioner poverty that grew up over the past 20 years can be eradicated—is to give far more than a prices—or indeed an earnings—link to the poorest pensioners, and we are doing that by some £20 a week.

In addition, it was necessary to remove the fundamental flaw in the social security system that we inherited. Under the present system, if people save they are punished for it. Under the pension credit, some 5.5 million households will gain because of their thrift and foresight, and I think that most people will bear that in mind when they go to the polls, whenever the election is held.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East): Is my right hon. Friend aware that over the three years since 1997 the poorest pensioners have received an additional £24.35 a week—or will do eventually—compared with a starting point of £67.80, a sum accumulated over the entire history of pensions provision, including the 18 miserable years of the previous Government?

Mr. Darling: As I said earlier, during the course of this Parliament we will have done more for Britain's pensioners in five years than the Conservatives did in the 18 years they were in power. That is why I suspect that, when it comes to the election, the British people will look at what the Tories are planning. They want to take away the winter fuel payment of £200, the free television licences and the Christmas bonus, which are benefit-free and tax-free, and then try and con people into believing that they will be better off if those payments are given back to them. The fact is that some 2.5 million people will lose out from those measures; and when they look at the longer-term plans they will find it odd that the Conservative party is the only organisation in the country that wants to keep a rotten system under which people who saved were punished for it. We want to ensure that 5.5 million people who have saved for their retirement are rewarded for their thrift.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Does the Secretary of State agree with Baroness Castle that Conservative pension plans which consolidate Labour's pension gimmicks and give the money back as a decent rise on the basic state pension are "an absolute vote winner"?

Mr. Darling: As I have told the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), when Conservatives pray in aid Lady Castle they are desperate indeed. The British people know that the Government have done more for pensioners in the past four years than the Conservative party did in the 18 years before that. I do not think that Lady Castle or anyone else is likely to support a party that is pledged to taking £200 off every pensioner household as well as taking away the free television licence for the over-75s and the Christmas bonus. People are in no doubt that if they vote for the Conservative party, in the long term they will lose out and be worse off.

Social Fund

11. **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): If he will make a statement on the resources available to the social fund. [136116]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): This year the discretionary social fund budget is based on £138 million of new money being paid into the fund. This, together with expected loan repayments of £458 million, provides a gross discretionary budget of £596 million.

Mr. Benn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. As she will be aware, it is the discretionary social fund to which poor people in desperate circumstances turn to buy a bed, some furniture, a cooker or other household essentials. What would be the effect on those people of a £90 million reduction in the funds available to the social fund, which I understand to be Conservative party policy?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right to point out that this £90 million raid would decimate the fund. It would wipe out the entire grants budget, if that is where it was taken from, and hit the most vulnerable the hardest. In other words, it is a typical Tory policy.

Carers

12. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What steps he is taking to improve provision for carers. [136118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We recently announced a broad package of measures to improve financial support for carers. We intend to increase the carer premium in the income-related benefits by £10 on top of inflation, to increase the earnings limit in invalid care allowance from the current £50 to the lower earnings limit—currently £67—to allow ICA to continue for up to eight weeks after the death of the person being cared for,

and to allow claims for ICA to be made by people aged 65 and over. We will be seeking to introduce these changes as soon as the legislative timetable permits.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Carers in my constituency will certainly be pleased that their valuable work is being recognised at last, but will he assure me and the House that carers will benefit from the increase in the carer premium and that it will not be clawed back in reduced housing benefit or council tax benefit?

Mr. Bayley: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I, too, have heard carers welcome the changes. They were warmly welcomed at the annual general meeting of the Carers National Association. The chief executive of the association assured me that it gave him "great pleasure" to welcome the announcement last week, which would boost carers benefits. The measures provide a sensible balance between targeting support on those most in need and giving those who are able to work the opportunity to continue to do so. The changes will benefit 300,000 carers at a cost of about £500 million over three years.

Opposition Day

[20TH ALLOTTED DAY]

London Underground (Public-Private Partnership)

[Relevant Documents: the Seventh Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98 on London Underground, HC715-I, and the Government's response thereto, Cm4093; and the Fourteenth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1999-2000, on the Funding of London Underground, HC411, and the Government's Response thereto, Cm4877.]

Mr. Speaker: We now come to the first debate on the Opposition motions. I have selected the Government amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I do not know whether you can delay the debate until the Secretary of State arrives, or if you have been made aware that yet again, the Secretary of State will not attend the debate. Can you advise us on what we have to do to get him to come to the House, participate in such debates and account for the actions of his Department? So far we have completely failed to do that.

Mr. Speaker: The important thing is that the right hon. Gentleman and I are here, so we can carry on.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It was not a point of order. Does the hon. Gentleman have a point of order to make?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Mr. Speaker, I think that it should be drawn to your attention that, following the privatisation of British Rail in the 1990s and the disasters on today's rail network, many Members have great difficulty getting to the House of Commons. People are making all sorts of arrangements throughout the country to get to Parliament. Some of us have to get up at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning simply to get here. That is why some Members are not here.

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In view of the acute embarrassment caused to the Government during the weekend by the leaking of the detailed note of the Cabinet meeting in June 1997 regarding the millennium dome, have you received any request from the Prime Minister to come to the House and share his embarrassment with us?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order. I call Mr. Jenkin to move the motion.

3.33 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I beg to move,

That this House notes the widespread concern about the viability of the Government's public private partnership proposed for London Underground; further notes that the Government has established Transport for London, which is answerable to Londoners, and whose Director, Mr. Robert Kiley, has a proven track record of modernising the New York subway system and who will take on responsibility for London Underground in due course; deplores the failure of Ministers to include Mr. Kiley and Transport for London in any meaningful consultations about the contracts under negotiation; condemns the Government's lack of openness with Londoners and their representatives about the bidding process; and urges the Government to work with Mr. Kiley and Transport for London with an open mind about what is best for London Underground and for Londoners.

Perhaps it is unusual that an Opposition motion does not blame the Government for a crisis but seeks to forestall one. The motion is not about Labour's poor track record on tube investment so far. We have debated that before, and I invite the Minister to leave aside that part of his speech and, as a courtesy to the House, to deal with the motion that we have tabled. The debate is not about the merits of one proposal for the tube over another. Nor is it even about whether the public-private partnership is a good or a bad thing.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: The motion is about how the Government are conducting themselves in relation to the elected representatives of Londoners and Transport for London—a body that the Government established. The motion is not about which scheme for the tube may be the best or worst option. It is about whether the Government are so blinded by their political prejudices against the Mayor of London—I am glad to see the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) in his place—who so humiliated them in the London elections that they are making themselves incapable of rational judgment.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The hon. Gentleman says that the motion is not about privatisation. Given that decisions on that matter will affect the future of the underground, why is it not about privatisation?

Mr. Jenkin: I am inviting the House to give its opinion on a motion about how the Government should conduct themselves in relation to Transport for London as regards the PPP, or whatever other scheme eventually goes ahead. The Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) chairs, has already passed judgment on these matters, describing the PPP as a "convoluted compromise", and I hope that she would welcome input from someone such as Mr. Kiley—input that we invite the Government to accept.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: The Government are pursuing the London Underground PPP without proper consideration of the full range of alternatives and without proper consultation with Londoners and their representatives. They are acting

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without any semblance of objectivity or accountability. To cap it all, the driving force behind the scheme, and the man more closely identified with the PPP than any other Minister, will not come to the House of Commons to discuss it.

I have great affection for the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), and it is always a pleasure to tangle with him on the Floor of the House or in Committee. I must say, however, with the greatest of respect for him, that he is not the driving force behind the policy. He is not the dominant influence at the Department. He is not the organ grinder—although my respect and affection for him prevent me from continuing with that metaphor.

The failure of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to appear at the Dispatch Box is not just a snub to the House of Commons; it is a snub to the British people, to Londoners and to their elected representatives. Why is he not here? Where is he? Despite the point of order raised a few moments ago by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), I do not think that the Secretary of State has had any difficulty reaching his office today, and it is a few hundred yards from this place. He could easily be here.

The botched privatisation of the tube is the Secretary of State's baby. He is the Minister forcing the scheme on Londoners. He keeps insisting that the PPP is right. He wrote to the *Evening Standard* last week to say:

> The PPP is the only realistic way in which the long-term investment that the Tube requires can be levered in quickly and efficiently.

As I shall demonstrate later, that is absolute rubbish. If, however, the Secretary of State has the time to write letters defending his policy to the *Evening Standard*, and to tangle with its editor and with Mr. Simon Jenkins, who writes for it, why does he not have the courage to explain himself to the people's representatives in Parliament?

I telephoned the right hon. Gentleman's office before the debate, and was informed that he had chosen to delegate this debate to his junior Minister. What a ludicrous situation.

If I raised my eyes towards the camera, I should probably be looking at the Secretary of State from the television screen in his office—but he cannot be bothered to come to the House to explain his policies. The man responsible for the policy will not debate it in the proper place and in the proper way.

This is not the first time that the Deputy Prime Minister has ducked the challenge of the House. Ten days ago he declined to show up for a debate on the September fuel crisis, when my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) challenged him about a major plank of Government policy. The right hon. Gentleman ducked that challenge as he does this one. He will duck the challenge again on Wednesday when we debate the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services.

That is odd, because only a fortnight ago, he told the House that

> I am constantly available to discuss such matters either in statements or other debates . . . There are many matters that I am prepared to debate, and I commonly come to the House.—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 150.]

Where is the right hon. Gentleman commonly now? That simpering protestation says it all. The Deputy Prime Minister has lost his grip on the policy issues; he has lost his nerve, and it will only be a matter of time before he loses his office, his salary, his grace-and-favour houses, his red boxes and his chauffeur-driven Jaguar.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): May I turn the question back to the hon. Gentleman? Is the reason why the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) does not lead debates for the Opposition on railway-related matters that, as a non-executive director of Railtrack from the day that it was privatised until the past 12 months, he is culpable for most of the disasters on the railways?

Mr. Jenkin: That type of desperate intervention does more to discredit the Government's position than anything else.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The Deputy Prime Minister's failure to turn up shows a wider failure of the Government, in that at business questions, I asked the Leader of the House to tell the right hon. Gentleman how imperative it was that he should exercise his responsibility as Secretary of State by attending the House for this debate. The right hon. Lady is in dereliction of her duty by not ensuring that the House is addressed by the appropriate Minister.

Mr. Jenkin: My hon. Friend is right. That point shows that the Government—and especially the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions—are constantly running for cover.

I shall deal with the key elements of our motion, as I hope that the Under-Secretary of State will address the motion rather than the Prime Minister's amendment, which is a distraction from the issues that we want to raise.

There are widespread concerns about the public-private partnership—first, over value for money. The Industrial Society has produced a report, under the executive chairmanship of Will Hutton. He is no great friend of the Conservative party—rather, he is a new Labour guru—nor does he appear to be a friend of the PPP. Yet on value for money, the report states:

> It became clearer to us while gathering and assessing evidence that much of the anticipated efficiency gains are just that: probable rather than certain expectations . . . The issue is whether this initial step-change in improvement is value for money . . . We think there are good reasons to believe that the PPP, as currently structured, overly favours the Infracos—

that is, the infrastructure companies—

> in terms of the distribution of risk and reward . . . The Infracos have an incentive to "hold up" important investment until they get paid more . . . The PPP proponents claim that they have designed contracts to take into account all these problems, which can be surmounted if there is genuine partnership. But that is to ignore the lessons of both theory and practice.

What about the value-for-money aspects raised by Chantrey Vellacot DFK? Maurice Fitzpatrick, its head of economics, concludes:

> The Government needs to rethink its strategy. If it does not, it will never be able to persuade taxpayers that PPP represents best value for money . . . we have published figures suggesting that the additional cost of PPP (as compared to purchasing the assets directly) is equivalent to a 30 per cent. hike in fares.

Why is the Secretary of State not here to debate that point?

There has also been a failure to assess alternatives to the PPP. We are constantly given the refrain from a previous era that there is no alternative—an unlikely phrase from a member of the present Government. However, the Hutton report points out:

> The range of possibilities in theory extends from wholesale privatisation of LUL under a regulator to retention of the Underground in public ownership as an integrated system but offering it an autonomous capacity to finance itself by issuing its own bonds.

There are many options and the report adds that the only constraint on them is the

> Government's manifesto commitment to retain a publicly owned and publicly accountable Underground system.

Professor Stephen Glaister points out that alternatives exist even given that constraint, which we reject. He has written:

> There are two alternatives to PPP. One is to simply keep the tube under the direct control of central government. This could have been accepted without more ado from the beginning. A much more sensible alternative would be to pass it to the mayor and leave him to decide how to pay for investment.

There are plenty of alternatives that the Government have failed to assess.

Complexity and fragmentation have already caused concern.

Mr. Geraint Davies *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: I shall finally give way to the hon. Gentleman. I do not think that he has much original to say, but it will be fun to listen to it.

Mr. Davies: In running through the apparently logical options for management and corporate governance that are available to the Government, the hon. Gentleman has not once mentioned privatisation as a conceivable option. Is that the level of conviction that Conservative Members now have about privatisation? Because of the failure of privatisation, he does not even mention it.

Mr. Jenkin: The Government whom the hon. Gentleman supports have gone in for a fair amount of privatisation, and the PPP is a form of botched privatisation. We have assessed every case for privatisation on its merits and against all the alternatives, and we have not rejected it in this instance. We keep an open mind. It is the Government's failure to keep an open mind on their PPP that is forcing them into terrible mistakes.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does the hon. Gentleman think that the privatisation of Railtrack has been a success?

Mr. Jenkin: I am sorely tempted to embark on a debate about the privatisation of Railtrack—but you, Mr. Speaker, might suggest that that is not a subject for today's debate. However, if the hon. Gentleman can persuade the Government's business managers to hold a debate about the railways, we shall be delighted, because we think that this Government have a rotten record.

Complexity and fragmentation have caused concern, and the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs has already called the PPP a convoluted compromise. Mr. Bob Kiley also has doubts whether the PPP will work. He says:

> It could prove a physical or human impossibility on a system that is a much more intensive operation than a national railway, with trains every 90 seconds.

Perhaps Ministers should listen to his argument.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that whatever the merits of his case, Members will do well to take the debate on the PPP seriously? If the Government call it wrong on the PPP, they will pay the price in the forthcoming general election in a swathe of marginals across London.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As I run through the issues, the only case that I seek to make is that there is widespread concern about the PPP. I make no more claim than that. The Government have their head in the sand if they think that they have all the answers.

On safety, I refer the Minister to the letter that was leaked from the Health and Safety Executive and reported in *The Guardian* earlier this year. The headline was "'Safety at risk' in tube sell-off: Leaked memo reveals rail watchdog's concern". The report gave details of safety hazards with potentially serious consequences which had been uncovered in the Deputy Prime Minister's plans partially to privatise the London underground.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

The leaked letter in *The Guardian* was from the principal rail safety inspector, Stanley Hart, who warned of

> a "growing concern" about safety in the partly sold-off tube system that the Deputy Prime Minister wants to bring in next spring.

It is incumbent on the Government to share their views about the safety issues that have been raised, not least with Transport for London and Mr. Bob Kiley.

Safety was also raised in the Hutton report. It referred to the leaked letter and

> particular problems thrown up during the shadow running of the PPP.

It recommended that the HSE should

> invite all interested parties to submit their specific concerns about the PPP's safety regimes. These concerns should form part of the HSE's assessment criteria of the safety regime.

Has that been done? If so, has it been done in consultation with Transport for London, which will ultimately have responsibility for supervising safety on the privatised London underground? I should add that the Government do, of course, take the advice of the HSE on such matters, as did the previous Government during privatisation of the railways.

The Government have established the London Mayor, the Greater London Assembly and Transport for London to take responsibility for such issues. The real consideration is that whatever the Government choose

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to do, they will pass responsibility for the consequences of their decisions on to Transport for London. As the Hutton report said:

> It will be the London government which will be ultimately responsible for any system failures, accidents and financial shortfalls—even though it did not negotiate the contracts or initiate the new structure.

How can the Government proceed without consulting London's government in any way?

Then there is Mr. Robert Kiley himself. He has exactly the track record and experience that any Minister should be gasping for. I am reminded of when we brought a controversial gentleman over from an American firm to run British Steel on a high salary. He went on to run British Coal. That is the influx of fresh thinking and expertise—at considerable cost—that the London Mayor is entirely right to entice to this country.

Mr. Kiley is credited with having revived the New York underground system. As chairman of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, he rebuilt the infrastructure of the New York subway and reorganised its management. Mr. Kiley will principally take on responsibility for the operation of the PPP. As Simon Jenkins pointed out in the *Evening Standard*,

> no sooner does Mr. Kiley arrive in his office than he is stripped of responsibility for stations, track, signals, carriages, tunnels and escalators. All he can do is sell tickets and drive trains . . . This is quite unlike Mr. Kiley's experience in Boston or New York.

Mr. Kiley himself is mystified by the PPP. He told the *Evening Standard* on 6 November:

> I have been trying to figure it out for about five weeks now and still haven't managed it. I have a rule that anything that takes that long to understand is not going to work.

Perhaps that is why Ministers are reluctant to share their secrets with Mr. Kiley: they fear an alternative point of view.

The negotiations are being conducted in an atmosphere of cloak-and-dagger secrecy, for no reason other than the Government's political convenience. The Government are on the defensive. The Deputy Prime Minister is deeply insecure about the strength of his arguments, and his judgment has become severely clouded by political considerations. We know that he has fallen out with the hon. Member for Brent, East. Personal animosities appear to be taking precedence over the interests of Londoners.

Then there is the question of how the Government will go forward. A future Conservative Government would certainly seek to work constructively with Mr. Kiley. We have our own proposals for the London underground—*[Interruption.]* If the Minister wants to spend this debate discussing our proposals, he would be missing the point that many of his hon. Friends will be seeking to raise with him. The Government have varying proposals; there are plenty of others out there. We will seek a constructive dialogue with Transport for London about the future of the tube because that is the only common-sense option open to any Government now that that body has been established.

This should not be about personalities, playing politics or settling old scores. It should be about what is best for London and Londoners. The motion urges the Government to put London first. I therefore commend it to the House.

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> "welcomes the Government's implementation of its manifesto commitment to create a Public Private Partnership for London Underground which will bring in £8 billion of new investment and up to £5 billion worth of maintenance over the next fifteen years–leading to faster, more reliable journeys and a safer, more attractive Underground of the kind Londoners deserve; supports the doubling of the resources available to the Mayor for transport in London over the next three years; condemns the previous Government's record of under-investment in transport and in particular their erratic investment in London Underground, which left it with a £1.2 billion backlog; and deplores the Official Opposition's plans to privatise London Underground, which will fundamentally undermine public accountability."

Before I turn to the substance of my speech, I should say that I listened patiently, as is my nature, to the fulminations of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) on the absence of the Deputy Prime Minister from the debate. May I modestly—as is also my nature—remind the hon. Gentleman that I am the Minister for London. Indeed, I am the Minister for transport in London. In the many bouts in which the hon. Gentleman and I have engaged in this Chamber, he has so far failed to land even a glancing blow. I suggest that he needs to prove himself at bantamweight before he risks moving up the boxing league table.

Mr. Jenkin: I certainly grant the hon. Gentleman that he is a harder target than the Deputy Prime Minister, which might be why the right hon. Gentleman is not present today.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman may say that; I couldn't possibly comment.

I am delighted that this debate is taking place. I especially welcome the opportunity to contrast the Government's plans to bring in investment to modernise the tube with the flawed proposals for the railways that were implemented by the Opposition, which we are doing so much to put right, and with their equally flawed privatisation plans for the underground.

The Opposition's motion calls on the Government to have an "open mind" on the tube. That is a little rich coming from an Opposition whose mind is so closed that they still intend to repeat the mistakes of railway privatisation—not, I am bound to say, that they ever seem eager to let out that information. In September, the Conservative party published its policy statement "Believing in Britain". It was eight pages long but there was not a mention of the Conservatives' plans to sell off the tube, lock, stock and barrel. They may believe in Britain, but they obviously have no faith in their policy for the London underground.

Extraordinarily, the motion focuses on Robert Kiley, whom I understand the Mayor of London has appointed commissioner of transport for London. The motion begins by expressing concern about the viability of the public-private partnership, so I shall start by explaining not only why the PPP is needed and how we shall ensure that it is viable but why it is essential to bringing about the improvements to the tube that London so desperately needs.

When this Government came to power in 1997, the tube had suffered from year on year of Tory under-investment—including under the Greater London council—which had left it in a dilapidated state, with a massive backlog of investment. The Opposition's spending plans, which would have seen investment falling to £161 million last year and to zero this year, would have ensured that that backlog grew still further, resulting in an even greater decline in the service for long-suffering Londoners.

In March 1998, we announced an additional £365 million of funding for London Transport over and above existing plans. In July 1999, we announced that we were allocating £517 million of additional resources to London Transport over two years to help it deliver real improvements to passengers in the run-up to the PPP. In the Budget this year, we announced that a further £65 million would be allocated to London Underground in 2000–01, plus an additional £40 million to deal with claims on the Jubilee line extension.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: Let me make a little progress on the substance of my argument before I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

It is clearly impossible to turn around decades of neglect overnight, but London Underground has been able to make some valuable improvements with the extra money. There have been track and tunnel upgrades on the Northern line and a 30 trains per hour service will begin on that line in January; station improvements have been carried out at Waterloo, Paddington, West Ham, Tottenham Hale and elsewhere; the gating of almost the whole network has been completed; new multi-fare ticket machines are being introduced; customer care staff have been introduced at key stations; and 24 kilometres of track have been replaced across the network, including the difficult crossover at Brixton, which was completed on time and to a very tight schedule.

Even before we took office, however, we knew that the extra money would not be enough to sort out the long-term structural financing problems of the tube. Even with the improvements, London Underground's entire investment was left at the mercy of the annual competition with other worthy causes for funds. We realised that that could not go on, which is why we said in our general election manifesto:

> Labour plans a new public/private partnership to improve the Underground, safeguard its commitment to the public interest and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers.

That is the commitment that we are honouring.

Mr. Bercow: Given his enthusiastic trumpet-blowing, how does the Minister explain the fact that the number of regular tube users who regard the tube as poor value for money has more than doubled, from 32 per cent. last year to 65 per cent. this year?

Mr. Hill: It is because they are suffering from an inadequately invested system. The whole point of my argument is that we need sustained high levels of long-term investment in the tube system to make up for decades of neglect and under-investment. Of course the system is creaking at the limits; that is the problem we seek to remedy through the public-private partnership.

Let me emphasise the differences between the PPP and the privatisation proposed by the Opposition. For a start, the PPP is based on fixed-term contracts, rather than permanent transfers to the private sector, so assets will return to the public sector after they have been upgraded. The PPP retains clear public sector accountability from the outset: it puts Transport for London in charge of the overall planning of the service and ensures that public sector London Underground retains the crucial statutory safety responsibility for the whole network. The Opposition are contemplating breaking up the tube into five groups of lines, then selling them off for ever. Under our proposal, private companies will maintain and upgrade the network for the period of the contract, but public sector London Underground will run the network—the whole network.

In stark contrast to railway privatisation, there will be no separation between train and track infrastructure maintenance. There will be no equivalent of Railtrack being responsible for track and signalling on the one hand and separate companies being responsible for trains on the other. For each tube line, there will be one company responsible for the maintenance of both trains and infrastructure. In other words, the PPP provides for precisely the sort of integration in maintenance that was so obviously absent in railway privatisation.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the same companies be responsible for employing drivers, setting timetables and ensuring the flow of income through ticket sales, or will those be the responsibility of a separate company? Would it not be sensible to opt for a totally vertically integrated system on the London underground, rather than a split between operations and infrastructure, as proposed under the PPP?

Mr. Hill: The companies will, in essence, be responsible for fulfilling contracts for the maintenance and modernisation of infrastructure and rolling stock. The travelling public will be comforted to know that every aspect of the London underground system with which they, as travellers, come into contact is in the hands of public sector London Underground Ltd. There will be no separation in responsibility for operating the system. There will be no equivalent of Railtrack operating the signals and a totally different company running the trains. London Underground will retain responsibility for all operational matters—from changing signals to driving trains to staffing stations—so it will be a much more unified system.

Of course, we will go ahead with the PPP only if it is demonstrably the best option. Specifically, that means that the PPP must pass two crucial tests.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already and I must make progress. If he behaves himself, I will look upon him favourably in the future.

The first of the two crucial tests that the PPP must pass is on safety. As I said, the safety regime for the PPP retains a structure where primary statutory responsibility for the safety of the whole network remains with public sector London Underground.

[Mr. Hill]

While I am on the subject of safety, I take this opportunity to scotch the claim made by some hon. Members—we heard it in last week's debate—that the Industrial Society's report on the PPP claimed that our proposals might harm safety. Quite the reverse is the case. The report states:

> The Review does not subscribe to the argument that the PPP structure is inherently unsafe and it recognises the special effort made by Government in ensuring that safety is managed centrally and rests ultimately in public sector hands.

On the specific point—

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) *rose—*

Ms Abbott *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) in a moment.

On the specific point raised by the hon. Member for North Essex about the response to the Industrial Society's recommendation that the Health and Safety Executive invite all parties to submit concerns about PPP safety, let me reassure him that the HSE is in discussion with London Underground about the best manner in which third parties' views can be sought.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No. I said that I would give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He said, quite correctly, that the statutory duty in relation to safety would remain with London Underground, but is he confident that London Underground will in practice have sufficient means to enforce sanctions in relation to safety? The ultimate sanction would be the removal of a contract. Does he think that it would ever be realistic for London Underground to do that?

Mr. Hill: Of course, my hon. Friend is right that that constitutes the ultimate sanction. However, the guiding hand on safety on the system at all times will remain that of London Underground, which will monitor safety and maintain close scrutiny of the activities of the infrastructure companies, or infracos. It will be perfectly possible for London Underground to step in and ensure that any necessary action to improve safety is carried out on the spot. As I shall go on to explain, there are clear incentives in the PPP contracts that we are establishing which will encourage not only active moves to improve safety on the part of the infracos, but proactive action on safety issues as part and parcel of the PPP structure.

I give way to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake).

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for giving way. It may be useful for him to know that on Friday I had a telephone conversation with Will Hutton of the Industrial Society, who confirmed that the PPP could jeopardise safety. He said that if the Government implemented the safety measures that were needed to make PPP safe, it would not be value for money.

Mr. Hill: That is an interesting observation, which I take seriously, but it is not what appears in Mr. Will Hutton's Industrial Society report. Obviously, we must go with the expert judgment of the specialists whom he brought in to write the report. Although they demonstrated no complacency, they were certainly not as alarmist as the reported exchange that the hon. Gentleman presents to the House.

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: Of course I shall give way to the Mayor.

Mr. Livingstone: As the Minister seems so enamoured of Will Hutton's report, will he give the House an undertaking to make in their entirety the changes to the PPP that Will Hutton recommended?

Mr. Hill: We are looking carefully at the contents of the Industrial Society report, as I shall go on to explain, and we co-operated fully with the society in its preparation. Officials in the Department have subsequently held discussions with the specialists who produced it, and we are responsive to all the many positive suggestions that it contains. It is a good report and I recommend that hon. Members read it—especially the hon. Member for North Essex, who palpably has not done so.

Mr. Jenkin: The Hutton report refers to particular safety problems thrown up during the shadow running of the PPP. It states:

> These are important concerns, and arise directly from the new structure and the multiplicity of companies who will be working on the Underground.

I beg the Minister, lest hon. Members misunderstand him, to explain that the people who will manage the tracks and signals will be employed by different companies from those that employ the people driving the trains and operating the timetables. In that respect, the plans for the London underground involve the same horizontal fragmentation as those for the privatised railway. I was led to understand that the Government were unhappy about that.

Mr. Hill: Let me set out the views of the Health and Safety Executive on safety; after all, it is the authoritative and independent body for such matters. The hon. Member for North Essex spoke about management. Essentially, the infrastructure companies are responsible for carrying out long-term contracts for the maintenance and modernisation of the underground. To that extent, they are not responsible in any direct sense for the operation of the system, all of whose moving aspects lie in the hands of the public-sector London Underground under the PPP system. I do not know how often or in how many different ways I must explain that to the hon. Gentleman before it sinks in.

In order to ensure that safety is maintained and improved, both in the run-up to the PPP and also when it is under way, three sets of changes to London

Underground's safety case are required. Two of these revised safety cases have already been approved by the Health and Safety Executive and the third is in preparation.

The transition to the PPP requires the submission and acceptance of that third set of changes to the safety case. The Health and Safety Executive has been closely involved throughout the process. It stated:

> HSE is content with the details of the proposed new structure. In particular, HSE believes that Opsco

—that is to say, the public sector operating company, London Underground—

> and the Infracos will be incentivised to seek improvements in health and safety as well as maintaining current standards

So the theory is sound, the principle is robust and it is already being put into practice.

Mrs. Dunwoody: As the Government have been considering the effect of an independent safety authority for overland railways, why are not they prepared to provide exactly such a division for underground railways? My hon. Friend will be aware that the whole population has genuine worries about the way in which the overground railways are run, precisely because their safety is not in the hands of an independent authority.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend makes an important and interesting point and I dare say that it will be taken into account as we examine the matter in more detail. She is aware that we are considering these matters all the time, for the future structure. I think that the public are looking for the reassurance that the guiding hand—the overwhelming responsibility for safety in the proposed PPP structure—lies in the public sector with the public sector London Underground.

London Underground is preparing to satisfy the Health and Safety Executive that its practical arrangements meet the necessary standards before the PPP can go ahead. We have said several times that the PPP will not proceed unless and until the HSE has taken an independent view and has stated that it is satisfied with the revised safety case. We insist that the PPP must make a substantial contribution to improved safety. I see no harm in saying that again.

The second key test for the PPP is value for money. As the House will be aware, London Transport and its advisers have developed a public sector comparator against which the value for money of the PPP will be judged.

Usually, such comparators measure the value of bids against traditional, annualised public sector funding. In the case of the PPP, however, we are aware that some people think that there is a better way. They want to issue bonds. They conveniently forget that bonds are just another way of raising debt, and that he who raises the debt carries the risk. In other words, it will be the taxpayer who shoulders the financial risk of cost overruns.

Those who support the issuing of bonds ignore the fact that bonds would do nothing to bring management efficiencies to the system; that they would introduce a further delay in getting a financing regime in place—perhaps as much as two years—and, as the Industrial Society points out in its report, bonds would not be a realistic prospect without new powers to raise local taxes.

We do not believe that Londoners want more delay, and we do not think that they want to have new taxes levied on them to pay the bill if there is a major cost overrun. They may be fond of Ken, but they are not that fond.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am perplexed. Were the electors of London naive to believe that the Labour party was putting a costed and fully evaluated proposal to the electorate of London in its manifesto—that proposal being that "we would move very soon to a public-private partnership?" It now seems clear that the Government have doubts about the safety of the system and that they are also doubtful about cost-effectiveness.

Mr. Hill: I am used to bizarre interpretations and utterances from the hon. Gentleman as I stand at the Government Dispatch Box, but on this occasion I am bewildered. He has it absolutely wrong. I am attempting—obviously with no success when it comes to the hon. Gentleman—to demonstrate that we are proposing to submit both the proposed safety regime and the proposed best-value aspects of the PPP to independent arbiters. That is exactly what we are doing, and it is exactly what a responsible Government should be doing in all the circumstances.

We are not dogmatically opposed to bonds, and we would not want to ignore the views of advocates of bonds. So, in addition to testing for value against the usual public sector comparator, we shall also check the bids against raising debt through public sector bonds. We have published the methodology for this comparator, which is being independently audited.

Most importantly, in August, the National Audit Office—Parliament's own financial watchdog—announced that it would bring forward its scrutiny of the comparator so that it could report on it before contracts are signed. We welcome this step because it will help to ensure that the comparator represents a fair and rigorous test of the value for money of the PPP bids.

The hurdles that the PPP will have to cross—safety and value for money—are high ones, but ones which we are confident the PPP will overcome. It is those tests, and not political considerations, that will determine whether the PPP goes ahead. Make no mistake—the Government are committed to proceeding with the PPP, as long as the bidders come up with the goods. There is a safety test for the PPP, just as there is a value-for-money test, but there is no Mayor test.

As I have said, the PPP is a manifesto commitment. The legislation stated that central Government would remain in charge of the tube until the PPP was completed. The best thing that we can do for Londoners is to pass the tube on to the Mayor with a robust financing package already in place. In that legislation, we also included duties of consultation and co-operation so that the transition would be as smooth as possible. London Transport has followed those duties. It has provided the Mayor with copies of the contract, and has consulted him on changes to them. Above and beyond those duties, we and London Transport have supplied information to the Industrial Society for its review of the PPP.

Contrary to press reports, Mr. Kiley has been provided with material on the PPP, subject to a confidentiality agreement. He has copies of the invitations to tender, the up-to-date contracts and the share purchase agreements,

[Mr. Hill]

and he has also received the highly sensitive public sector comparator for the PPP. We are more than happy to co-operate with Mr. Kiley, and to supply him with further information, subject to our legal obligations on this point.

We have always made it clear that we must be careful about making available commercially confidential information relating to the bids themselves, which could risk damaging the public sector's position and prevent us from us achieving best value. Anyone who has ever taken part in commercial negotiations knows that one never shows one's hand to the other players while the game is in progress.

Mr. Jenkin: Do I take it that Mr. Kiley has been given the commercially sensitive information, and that he has been fully apprised of the state of the negotiations? After all, he will be responsible for managing these contracts when they are in place. That is the burden of our complaint. Has the Minister handed over that information?

Mr. Hill: I shall reiterate what I said a moment ago, as it obviously came as a bit of a shock to the hon. Gentleman. Mr. Kiley has received copies of the up-to-date contracts.

This may be a unique occasion in parliamentary history. The Opposition have devoted their own precious parliamentary time to a motion whose essence is to demand that Ministers meet a named individual. The Opposition need only have asked to discover that I, and other Ministers, have already met Mr. Kiley and discussed with him the plans for the PPP. We did so with the full blessing and endorsement of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Perhaps the Opposition will now withdraw their motion. One can only assume that they have taken bandwagonitis to a new height. Let us be entirely clear: the Government have no problem with Robert Kiley or with anyone appointed as an employee of Transport for London by the Mayor. We welcome the appointment of a man with his track record.

The tube has been underfunded for far too long, and Londoners have suffered enough. Passengers do not want to wait longer for improvements to the tube, and I do not see why they should. I want rapid and sustained investment in the tube. The PPP will deliver that, and will give Londoners the improvements they deserve—a safer, cleaner and more efficient service.

In particular, over time, the PPP will upgrade trains, track and signalling across the network, starting with major overhauls of the Victoria, District and Piccadilly lines. It will make the tube much more reliable by incentivising the infrastructure companies to repair faults that cause delays and speed restrictions. Routine maintenance will not be neglected. The PPP contracts contain a robust asset management regime, which requires the private sector to improve any substandard assets, even if they do not have an immediate impact on safety or performance. That is very different from the national railway regime that we inherited from the Opposition.

Stations will also get marked improvements. The private sector will be required to modernise almost all tube stations in the first 10 years, and there will be a programme of improvements to reduce congestion and improve accessibility at stations. Already about 20 per cent. of the network is equipped with lifts and ramps for wheelchair access, and the PPP will increase that to almost 50 per cent.

The Mayor has made it clear that he agrees with those investment priorities. Indeed, his draft transport strategy, which is currently out for consultation, includes the improvements that we expect the PPP to deliver. We can see from his transport strategy that, while the Mayor may say that he does not like the PPP, he certainly likes the improvements that it will bring and the money that goes with it.

The London Underground PPP is well on course and set to deliver substantial improvements to the system soon. That contrasts with the official Opposition's plans to break the system up and sell it off, and with other proposals based on bond financing.

We have learned from the mistakes of the dogma-driven programme of the previous Administration. It is a pity that the Opposition have not. We are working hard to put right the mistakes made on the railways, and we have developed this innovative, custom-built solution for the tube. That is the right way forward, and that is why the House should reject the Opposition motion and support the Government's amendment.

I commend the amendment to the House.

4.26 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome this opportunity for another Opposition debate so soon after the Liberal Democrat debate on privatisation and public-private partnerships.

The Conservative Opposition are obsessed with this admittedly very important issue. Some boxing analogies have already been drawn today, and I shall give another. The Conservatives resemble a punch-drunk boxer: they have received so many blows to the head in their attempt to defend their privatisation policies that all they can do is to get back into the ring for another pounding.

Londoners do not trust Tory policies on the tube. They remember the Tories' lethal legacy—outstanding repairs costing £1.2 billion—and the statement that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), then Secretary of State for Transport, made to the House that

> we were considering whether we could apply the success of railway privatisation to London Underground.—[*Official Report*, 13 January 1997; Vol. 288, c. 10.]

They also remember the understatement of the year, which was made by the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who said:

> We did not do enough for the tube—I would be the first to acknowledge that.—[*Official Report*, 27 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. 436.]

I am afraid that that statement does nothing to convince Londoners that the Conservatives have accepted responsibility for the state of the tube.

The Deputy Prime Minister may have snubbed Londoners today by not attending the debate, but the Tories' privatisation plans for London Underground would inflict the greatest outrage on Londoners. On the other hand, Londoners are not exactly queuing up for the solution offered by the Under-Secretary. They voted decisively against public-private partnership in the Greater London Authority elections. I want to focus almost exclusively on the safety implications of the PPP.

The Under-Secretary is a nice, jovial chap. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) asked me to be gentle with him today. I can picture myself buying

him a consolatory drink when his PPP plans go belly up. However, I am afraid to say that joviality is no substitute for straight answers to tough questions. Each debate on the PPP raises a host of questions, all of which, I am afraid to say, remain unanswered by the Under-Secretary.

Many questions were raised in the most recent debate, on 6 November, to which I hope another Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), will respond when he sums up. That would finally give us some answers. The first question involved the statement made by the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), who said:

> I say that the PPP will not proceed unless and until the HSE has taken an independent view and has stated that it is satisfied with the revised safety case.

That is all well and good, but when will that happen? When will we be told that the safety case is complete? A second question was raised by the Under-Secretary's statement that

> London Transport and its advisers have been devising a public sector comparator against which the bids for the PPP will be judged.

Perhaps the other Under-Secretary—the hon. Member for Sunderland, South—or the Mayor, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who is in the Chamber, will say when that will happen. Finally, the hon. Member for Streatham, said that the National Audit Office

> would bring its scrutiny of the comparator forward.

Much is happening, but there are no precise details about when the process will be completed.

Last week, the amendment that the hon. Gentleman moved to the Liberal Democrat motion stated that the Government "deplores" the previous Conservative Government's

> incompetent privatisation of the railways which left the network fragmented.

I could not agree more. Will he therefore answer the question that he did not answer last week: how the Government can guarantee that a similar break-up of London Underground will not lead to an identical breakdown in communications? We did not hear an answer from the Minister last week; perhaps we shall hear one from him this week.

The biggest question of all is this: if the PPP fails the safety test, or the public sector comparator finds that it does not represent best value for money, what exactly is the Government's fallback position? The cash will run out in the next financial year, and we need an answer from the Minister.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman has touched on the crux of the issue. The Government are now so politically committed to the PPP, and would suffer such loss of face if it did not proceed, that they cannot afford to allow it to fail against the public sector comparator, for political reasons. Nor can they afford to allow the Mayor to interfere with it. That is the danger of proceeding in the way in which the Government are proceeding.

Mr. Brake: I entirely agree, but I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that the Government would receive the support of the House if the public sector comparator revealed that the PPP was not the best option, and that there was a better option behind which Members and Londoners would unite.

I seek an apology from the Minister on the issue of safety. It need not be in writing; he could give it now. He has already raised the matter in relation to the Industrial Society report. In last week's debate I quoted from that report—or, more precisely, from the BBC's report on it—saying that the Government's plans for London Underground

> represent "poor value for money" and could put . . . safety at risk.—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 112.]

The Minister said that I should have read the whole report, and the other Minister, the hon Member for Sunderland, South, also challenged my interpretation.

As the Minister now knows, on Friday I took the trouble to contact Will Hutton, the chief executive of the Industrial Society, for whom the report was written. He confirmed my understanding: he said that the PPP could—I used the word "could" in last week's debate, and I am using it again now—jeopardise safety, unless the necessary safeguards were provided. He went on to say that providing them would be so expensive, with the PPP structure, that the PPP could no longer represent good value for money.

If the Minister would like to stand up and apologise for, perhaps, misunderstanding the point that I made last week, I would welcome it. He chooses not to; perhaps he will do it later, in writing.

Mr. Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the National Audit Office. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee. Will the hon. Gentleman accept the verdict of the NAO and the PAC when they have reached their conclusions—which may be in favour of bonds, or may be in favour of the PPP or, indeed, another option—or is he simply driven by ideology and dogma?

Mr. Brake: I do not think that I am driven by dogma. I shall be happy to look at the NAO report, and to take on board its findings; I only hope that the Minister will be in a position to do the same, and is not being driven by dogma to such an extent that the PPP is the only option that the Government are willing to adopt.

Concerns about the impact of the PPP on safety should not divert our attention from serious safety worries about the way in which the tube is operating now. Is the Minister aware, for instance, of what appears to be an increasing number of dangerous incidents involving overcrowding on London Underground platforms? I understand that both Lynne Featherstone, a Liberal Democrat member of the Greater London Assembly, and Lady Williams, who speaks for our party in another place, have been personally involved in some scary overcrowding incidents. Some 1,200 passengers have apparently been emptied on to an already nearly full platform when a train has stopped short of its destination. In addition, there are cancellations, station and escalator closures, signalling and equipment failures and poor staff morale. That feeling prevails in London Underground as a result, I am afraid, of the Mayor's indication that he would possibly sack, or threaten to sack, managers in the system. The term "managers" is general and several levels of management in London Underground are concerned about to whom the ruling applies. Does the Minister think that we have reached a point at which we should have an inquiry into the safety of the existing system, let alone into what will happen as a result of the PPP? The Minister

[Mr. Brake]

may be reluctant to answer safety questions—although I hope not—but perhaps he will answer other questions relating to the running of the PPP, if it is ever established.

Mrs. Dunwoody: There are real problems with London Underground concerning the number of people that it carries and the age of the rolling stock. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will emphasise the fact that London Underground maintains a high level of safety. Indeed, the level of safety on the underground is higher than that on the overground railway. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not suggest that people using that overcrowded underground system are put at risk, because that is not in their interest.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and am happy to reassure her that I believe that London Underground runs a safe service compared with alternatives such as overland rail—which she mentioned—or travel by car. However, that does not mean that we should not consider whether there are now sufficient problems for an inquiry to look further into the safety of the system.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brake: No, I should like to make progress, as many other Members wish to speak in our debate. We have already asked the Minister what the fallback position is if the PPP failed. However, what is the fallback position if a contractor fails? Will the Minister confirm that the Mayor will be required to pay significant sums of compensation to contractors whose contracts are withdrawn because they have failed to deliver on their contracts? What impact will that have on his ability to pull the plug on contractors if they are not doing their job? If one of the three companies taking over the two sub-surface lines fails, who will be waiting in the wings? Is the Minister confident that those companies will have the financial clout to survive closures—for example, of the District or Circle lines—if major tunnelling works are required?

Mr. Livingstone: May I answer the hon. Gentleman's question about what would be done if it became obvious to Transport for London and the Mayor that one of the companies was failing to provide the required level of safety. Technically, in law, one could sack it or kick it off the contract. However, under the form of the contracts, TFL and the Mayor would have to pay the banks that funded the company the entire amount that was lent. The Mayor would have to raise between £1 billion and £3 billion to do that, so that option is not feasible, and we would be stuck with those firms for 30 years.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much, and I hope that the Minister will respond to that point shortly.

Finally, I am not about to make a link between the Government's PPP plans and the disaster in Austria. However, as there as not been any other opportunity, this is an appropriate point at which to ask the Minister whether he has had any discussions about tube safety since that tragedy. My researcher spoke to Colin Paton, a train guard present at the Ladbroke Grove train crash, who has talked to London Underground about the lack of fire extinguishers on its trains. He was told that they were removed because of vandalism and were not considered necessary because tube trains are not flammable. I believe that the Austrian train was also considered to be non-flammable, so has the Minister thought that it might be appropriate to review very soon the existing arrangements on London Underground to be absolutely certain that the accident in Austria has no implications for the safety of the tube?

The Minister has been asked many questions both today and in previous debates about the PPP and safety. I hope that, this time, we will extract some answers from him. The Government can no longer hide behind studies, reviews and commercial confidentiality. Londoners need straight answers to difficult questions about the future of the tube. I have heard a Labour Member describe the Government's policy of building more than 100 incinerators as the poll tax with flames. The PPP for London Underground may be the Government's poll tax with wheels.

4.40 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): I suspect that I had better declare an interest, just to be on the safe side. As Mayor of London, I will inherit the contracts in the next year or so, if they go ahead, and the underground. I also have an interest as a Londoner who uses the underground every day.

Before people assume that my opposition to the proposal is on an ideological basis, look at the way in which I have conducted myself in my office in the past six months. At every stage, I have tried to do what is best for London, rather than take any particular ideological approach. As I have looked at the issue, the question has been: what is going to work? I have been guided by the thoughts of Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the revered former leader of Communist China, who had a wonderful little saying: "It does not matter whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches the mice."

When the PPP was first announced, I did not rush to condemn it, as anyone who reads the *Hansard* for that day will see. I looked to see whether it could be made to work. Clearly, no Mayor is in the position of being able to reject an £8 billion or £15 billion deal when that office's total budget through all the organisations under the Greater London Authority is just over £3 billion a year. However, since then, there have been four major independent academic studies: by the London school of economics, University College London, the Institute for Public Policy Research, which is close to the Government, and Will Hutton's Industrial Society. All have found serious flaws in the PPP proposals.

London Transport itself conducted an investigation of 15 possible ways of dealing with London Underground over the coming years. PPP was ranked as the 14th most desirable out of the 15. I hear talk about Mr. Kiley being given all that he has asked for, but that report, now several years old, containing no contractual or commercially sensitive information, is still being withheld from me, the elected members of the London Assembly and Mr. Robert Kiley. What on earth can be the reason for withholding that? I hope that, when the Minister replies, he will indicate that he will direct London Underground's existing management to make that available. I see no reason why it should not be available to hon. Members, who have an interest in the issue.

The problem with the PPP is splitting operational and infrastructural control. We are having the debate because Hatfield has brought home to us the tragic problems that arise when that happens. Gerald Corbett's comments do not need repeating.

The PPP will inflict a similar fragmentation on the tube. Control over operations and infrastructure will be split. That is accepted by the Government. When we talk about three consortiums and Transport for London—so four players—it does not sound as bad as the way in which British Rail was broken up into 150 units, but each of the consortiums will have to have a contract with Transport for London and the Mayor. Each will have to have contracts with its four or five component firms. Each of the four or five component firms will have contracts with each other.

Each of the consortiums and the firms within consortiums will have contracts across those consortiums because, in many areas, the track crosses; lines are not completely separate. Additionally, each of the consortiums' component firms will have contracts with their own subcontractors.

I estimate that, eventually, the number of different players involved in the contracts will be more than the 150 or 160 players who were involved in the break-up of British Rail. I foresee problems with that. If a cracked rail is found, for example, how will responsibility be pinned down between subcontractors, contractors and consortiums? When public safety is at stake, there has to be a clear and immediate line of responsibility. The loss of such responsibility will rumble on as a potential disaster.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) mentioned the leaked letter from the Health and Safety Executive which stated that, since the start of shadow running, it had lost confidence in London Underground's systems. Let us be clear that the structural break-up of the underground has already happened. Although the underground remains within the public sector, shadow running started in September 1999, and it was completed in April 2000. The underground has now been divided into the bite-size chunks that are necessary for the PPP to proceed.

Does anyone in London think that the underground is better now than it was one or two years ago? Everyone whom I speak to in London complains that the underground seems daily to be getting worse. Every 16 minutes, there is a breakdown on the system. Sometimes, almost one in six escalators is out of order. No one seriously believes that since the start of shadow running, which is the only test that ordinary members of the public will be able to apply, things have not deteriorated further. We have already broken up the management chain.

What did the Health and Safety Executive's letter say? It said that London Underground's senior management seemed to have lost control of the lines of communication on safety.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend accept that the primary reason why the service is deteriorating is that ever more people are using the service and that necessary investment levels are not being delivered? Is it not a matter more of need for greater investment, with more people using the system, than of structure?

Mr. Livingstone: I completely reject my hon. Friend's suggestion. I think that the management changes prefiguring PPP are exacerbating the problems of under-investment.

A quite sinister—although, I am sure, purely innocent—coincidence is that, on 1 November, Stanley Hart, the chief railway safety inspector and author of the leaked letter, was moved from his post, so that he will not be making the final recommendations. I regret that. I hope that, even at this stage, the Government will bring him back. Confidence will be retained only if Stanley Hart signs off on the issue.

Mr. Kiley is no member of the Militant Tendency, but has a very interesting career path which started in the Central Intelligence Agency. He moved on successfully to the private sector and to running New York's and Boston's transport systems. More recently, he was effectively the managing director of New York's equivalent to London First and the London chamber of commerce.

On 20 October, we wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister, asking that Mr. Kiley be given all the information on PPP. Mr. Kiley gave a clear undertaking, which I accept, that what he was given would remain confidential. I have not asked that anything that is passed to Mr. Kiley be passed to me.

Mr. Kiley had meetings with the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), and with the Minister for Transport, who indicated that information would be supplied. As of today, however, Mr. Kiley has not received all the information that he has requested, notably the bids from the PPP companies. He has also received no explanation of why those documents have been withheld. It is a ridiculous situation. The advice of a proven transport manager with a record of success is being offered free to the Government, but the Government are not seizing that advice.

I am specifically reiterating that Mr. Kiley wishes to see, at the earliest possible opportunity, the best and final offers from the consortiums that are due on 20 November. He would also like to see the current public sector comparator, because the copy that he has been given, which is confidential and not available to me, is dated March. By now, I suspect, it has been seriously amended. If that information is given to Mr. Kiley, I shall give a commitment to the House. If Mr. Kiley, having undertaken a full study of those documents, comes back to me and says, "This system will work", I will drop my opposition to PPP.

However, if Mr. Kiley—acknowledged to be the best mass-transit manager of modern times—says to the Government, "I do not think that this will work. There are safety implications, and financial problems for Londoners", will they accept his advice without reservation? He is a genuinely independent person, and I hope that the Government will make a clear commitment that the information that I have specified will rapidly be made available to him, and that they will be prepared to listen to the advice that he gives them.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): What is Mr. Kiley's status? Has he been hired to run

[Mr. Richard Ottaway]

London Underground? Is that a short-term measure? Is he a consultant? What will happen if the Government do not accept his advice and go ahead with the PPP?

Mr. Livingstone: Mr. Kiley has been appointed commissioner for transport, the senior officer in the whole Transport for London mini-empire. He will be responsible for buses, the Public Carriage Office and the docklands light railway. As soon as the underground is transferred, he will become directly responsible for that as well. His contract has been agreed, and we expect him to sign it on his next visit, this Thursday. I have no doubt that he will sign it: he is desperately keen to be able to turn round transport in this city. Although we have had to pay him a considerable sum, it will be money well spent if he is able to achieve that.

Mr. Kiley is not a man who flounces away. He is a man who, having had the experience of managing vast projects, may well concentrate the minds of some of the infracos. They may have assumed that they would have to manage with some rather dull and unimaginative public transport official—like the sort of dullards who are currently negotiating the contracts. Given that those people have manifestly failed to run the underground, the idea that we should give them the power to negotiate those contracts with some of the sharpest lawyers on the face of the planet does not fill me with enthusiasm. I do not think that the consortiums are happy, having come up against someone who knows as much about these matters as they do. Perhaps they will not find such easy pickings as they had imagined.

We should also consider what the public think. I commissioned an opinion poll, the results of which I received this morning, to assist the Government in moving forward. It is interesting because it is no good simply asking questions about the tube. We asked for comparisons between the tube and the overland rail services. At the moment, 46 per cent. of Londoners are satisfied with the service on the underground, and 32 per cent. are dissatisfied, which, given all the problems, is a remarkable figure. On the overground, only 30 per cent. are satisfied, while 36 per cent. are dissatisfied. Anything that moves the management of the underground towards the management of the overground system is not something about which Londoners should be optimistic.

I asked the polling organisation to ask what Londoners would expect if the PPP went ahead. Nineteen per cent. expected safety to improve, while 42 per cent. expected it to worsen. Sixteen per cent. expected to get value for money, but 47 per cent. did not and expected the system to get worse.

The Government have not managed to persuade Londoners—whose underground it is, and who have paid for it over the best part of a century—of their case; nor have they persuaded their own supporters. The Greater London Labour party bi-annual conference met last weekend. It was not a conference dominated by my old friends. As the *Evening Standard* defined it, the Blairite candidate for chair won by 60 per cent. over the pro-Livingstone candidate, who got 40 per cent. So this was a conference under control, except when it discussed the public-private partnership. A motion that in the light of Hatfield, the Government should withdraw the PPP was carried so overwhelmingly that a card vote was not required. So not only have the Government not persuaded Londoners, they have not persuaded their own supporters.

The Prime Minister has often said that we should not fight the battles of the past. Why are we now facing PPP? The Government came to office with two immediate problems. The management of the underground was pretty dire—which is why we are looking forward to a clean-out as soon as I get my hands on it—and the problem of under-investment, for which the Conservative party must take responsibility, had become acute. Yet the Government had bound themselves by a promise to observe the outgoing Government's public spending limits.

The Government set out to find a revenue stream and to bring in good management. The problem now is not a failure to find a revenue stream—it is that the Treasury cannot spend the money quickly enough before the general election. Equally, the problem of management is resolved. I have resolved it by bringing in Bob Kiley, who I think will cut through the dead wood of London Underground's senior management like a scythe going through butter.

Mr. Brake: Could the hon. Gentleman be a little more precise about how much dead wood in the organisation he means? It is causing concern among London Underground staff.

Mr. Livingstone: I consider that there will be substantial and extensive change. We will look to promote those people who have some enthusiasm, but an awful lot of people have been ground down by years of failure. I am talking about changing not one or two people in senior management but dozens, and I regret that it has not been done before.

As I said, I did not automatically reject PPP at first. I focused on it massively in virtually everything that I did in the election campaign. Since I have been elected Mayor, it is the single biggest problem on my desk. I am honestly not persuaded that the system is safer. I genuinely fear that right hon. and hon. Members may be hearing a statement in two, three or four years' time about a major loss of life on the underground because of this system. Labour Members will not be able to blame such a disaster on the previous Government or on anyone else. This proposal is this Government's creation. Nobody else will be at fault. I beg my colleagues: is this a risk they want to take?

We already know that the Liberal Democrats will be standing at the election next May—if it is May—saying, "Liberal Democrats against tube privatisation." The contracts have slipped so that the earliest they can be signed is April. This will be a live election issue. We have not persuaded Londoners; we have not persuaded our own activists. I beg the Government to step back. Here is the face-saving way out—to offer Bob Kiley all the information that he has asked for and then accept his advice, as I have undertaken to do here today.

4.58 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): In the nature of things, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and I have followed each other in London debates in the Chamber on a number

of occasions over the past six years. This is one of those occasions when I wish that I had spoken first and he had spoken second, because he is a hard act to follow. However, it is a privilege to speak in the debate immediately after him. I was not expecting to speak in the debate, and I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me. Like all Tories, I know that we live in an imperfect world, and therefore the unexpected happens periodically.

I shall vote at 7 o'clock on the motion so ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), but I hope that those winding up the debate will excuse me if, like Mr. Speaker, I am at that stage hauling myself into fancy dress to attend the Lord Mayor's banquet.

Mr. Livingstone: I too apologise to the House. I do not wish to snub the new Lord Mayor, and will also miss the winding-up speeches for the same reason.

Mr. Brooke: As ever, the Mayor and I march in unison.

I was entertained to hear the Minister open his speech by saying that he was raring to go and was extremely glad that we had tabled this motion. This is the fourth debate on the London underground that has taken place in Opposition time in this Parliament, but we have yet to debate it in Government time. That does not suggest a Government marching towards the sound of guns.

The Minister will excuse me for reminding him that I wrote to him last week about the correspondence between us on the London underground in which I drew attention to the fact that I had been waiting for a reply for four months and had already reminded him after two. He need not be upset; I have not delivered the Exocet of putting that matter on to the Order Paper, but I look forward to receiving his reply in due course.

Labour Members in London outnumber Tory Members by five to one, but Back-Bench attendance was five to four a moment ago; it has now gone back to being even steven. Earlier in the debate, Labour Members were in the minority—that looks like London Labour Back Benchers distancing themselves from a rocky policy.

I enjoyed inferring from the Minister's speech the notion that the Deputy Prime Minister can understand the Government's plan for the underground—he is not here to enable us to test that—whereas Mr. Kiley, who has experience of running large-scale municipal railroads, has, given the testimony of my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex, acknowledged that he cannot understand it.

I was much struck by the information, cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and reinforced by the Mayor, that the number of passengers not satisfied by the tube's value for money has doubled in the past year from 32 to 65 per cent. That 33 percentage point increase represents one passenger in three. I am such a passenger, and there are more underground stations in my constituency than in the rest of Greater London.

Before I explain the reason why I take that view, let me pay tribute to the Jubilee line extension—not only north-south, but east-west. Travelling to the west end, especially to Piccadilly, from Westminster has been transformed by the Jubilee line, but those who travel east-west, even those dwelling north of the river, have gained from the link on the East London line between Canada Water and Wapping. It is now much easier to go east than it used to be.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, if the Jubilee line had been a PPP, the £1 billion or so extra cost of building it and the extra cost of more than a year's delay would have been borne by the private sector through risk transfer? With hindsight, does he not think that the Jubilee line would be better off as a PPP, rather than under the traditional method adopted by the Tories?

Mr. Brooke: The hon. Gentleman should acknowledge that that would always depend on the contract. However, the fact that we have waited so long for the Government to come round does not comfort me that everything will move smoothly thereafter.

The changes involving the Jubilee line are to London Underground's credit, and I am delighted that the Jubilee line's east London stations have won so many architectural prizes.

I do not know how often the Minister travels by underground, but I travel at all times of the day and night. The phrase "rush hour" was first used in London in the 1890s, and, for 100 years, it was what it started out as—namely, a single hour, morning and night—but it now goes on all day, as I am sure all my hon. Friends who travel during the day will testify. What are the symptoms? The first symptom is the number of times people arrive on a platform in mid-afternoon or mid-morning—or last Friday at Victoria at 6 o'clock in the evening—and no trains at all are signalled for the next 10 minutes.

The second symptom is the ominous public announcement on the loudhailer that, on lines that bifurcate, passengers are advised to take the next train wherever it is going and then change trains later. The third symptom follows, as night follows day: the platform is full to overflowing and everyone on the platform seeks to get on the train when it arrives, instead of only half the passengers who are waiting.

There used to be a sad sign on continental trains saying that goods vans would take 40 people or eight horses. Perforce, and again at all times of the day, the management of London Underground, under the auspices of the Government, give the impression that they are trying to squeeze not eight, not 10, but 12 horses into an underground carriage.

By chance, two and a half weeks ago, the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick)—who has just left the Chamber—and I coincided at Tower Hill station at three o'clock in the afternoon. Everything that I have just described applied. No trains were foreshadowed. A sizeable crowd was already on the platform. As we waited, the hon. Gentleman and I grinned at each other, with the dyed-in-the-wool irony of dyed-in-the-wool Londoners. The black hole of Calcutta is not a racist analogy; those imprisoned there during the mutiny were largely, if not entirely, white. By the time a train eventually left Tower Hill that afternoon, with the hon. Gentleman and me on board, conditions resembled those of the Calcuttan analogy. We were absolutely packed in.

[Mr. Brooke]

The hon. Gentleman and I went on grinning at each other, but I shall derive no satisfaction at the general election if we win London seats from Labour simply because of what the Government have put Londoners through on the underground.

Mr. Brake: Given what the right hon. Gentleman has just described, does he share my concerns about safety?

Mr. Brooke: I am happy to endorse what the hon. Gentleman said earlier, although I must admit that when the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town and I stood in the black hole of Calcutta at Tower Hill at 3 pm the other day, both he and I were, I suspect, more preoccupied with our immediate personal discomfort than with larger issues of safety.

The Minister puts down my dissatisfaction to historic under-investment. I acknowledge that, and we have debated the issue previously. Under-investment is not wholly the responsibility of a single party. Londoners, however, put their dissatisfaction down to the absurd theological debate that has gone on within the governing party while the service has steadily gone on deteriorating.

5.6 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): My hon. Friend the Minister said that he believed that the Government had learned from the mistakes of previous Administrations. Sadly, I do not believe that that is the case. In going forward blindly on the public-private partnership, my own Government appear to be making the same mistake as the previous Administration by sacrificing the interests of the travelling public to doctrinaire ideas.

Of all issues facing Londoners, public transport is the most important, pressing and vital. Public transport is not just of concern to those, like me, who use it every day. It is of equal concern to professional drivers, including taxi and van drivers. Some of the most passionate supporters of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) in his quest to become Mayor of London were cab drivers who remembered the old Greater London council. Contrary to what the Minister implied, those drivers remember that public transport was better under the GLC and that there was less congestion on the roads, which made it easier for professional drivers to make a living. Public transport not only concerns unfortunate commuters, but is of interest to professional drivers, drivers in general, businesses and the City.

No one doubts that the opposition of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East to the PPP enabled him to amass so much support in London in the contest to be Mayor.

Mr. Jenkin: I do not wish to intrude too far, but I recall that the official Labour candidate began to put caveats on his own support for the PPP as he tried to recover his position in the run-up to that election.

Ms Abbott: I do not want to go there. Frank Dobson was a nice man who did not deserve what happened to him in that campaign.

Mr. Wilkinson: He is still a right hon. Member.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is a nice man who did not deserve what happened to him in the course of that campaign. I do not want to dwell on that.

Transport is the key issue for Londoners and lay at the heart of the mayoral campaign. If Ministers who lived through that campaign and saw that the people's votes went overwhelmingly to candidates and parties opposed to the PPP are prepared to dismiss the opinions of Londoners, they should not be surprised if Londoners are sceptical when the Labour party wants them to return to the polls in the forthcoming general election.

Colleagues have talked about past Conservative Governments and what they did to British Rail. It is tempting to dwell on the past, but I want to talk about the future of London Transport.

The Minister referred to the need for investment; we can all agree about that. He talked of the need to introduce greater management efficiency; we can all agree on that. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East headhunted the world's best public transit manager to run Transport for London. That is why my hon. Friend proposed sacking not one or two but dozens of London Underground managers. I point out to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) that nothing would be more likely to make my hon. Friend even more popular with Londoners than success in clearing out the dead wood in the management of the underground.

This morning, I travelled to Westminster on the Victoria line and hit one of the 15-minute breakdowns to which reference has been made. The fact that my hon. Friend is willing to take effective action against a management that has repeatedly failed is much to his credit. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington will get nowhere trying to make points about that.

Mr. Brake: The only point I was making is that it is perhaps not best management practice to announce the sacking of an unspecified number of managers.

Ms Abbott: Everybody knows that the management of London Transport has failed and is failing. Everybody wants something to be done about that. If the Mayor says that he intends to act, that offers the clearest possible signal to the travelling public. My hon. Friend's statement was welcomed by the majority of Londoners.

There is agreement on both sides of the House on the need for investment. The Government and the Mayor are certainly agreed on the need for management efficiencies. However, we have not received a satisfactory response from Ministers to the questions on safety put by Members on both sides of the House. As I pointed out earlier, it is all very well to state that responsibility for safety will lie with London Underground, but the Minister has not explained how, in practice, LU will have the sanctions to enforce its safety objectives. Although the ultimate weapon available to the company would be to pull out of a contract, in practice—because of its responsibility for financial matters—such a course would be unrealistic. Of course, the contractors will be aware of that.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who opened the debate, has responsibility for London, so he will know how many London boroughs are entangled with the contractors that have taken on privatised services, such as housing benefit. The boroughs would like to take back the contracts, but in practice they cannot do so. Although the sanctions of the market are supposed to operate, they do not; for example, ITnet is messing up housing benefit all over London. Councillors in Islington, Hackney and Hounslow say that, in practice, they cannot pull out of the contracts. What sort of sanction does that provide?

London Underground will find itself in the same position as Railtrack in relation to private contractors. The responsibility for safety will lie with London Underground and although the ability to withdraw the contract may exist in theory, it will not be possible to put it into practice. The Mayor and London Underground will thus find themselves locked into contracts for 30 years.

The PPP proposal was fought to a standstill during the mayoral campaign. Londoners made their views clear on the matter. Every opinion poll commissioned on the subject reveals that Londoners are against the PPP. According to the most recent poll, cited in the House this afternoon, Londoners think that safety will be worse under the PPP. Londoners do not want the PPP. The London Labour party does not want it.

In an internal report produced in 1997, London Underground examined all the available options for obtaining adequate funding. The first was to retain LU as a unified system within the public sector—my preference. The second was to keep it as a unified system in the private sector—the preference of the Opposition. However, the 14th option was the one adopted by the Government. In the face of consistent public opposition and opposition from within the Labour party and in the face of the serious questions about safety that have been raised by Members on both sides of the House, it is extraordinary that Ministers insist on continuing blindly along their chosen path.

Unless a way can be found to allow Ministers to step back without losing face, the Labour party—my party—will pay a price in the forthcoming general election. Commuters have a view on the PPP and they will express it in the ballot box. If the PPP goes forward without the changes suggested by Mr. Hutton and the Industrial Society, I only hope that Londoners do not pay a price for it in the form of drastically reduced safety.

Even at this late stage, I urge my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench to put dogma, their personal feelings towards my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East and the question of loss of face to one side and to concentrate on the interests of the travelling public. Every survey available has proved that the proposed PPP will not meet the interests of the travelling public. It is not too late for Ministers to acknowledge that and to take up my hon. Friend's suggestion and let the transport commissioner for London give his considered opinion on the proposals.

5.16 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): It is always interesting to follow the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). I used to chair a health authority that covered her constituency and we regularly turned up at events together. However, I shall not intrude on the grief that is obvious between her and those on the Government Front Bench.

My constituency is in a London borough that does not contain any underground stations. However, my constituency has more railway stations than any other in the country. There are 14 and, if anyone wants to challenge me, I can recite them. However, Members would probably prefer me not to do that.

My constituents are primarily concerned with ensuring that their railways operate well. The railways are under considerable pressure at the moment, so my constituents do not want to be faced with congestion charging, which will lead to more people using the railways. However, my constituents also want the underground, which they use when they come into the centre of town, to run efficiently.

I was grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) for his comments about the Jubilee line. The firm of consulting engineers that was key to the line's engineering is based in Beckenham. It did an expert job in very difficult circumstances.

Many of my constituents use the underground, as do I. However, we should not ignore the fact that some of the underground's current problems are the result of the increased prosperity of the past 20 to 25 years. More and more people have more disposable income, so they are more likely to travel. That follows as night follows day. There are more cars on the road and more people use trains and the underground. The problems of London Underground cannot just be put down to a lack of investment and poor management.

The hon. Members for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington probably do not help London Underground by castigating its managers. If the good managers in any organisation feel under pressure, they will leave and the organisation will be left with poorer managers. Of course, if those in the management structure are already demoralised, the last thing that they want is more unhelpful criticism. The poorer managers will also leave and that will leave the organisation badly under-managed. London Underground has a real difficulty with that, and I hope that a more constructive approach will be taken to its managers to bolster them in very difficult circumstances.

It was an inspired decision to appoint Mr. Kiley and bring him over from New York. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent, East on that. The most interesting fact I read was that Mr. Kiley had increased New York subway fares by 30 per cent. to create the money for investment. My first thought on learning that was how the Mayor would explain such an increase to my constituents and everyone else in London. Those of us who remember "fares fair" would find that increase difficult to understand. Mr. Kiley—poor man—is clearly completely constrained by the terms of the PPP.

It is, however, worth exploring and comparing the confidentiality agreement that the Government negotiated with Mr. Kiley with the confidentiality agreements that are signed by companies in the midst of takeovers or any other commercial transaction. As I understand it, a company that is involved in a bid for another company signs a confidentiality agreement that is sufficiently robust to allow the bidding company to look at all the books and ask all the questions necessary to get all the details. It is on the bidding company's own head if it leaves anything out. The legal agreement is so robust that there is no information that the company that is the subject of the bid cannot hand over, and it must not deliberately withhold information from the bidder.

If Mr. Kiley has signed that form of confidentiality agreement with the Government, there is no reason why all the information about the PPP cannot be made available to him. If, however, he has not been asked to sign such an agreement, the Department is at fault for not having a sufficiently robust confidentiality agreement. One way or another, the Minister has to reassure the

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

House about the quality of that agreement and say why, if it is sufficiently robust, Mr. Kiley cannot see the information. If it is not sufficiently robust, I suggest that the Department gets some better lawyers.

We do not know whether Mr. Kiley has accepted the appointment, but we have been assured that he is likely to sign up to it this Thursday. I feel for the man. He has to come into the snake-pit of London politics and, in addition, has to deal with the hugely complex problem that is London Underground without having all the facts—and I mean all the facts—at his disposal. He will have to be an extraordinarily robust character to survive much longer than six months. It would not be right for this very experienced person to be switched off and unable to operate within six months because of Government obduracy and the snake-pit of London politics.

We have directly elected Conservative members of the Greater London Assembly in my part of the world. I have been talking to some of them about their experience of Mr. Kiley, who went to a meeting of Assembly members just after he had been to the Department. His state of mind when he returned from visiting the Department was described as "disconsolate and dismayed." If he is already giving that impression to Assembly members of his relationship with the Department and how he expects it to develop, he will not be in the right frame of mind to take on and manage the extraordinarily complex structure that the Government have imposed on the PPP.

One other clear point—it relates to the questions that have arisen about safety and financing, and to the various reports that have been required—is that there seems to be a build-up of yet more delay in the delivery of the PPP. Although many of us do not represent London constituencies, most of us use the underground at some point, so I am sure that I do not need to repeat to everybody present the fact that the amount of cash going into the capital expenditure that London Underground requires is falling significantly. If there is further delay in the delivery of the PPP, London Underground will stagger to an investment halt. The problems that have already been identified will of course multiply, as progression in such matters is never arithmetic but geometric.

I would hate to hear from the Minister in his reply that there will be further delays in delivery and execution of the PPP. For whatever good reason—safety records, or whatever—we cannot afford any further delay in the fruition of, admittedly, probably the most worst option for the London underground. We cannot afford any more delay in finding a solution in one form or another, so that at least we know there is investment, and genuine plans for it, and people will see much greater improvement very quickly.

I would not want any further delays, and I seek a guarantee that no further delays are envisaged in the creation and operation of the PPP. I hope that the Government will not use the way they have so far treated Mr. Kiley as an excuse for yet further delay. We must have improvements in the London underground, and it is now down to the Government to get on and ensure that they are made as swiftly as possible.

5.27 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me from these crowded Benches to contribute, along with the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), the London Mayor, to the debate on the Opposition's unfortunate motion. They claim now to have an open mind on options for the London underground. Formerly, their ragbag of ideas comprised universal privatisation, which in Railtrack has proved most unsuccessful. So, I am glad that they made no attempt to present such a policy. Instead, they chose to dwell on a new policy of open-mindedness, which in the new Tory party is a contradiction in terms. The issue before us is not one of privatisation; that has not been debated. It is really that of credible options, such as issuing bonds and public-private partnership. I shall focus largely on those matters rather than following the Tory policy of kicking a person when he is down.

Hon. Members will know that I serve on the Public Accounts Committee. I am glad that it was made clear in August that the National Audit Office will be looking objectively at the different options before us and forming its verdict. I hope that everyone will take that particularly seriously. I welcome the appointment of Bob Kiley by the London Mayor. It is important to import new excellence to our public services, and I look forward to hearing his comments.

It is worth noting that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) pointed out that some of the major problems of the PPP resulted from the multiplicity of responsibility due to the break-up of the system, which leads to confusion and could therefore undermine safety. That completely contradicts the Tories' strategy for privatisation, which in itself gives rise to a multiplicity of functions and to confusion. The hon. Gentleman's comments are tantamount to an admission of guilt for the failures of privatisation and an explanation of why it has gone so badly wrong.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend has said that he welcomes the appointment of Bob Kiley. Would he therefore welcome the Government releasing to Mr. Kiley all the information that he has asked for?

Mr. Davies: I think that it is important that the Government share information with Mr. Kiley and work closely with him to get the best transport system for London. There might be marginal issues relating to timing the release of confidential commercial information during a competitive tender process, but Mr. Kiley and the National Audit Office need at their disposal a complete account of the options available for the London system.

Mr. Brake: The hon. Gentleman, rightly, criticises the Conservatives for highlighting the problems of fragmentation caused by the PPP, and points out that that is exactly what happened under railway privatisation. Does that mean that he accepts that there is a problem of fragmentation associated with PPP?

Mr. Davies: No, that was not my point: I focused on the contradiction in the Conservative argument. However, I accept that if an organisation comprises too many pieces, there will be problems of co-ordination, which might lead to confusion, higher costs and, in extreme cases, problems with safety.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) focused, not on the Industrial Society's report, but on a half remembered telephone conversation

with Will Hutton. Having met Will Hutton, I do not believe that he will thank the hon. Gentleman for repeating apparently confidential remarks in the House of Commons, especially as he has already issued a statement for public consultation in the Industrial Society's report. I doubt that the hon. Gentleman will receive much more co-operation from Mr. Hutton.

Mr. Brake: I am pleased to be able to assure the hon. Gentleman that I clarified with Mr. Hutton whether he thought it appropriate for me to relate his views on the subject. I also confirmed whether he was quite happy with my interpretation—he was.

Mr. Davies: That is good to hear.

It was also interesting to hear the rendition of Mr. Hutton's views given by the hon. Member for North Essex. He claimed that in the Industrial Society report, Will Hutton said that the problems of the PPP were, first, its uncertainty—well, we all know that the future is uncertain, and we understand the complexity of the options, so that is only stating the obvious—and secondly, that the extra cost of capital could, by some arithmetic, be translated into a 30 per cent. hike in fares.

In fact, London's tube system is one of the few in the world that makes positive gross margins—about £300 million a year—but it does not generate enough to pay back the cost of capital. Therefore, one can look at the figures and say that, at the margin, the cost of capital is greater under PPP than with bonds, for example, and then translate that into fares—but the issue to be considered when comparing the options is not the cost of capital, but overall value for money in terms of risk transfer, cost of delays and so on. It is easy to make quick comments, but careful consideration is required.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I intend to expand on those points, so it might be better to take the hon. Gentleman's intervention then.

I consider it unfortunate that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington gratuitously linked our serious debate on the different financial options for investment in the tube with the recent Austrian disaster. There is enough scaremongering going on. Many speakers have said that the tube is safe, even though it needs more investment. The tube is a good system and we need to renew it; the question is, how do we do that for Londoners?

Mr. Flight: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), who tried to intervene earlier.

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It was on an earlier point that I wanted to ask him a question. Does not money raised by bond issue have to be repaid? The history of bond issues to finance similar investments in the United States, or other public sector undertakings, shows that when one lot of bonds matures, it can be refunded with another lot of bonds. The model for financing by bond issue does not necessarily entail fare charges to repay the capital.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman knows that that is not always the case. In some bond issues, additional money has had to be obtained from taxpayers, because of the value of the bonds. Bonds entail an element of uncertainty and risk, which would be set against the London taxpayer—but the Mayor is currently not empowered to raise tax to cover that risk. That is one of the problems. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made that point, so that I could demonstrate that it was wrong.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I will certainly take an intervention from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). It will give me great joy to respond to this one.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He should not speak too soon, because he knows not upon what subject the intervention comes. In the light of his remarks about the need to minimise fragmentation—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will cease chuntering. In the light of what he said about the need to minimise fragmentation, what is his assessment of Pricewaterhouse's conclusion on the structure, upon which the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee deliberated in July 1998?

Mr. Davies: What a fine point! That was worth waiting for. The Pricewaterhouse analysis indeed shows a certain amount of fragmentation of the various components, the purpose of which was to generate competition and value for money. If the hon. Gentleman were not relying on a one-liner from the Library, he would know that the matter was more complex than that rather silly intervention—*[Interruption.]* That was characteristic of the guffawing to which I have become accustomed from that small character on the Opposition Benches.

I shall move to a point more serious than such one-liners, which we have come to expect instead of reasoned dialogue. I invite the hon. Gentleman to make a proper speech, rather than resort to the one-liners that he looks up late at night, a sad man in the Library.

Moving on from that momentary, derisory distraction, the issue between PPP and bonds is not simply ideological. It is an empirical question of which is the best value for money. There will obviously be a debate about who is best equipped to analyse that. The Mayor—the hon. Member for Brent, East—mentioned a number of experts who have come forward. There are other experts with different views, and we await the verdict of the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee.

I see this as an empirical issue. Hon. Members may know that I was the leader of London's largest council, Croydon council—

Mr. Bercow: Has Croydon recovered?

Mr. Davies: Was that an intervention?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We have had enough interventions from a sedentary position and banter of one kind or another. I should be grateful if we could get on with the debate.

Mr. Davies: I value the dull humour of the hon. Member for Buckingham. That is a character failure of my own, I suppose.

[Mr. Davies]

When I was leader of Croydon council, we introduced Tramlink, which was a public-private partnership. The private sector invested some £100 million and the public sector some £125 million. As has been pointed out, there was a delay. The system was supposed to begin operating last November, but in fact it started in May. Already it is the most successful tram system in the country, moving 45,000 people a day.

The cost of the delay from November to May is being borne by the private sector. Risk transfer was built into the contract. Under PPP, a contract is drawn up, and if the private sector fails, the cost of failure in terms of delay or exceeding the budget will be transferred. That is precisely the point that I made earlier in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Kensington—

Mr. Bercow: Who? You are all over the shop.

Mr. Davies: I should have said the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). I intervened on him earlier, when he hailed the Jubilee line as a great Tory success. I pointed out that it was about £1 billion over budget and a year late. That was no success. If it had been a PPP, the transfer of risk would have gone to the private sector. That is the point. The issue is about value for money.

Mr. Livingstone: Is my hon. Friend aware that under their contracts, contractors will be fully compensated if they run only 95 per cent. of the existing service? Services can be cut by a further 5 per cent., but they will still be fully compensated. That does not build in an improvement, but allows a further margin for failure.

Mr. Davies: That is not an a priori point, but a contingent point. The issue is the terms of the contract. Unacceptable contracts may be drawn up, and Mr. Robert Kiley, the hon. Member for Brent, East and others may produce good ideas on how they can be tightened up. I agree that there could be good arguments for doing that, and various issues have been raised in that respect. People have asked, "Why can't we untie these? Will they last the 30 years? Can't we have different options?" Those are legitimate value-for-money questions that should be considered by the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office in reaching a verdict, just as we should consider such matters in reaching our verdict. There is a proper debate in which those points should properly be included. There is nothing inherently good or bad about the proposed system. We should be discussing the contingent issue of what the contract says, and what is best for the public in terms of value for money.

Tramlink is a project in which we were able to transfer risk. As a result, we have already established the most effective tram system in the country. That shows that the proposal can work. It has been suggested that it would not work in particular scenarios, but that is obvious.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Before we move away from the superficial attractions of bond issues, I have a brief question. I am sure that other hon. Members are more than aware of the answer, but sadly, I am not. I do not know any philanthropic capitalist who is anxious to invest in bonds without receiving a return. Who would service the bonds? Would it be the people of the whole country or the people of London, or would the proposal be a further drain on London Transport's small margin of operating profit?

Mr. Davies: As has been pointed out, it is hoped that bonds will be self-financing. The risk, however, is that they will not be. If that happens, we must then decide who pays. One would usually assume that London taxpayers would pay, but the Mayor is not empowered by current legislation to increase taxes. If it is proposed that the Mayor should be empowered to raise taxes, Londoners will have to be consulted again. Obviously, there was massive popular support for the hon. Member for Brent, East when he became Mayor, but it was not given on the understanding that he would be able to raise taxes. We are considering a different political question, to which people might respond differently.

Ms Abbott: They would not.

Mr. Davies: I do not know. My hon. Friend might be right, but the point is that we do not know. There may be a downside liability, but there is currently no cover for such liability. Again, value for money is at stake, not the cost of capital. In debates such as this, it is often said that the cost of capital for PPP is greater than the cost of bonds and public sector borrowing. I agree, but the Jubilee line is an obvious example of how other factors must be taken into account. The cost of capital would have been completely overwhelmed by the extra cost of taking the traditional route, because of the cost in terms of delay and running over budget.

Various issues, including delays, must be considered in relation to the argument of PPP versus bonds and tax raising with bonds. Those issues must be considered carefully, although it is understandable that hon. Members are saying, "Okay, we've been hanging around here for ages. When will we get something done?" One of the costs of bonds is simple to explain. If we all decided to take the bonds option, a couple of years would be added to the timetable for the tube's overall progress. That is a genuine cost. It is not merely a delayed letter or a similar hitch, but a measurable cost in terms of economic activity and disruption for the people of London. That must be factored into the analysis.

Mr. Brake: I agree entirely that if a bond issue were launched now, a two-year process might be initiated. However, will the hon. Gentleman contrast the two years that might be involved with such a project with the four years involved with the PPP? Had the Government embarked on bonds four years ago, the system would now be up and running.

Mr. Davies: With respect, that is rather a silly question. As with all political choices, we have arrived where we are. That being so, what is the best thing to do? The hon. Gentleman might be able to argue that we should have done something earlier—an argument that could be taken back in time. Given where we are, should we keep going and finish PPP, or opt for bonds to see whether that approach works after another couple of years? These are the real options.

Mr. Livingstone: The current best estimate is that work under PPP—that is, work on the lines—might start

as early as next September. There is not the slightest doubt that if there were the backing of the Government through the Treasury, bonds could be around in a matter of weeks. Bonds could advance the start of the work, not delay it.

Mr. Davies: That was an important intervention. We must be crystal clear about different options and costs. One of the variables is obviously delay. I believe that work should be brought forward by public sector direct investment if there is an acceptable gap in PPP investment when set against what the new levels of investment should be.

The hon. Member for Brent, East suggests that bonds could bring forward funding within weeks. I understood that there would be delay for years. However, it is a matter of fact rather than judgment, and I stand to be corrected. One of the issues must be the cost of time, and I am sure that that will be factored into how the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee approach the matter.

We have not talked about the third option, which is privatisation. We all know that the history of Railtrack privatisation involved the sale of about £2 billion worth of assets, which were valued at £8 billion a couple of years later. With the Tories' suggestions, we would look forward to the same thing—a rip-off sell-off, a takeover by a profit-maximising operator, who would reduce capacity, increase price and provide a worse service for Londoners. I have not dwelt on privatisation because it is such a ridiculous suggestion from the Tories.

We need sure investment now. The investment should not go up and down, as Government funding does. In reality, Governments sometimes turn down investment as they approach elections. That is precisely what the Tories did. That is why we ended up with a £1.2 billion backlog of essential investment. For self-interest rather than public interest, the Tories decided, "We'll cut that back, introduce a few pre-election tax cuts, mess around with interest rates and tamper with the political process." PPP gives a guaranteed cashflow investment into public services. That is one of the key benefits. With bonds, issues arise about different values and risks that may affect investment flows over time. That is something to be factored into the various considerations.

Different people make different assessments. Professor David Currie of the London business school thinks that PPP would be £2.3 billion cheaper, and that overall it would bring about savings of £3.3 billion. Such analyses are professional, but they are contentious. I make that point because the hon. Member for Brent, East listed people who had adopted a different argument.

Members have dwelt on safety, an issue that is important to us all. The first condition of safety is investment now. The second condition is value for money. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State has said, in terms of ownership, safety will still be the responsibility of London Underground. The Government are attempting to put into place an investment stream that will be a pre-condition for safety.

I have already talked about sanctions on contractors. It is important that there are proper controls and sanctions over inadequate investment or management performance. The Mayor should have the power to act in the interests of the public. Overall, the issue is not black and white. We are having an honest debate and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to it.

5.49 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): It is always a pleasure when authentic Members such as the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) participate in our debates. It is not such a pleasure to hear people who are not real, such as the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill). My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) may consider the hon. Gentleman a cheeky chappie, but I think he is a poor imitation of Frankie Howerd, and his speech was not in any sense funny. It would have been a significant speech had it been delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister, but the right hon. Gentleman seems to have the Falconer contagion and is running away from his responsibilities to this House. Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman's policy is failing. Were that not the case, why would the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) weary the House with a speech of Front-Bench proportions? As Members representing London constituencies, we demand better from the Deputy Prime Minister.

In my constituency, there are no fewer than eight tube stations serving three lines. The underground system is essential for my constituents to get to work. There is often a glitch—sometimes a major problem that delays their arrival at work by hours—or other difficulties, such as discomfort, irregular running or rudeness by staff. It is not surprising that one of the tabloids today reported that the experience of commuting is even more stressful than the worst workplace—and so it is for many of my constituents. This should not and need not be so.

In its manifesto, the Labour party led us to believe that things could only get better, and that they would, indeed, get better for London Underground, thanks to the public-private partnership. No doubt was expressed: the public-private partnership was part of Labour's fundamental commitment to the electorate not just in London but nationwide. People were led to believe that it would come into operation very shortly after Labour came to office, and furthermore that the Mayor of London, when returned to power, would have under his control Transport for London, which would include a key element of London's overall transport system, namely the underground.

When I said to the Under-Secretary that it was preposterous that the Labour party had perpetrated such a fraud on the electorate of London, and that no one in London would gain any confidence from his admission that we are going to have to wait still longer for the public-private partnership to become operational, the hon. Gentleman shrugged his shoulders and said that it was of no importance. It is of importance. Two fundamental issues seem to be causing the delay—a safety audit by the Health and Safety Executive and the basic financial question of whether the PPP will be cost-effective, which will be assessed in the National Audit Office report.

A policy as central to a party aspiring to office as the public-private partnership should have been worked out in advance while that party was in opposition. No responsible political party should put in its programme a

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

policy that falls apart when it gets into office and does not work. We warned the Labour party throughout the sittings of the Committee which considered the Greater London Authority Bill that it would happen, and it has. That explains why so few Labour Members are present.

How wise my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are to be open-minded. We do not know the circumstances under which we will take office. We will take office either in national Government in the spring or autumn next year—it is clear, and the Mayor has made it plain, that the public-private partnership will not be up and running by then—or at a London level at the next mayoral elections. It will happen, because we have a majority of the directly elected seats on the Greater London Authority, and I do not think that the people of London will be impressed by the coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, which is frustrating the Assembly's function of keeping a check on the mayoralty, not least on transport policy for London.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Given that the hon. Gentleman is promoting a policy of open-mindedness on the ground that there is uncertainty about the future, does he think that it should be Tory policy to be open-minded on everything? Would that not be common sense? Is it not the case that we do not know what will happen? The Tories have made U-turns on the tax guarantee. Are we entering a new era of open-mindedness from the Tories?

Mr. Wilkinson: The Conservative party is certainly in favour of common sense: that is a central theme of all our policies. As for open-mindedness, it is an engaging and rare political characteristic, which I find in my hon. Friends.

My central point is that we do not know in what circumstances we will take power. Perhaps it will be nationally at first and then in London, in which case we will be in control of the GLA and central Government. We must take things as they come. I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, who was honest in saying that the logical position is either to have the tube run wholly in the public sector or to privatise it as an entity so that at least there is a clear chain of command: people know where they stand, there is less opportunity for conflict and confusion and safety issues and risks are minimised. That was the view of London Underground when it did its study. How wrong it is of the Government not to permit that study to be in the public domain, in the Library and available to the Greater London Authority.

Secrecy in the negotiations between the mayoralty and central Government over the appointment of Mr. Kiley and the information available to him will have a profound effect on the confidence of the people of London in the Government. They expected the Government to be open and to share these basic facts with those responsible for taking important decisions on behalf of Londoners. The Government clearly do not intend to do so. They are ideologically driven, and are frightened that if the truth comes out, the can of worms will be opened in its entirety.

There is a necessity to get on with producing an effective system. This state of limbo should not endure any longer. It is an intolerable state of affairs. In my part of north-west London, we want the Croxley link to be established to connect the Metropolitan line with Watford Junction station. Other people advocate as a priority the extension of the Central line through south and west Ruislip to Uxbridge. and perhaps even down to Heathrow. Some suggest that the Piccadilly line which runs from Rayners Lane through my constituency to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) should be continued in a loop to join up with the Piccadilly line at Heathrow.

Important projects should be completed but are being stymied thanks to the confusion caused by the Labour Government. This state of affairs should not be allowed to endure. That is why the critical motion tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends is timely, and why it deserves the House's wholehearted approbation.

5.59 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate, and especially to listen to contributions from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who always speak in such debates.

My constituency is at the beginning of the District line—its eastern terminus is Upminster. It is the only underground station, but it is important because my constituents benefit from the link with the underground system. They also have the alternative of using the overland system from the C2C operator—the former London to Tilbury line. My constituents have that advantage: if there is a problem with the underground, they can use alternative rail services.

I was interested in the statistics that the hon. Member for Brent, East gave about satisfaction rates among London Transport users. In current circumstances, and bearing in mind the troubles of recent weeks, 46 per cent. is an incredible statistic. However, it does not surprise me because the most common comment is that the underground system is basically a good one on which people rely. Hon. Members and the travelling public rely on it to get to work each day, and their experience is usually good. However, there has been a deterioration in the service, which was caused by increased usage and people's different life styles and different working hours. My experience—I use the tube most days—is that it is operating over capacity. I frequently leave the House after 10 pm, and find that the trains are full. Capacity is important.

Mr. Bercow: Given that the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) slavishly read out a brief for 22 minutes but failed to say anything coherent about value for money on the tube network, will the hon. Gentleman who has the Floor be kind enough to tell the House what he thinks explains the increase from 32 per cent. to 65 per cent., revealed in the MSB survey, in the proportion of regular tube users who believe that the tube does not provide good value for money? The change occurred between one year of the Labour Government, 1999, and another, 2000.

Mr. Darvill: There are several reasons for that. Last year and the year before, there was a significant deterioration in several services, involving escalators,

which caused significant difficulties. The delay in the completion of the Jubilee line extension was another factor. However, the main factor is the lack of sustained investment over several years. This is not a party political point, but investment in the underground system pre-war—

Mr. Bercow: Which war?

Mr. Darvill: The second world war. There was significant investment in the underground system before the war. Had that rate of investment been maintained during the latter part of the century, we would not be facing today's difficulties. The major part of the blame for the failure to maintain investment must rest with the party that was in power for most of that period. I do not deny that the Labour party was in power for some of that time, and bears part of the responsibility, but the Conservative party was in power for most of the period during which such investment could have been maintained. That failure has to be reversed.

Whatever the organisational or ownership system for the underground—whether it is privatised, whether a PPP is involved or whether the situation is left as it is—investment is crucial. My constituents are concerned about the tube's future, but the Opposition motion only expresses concern about the PPP.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason for the deterioration, and for the increase in the number of people expressing concern about value for money, is that more people are using the tube because the Government are putting more people into work, and those people have to travel?

Mr. Darvill: My hon. Friend makes a good point about a contributory factor. Other factors include the effect of congestion on our roads and pricing on the underground. Travelcards, which I know are not available to rush-hour travellers, represent good value for money and are used by many of my constituents, who can travel after 9.30 am from Upminster to the other side of London for a good price. That has led to an increase in the use of the underground system. Although it is possible further to expand that use, expansion is limited by capacity problems. We therefore need increased investment, which will help to develop integrated transport policies. Important environmental issues are also involved. We should not consider any of those problems in isolation, and we need to deal with them quickly.

My constituents tell me that, however we decide to attract investment, we must get on with the job. They want investment sooner rather than later and I am happy to examine the PPP, which is a way forward. Although I appreciate that there are concerns about it, some of them are the result of scaremongering. The underground system should be comfortable, clean, reliable and safe—that is what constituents want and, when the investment goes in, that is what will be delivered.

The Opposition motion refers to the appointment, which I welcome, of a senior management official. I urge the Government to provide any information necessary for him to do his work properly—subject, of course, to the consideration that commercial confidentiality should be protected. If we are going through a bidding process and trying to get best value for the public purse, commercial confidentiality is important. Subject to that consideration, all the information should be made available.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend cites the importance of commercial confidentiality. Is he aware that Mr. Kiley gave an undertaking about the confidentiality of the material? Does my hon. Friend not believe Mr. Kiley, given that Mr. Kiley spent 10 years in the CIA?

Mr. Darvill: I am afraid that I cannot answer my hon. Friend's question. If I were responsible for commercial contracts and I wanted to get the best bid, I would want to secure commercial confidentiality. Subject to that consideration—it may be possible to extract the information from the relevant documents—my view is that information should be passed on as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

The Opposition motion is ill timed because the Government have already said that they are having meetings with Mr. Kiley. Legislation involving the PPP is on the statute book, and the problem, as I see it, lies with its implementation. The sooner we introduce the arrangements, the better. I urge the House to reject the Opposition motion and to support the Government amendment.

6.8 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I am delighted to take part in the debate not only because I see many veterans on both sides of the House from the Standing Committee that considered the Greater London Authority Act 1999, but because, although I often describe myself as an inhabitant of Middlesex, I am also a Londoner. In this instance, I feel that I am an inhabitant of Metroland: Uxbridge is the sort of area that was described by Sir John Betjeman.

The fact that no main line runs through Uxbridge is, apparently, as a result of the love of non-conformism among inhabitants of Uxbridge, who were not keen for trains to travel through the area on a main line on Sundays. I like to think that such non-conformism is still present in Uxbridge and surrounding areas.

No doubt hon. Members on both sides of the House will be well acquainted with the journey to Uxbridge. They will know that my constituency contains three underground stations: Uxbridge, Hillingdon and Ickenham. I used to travel to school on the underground—

Mr. Pound: Tell us about it, John.

Mr. Randall: And I used to travel on the underground when I was at university. So I have a certain affection for the experience of being bumped around on the Metropolitan and Piccadilly lines at various times of the day and night.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend allow me?

Mr. Randall: Yes.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way.

[Mr. Bercow]

Will my hon. Friend accept from me that the most pleasurable journeys on the London underground to the Uxbridge station that I have ever in my life undertaken took place during the July 1997 by-election campaign, in which he was so triumphant?

Mr. Randall: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure that he enjoyed that time as much as every other Member.

Many of my constituents use the underground to get to work, and many aged over 60 or 65 are very grateful for the free pass that enables them to travel to London: it is often used.

We are very interested in the future of the underground. I agree with the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) that many people will think about it carefully when casting their votes at the forthcoming general election. It might therefore be in my interest to encourage the Government to continue their present line on the PPP, which is deeply unpopular throughout the area, but I think that if I did so I would do a disservice to my constituents, and to fellow Londoners.

As I said earlier, many Members who are present today were involved in the Committee stage of the Greater London Authority Bill. We had hardly any time for discussion, and what we discussed was not what happened in the end.

Mr. Pound: It was because of the Liberals.

Mr. Randall: Most things are.

I am glad that our motion allows such open-mindedness to operate in today's discussion. The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) offered the Government a very fair option: to let Mr. Kiley himself decide what was preferable. It was refreshing to hear the hon. Gentleman propose a solution in which dogma would not decide the issues that matter to London.

As we have elected a Mayor, I think it fair to say this: most people voted for him thinking that he would sort out London's transport problems, and most of them would like the Mayor and his office to get on with the job with which they believe they entrusted him. Many of my constituents will be sad to learn that he has been constrained by the Government. If the Government really are frightened of an independent assessment, as they seem to be, that is a sad indictment.

As I think is recognised, what we need is real investment. The infrastructure is not in a good state. I want to look to the future: I want to see imagination being used. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) mentioned projects to extend the tube in his constituency, and I ask the Minister again to consider the possibility of extending the Central line to Uxbridge.

On one occasion, during Question Time, I asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether he had considered that option. He told me that it had been looked at and rejected when the Government came to power. Subsequently, correspondence—delegated to the Minister, I believe—revealed the interesting fact that the Government had neither examined nor discussed the possibility, but had they done so they would no doubt have rejected it.

Another subject that crops up frequently during discussions about the underground is further access for disabled passengers. That too will require investment. In the case of some stations there is access to platforms, but getting on to trains is less easy, and there is always the problem at the other end: disabled people will probably want to get out of trains at a point where they cannot possibly do so.

The problem with Uxbridge is that it is a terminus, and for many years there has been no planning for car parking. There is no incentive for drivers to go to Uxbridge or, indeed, other stations in my constituency, and then to continue their journeys to the centre of London.

We have a problem. The service has been deteriorating. It is slow, and somewhat dirty; it is certainly not particularly attractive in the evenings, and we are subject to increasing delays. I hope that the Government will listen to Londoners of all political persuasions—and probably, the way things are now, of none—give the Mayor and his director of transport a level playing field, and give us the underground in London that we all want.

6.16 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): It is always difficult to follow the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). He oozes decency to such a degree that it is almost impossible to disagree with him—but we must struggle to do so, in the name of the people.

I have to say that there are occasions on which I do disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Given that he has issued a wish list for tube and infrastructure improvements in London Transport, however, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will recall that I may have written to him about the absence of a down escalator at Greenford station.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge made an important point about access for people with disabilities. The footings for the Greenford station escalator were installed in 1943, but because—sadly—the steel was needed elsewhere at the time, we now have footings but no escalator. Since then the people of Greenford—men and women carrying babies, shopping, luggage and now, under the present Government, enormous pay packets—have struggled personfully down the stairs, without an escalator, but knowing each time that the footings exist beneath their very feet.

The point made by the hon. Member for Uxbridge should not, however, distract us from some of the more unpleasant and, I have to say, overly politically partisan points made by other speakers who have not considered the issue of transport provision for London except in the narrowest of party political terms. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) made an extraordinary speech, in which he was unkind—indeed, beastly—to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies). He simply did not behave like a gentleman. I would expect better from one with his record.

I wish I could have asked the hon. Gentleman of what towering achievements during the 18 years of Conservative Government he was most proud. What were the enormous infrastructure improvements? What were the new track, signalling and equipment financing arrangements? What new tube stations were built? What,

apart from the Heathrow loop, was done to improve London's transport during those 18 dark, dank, dismal years?

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Pound: I recall them not, but I am sure I will be given a list now by the hon. Member for somewhere miles from London.

Mr. Jenkin: We completed the Victoria line, we ordered the Jubilee line extension, we built the docklands light railway, we ordered the Croydon Tramlink—would the hon. Gentleman like me to go on?

Mr. Pound: The hon. Gentleman is good at saying what he "ordered"; he is less good at saying what was actually delivered during that period. *[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) leads me to sympathise with the point made by the Leader of the Opposition in the popular press today that Scottish Members of Parliament should never be allowed to comment on matters relating to England. Perhaps bumptious bumpkins from Buckinghamshire should not be able to comment on issues relating to London. A prerequisite for participating in our debate tonight should be the possession of one, two or, in my case, three and a half tube stations.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pound: Yes, let us trade insults.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, I really am. I represent Buckingham, which is close to my heart. I have an agreeable residence there, to which I do not intend to invite the hon. Gentleman. However, he is woefully ignorant of the fact that I have had a home in London for 37 years. I probably know more tube stations than he has forgotten, and have forgotten more tube stations than he knows.

Mr. Pound: It is well known that the hon. Member for Buckingham arrived at his selection meeting in a borrowed helicopter. I would suggest that the sort of a chap who borrows a helicopter to go to a selection meeting is not overly familiar with London Transport.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not wish to delay proceedings unduly, and am greatly enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech. However, is it in order for one hon. Member to accuse another of borrowing something for which he paid and which left a large hole in his pocket?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that that is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Pound: I did not imply that the hon. Member for Buckingham managed to nick a helicopter from helicopter parking in Buckinghamshire. I was merely saying that the helicopter was not the hon. Gentleman's own.

Moving on to the substantive issue, I have a great deal of sympathy for the plea made by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) for an end to the arcane nonsense of angels dancing on the head of a pin, and an improvement in the service. I represent the western end of the District line where the position is intolerable—if it is not, I do not know the meaning of the word. We are pressure-cooked and steamed in the morning—if we are lucky enough to get on the damned train. When we get out of the train at the other end—assuming that we do, as I believe that many of my constituents do not emerge from that black hole—we are reamed, steamed and dry-cleaned.

That appalling and outrageous situation is matched in horror only by the sheer brass neck and utter effrontery of the Conservative party which, for 18 years, did virtually nothing to improve the situation, left us with a black hole of £1.2 million underfunding, cut all funding in the year before the election and required London Underground to break even at the end of every financial year, in one of the most ludicrous pieces of accounting practice ever seen in the world. Now, the Conservative party suddenly appears to be the champion of the tube passenger, which is amazing, considering that its former leader, Baroness Thatcher, memorably said that anyone over the age of 30 who travels on public transport is a failure. The Opposition motion on the Order Paper has, as we say round my way, more front than the Hoover building. It is outrageous for the Opposition to suggest that they are seeking to do anything other than score party political points and drive a wedge between the Labour party and our good friend the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone).

The hon. Member for Brent, East made a well-informed, cogent and important contribution in addressing the issue of safety. To be perfectly honest, I am agnoistic about funding, and do not care where the money comes from, as long as it comes. I would be quite happy if an Opposition Member chipped in and gave us a capital injection. The important things are the ownership of the underground system and its safety record.

I see no causative link between these two factors, but within six months of my being elected, there was an enormous train crash at Southall, which adjoins my constituency. When I went down there, I found that people were dealing with 21 different companies. Because of the fragmentation, it was impossible to try and identify any lines of control, command and communication. If the majority of Government Members wanted to privatise London Underground, fragment it and carve it up into a British Rail-type disaster, I could not bring myself to vote for that. Thankfully, that is not the case, and there is no suggestion that London Underground will be anything other than a single entity that is a publicly controlled and owned company.

The hon. Member for Brent, East made an important point, which must be addressed. He agreed that there will be one publicly owned, accountable, strategic company for the whole city. However, what about contractors and subcontractors? How can there be accountability, when contractors are subcontracting, as are the subcontractors themselves? Even the most monopolistic public body has contractors and subcontractors. To try to make the point that a public company is not a public company because it

[Mr. Pound]

may occasionally employ a subcontracted sparks on the signalling system is, if not mendacious, certainly whipping up scares without any valid ground.

Ms Abbott: With the greatest respect, my hon. Friend does not seem to understand the Government's proposals. The Government are putting in place proposals whereby three infracos are bidding for three separate contracts. There will not be a unified company in the way that my hon. Friend described.

My hon. Friend was flippant about the use of subcontractors. However, all the comments on the Hatfield disaster that I have seen have suggested that it was precisely because Railtrack hollowed itself out and contracted and subcontracted responsibilities for maintenance, that repairs were not done as quickly as they should have been.

Mr. Pound: I thank my hon. Friend for that. One of the hardest things is to try to have a sensible, logical debate in the long shadow of British Rail privatisation, which is an example of how not to privatise. It is unfortunate when people try to extrapolate from the splintered privatisation involving British Rail and Railtrack and compare that to London Transport. However, the proposals for London Transport are not comparable to those for British Rail, as we are not talking about several companies running tubes on a system owned by a different company. With respect, there is no comparison.

We have a transport system for our capital that is creaking at the seams because of under-investment over many years. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central made the point that more people may be using the tube, and I agree that capacity is an issue. However, London Transport was privately funded in the middle of the 19th century, mostly by American money. It was built privately, was used and cherished by Londoners, and did not even come into the public domain until after the first world war. The system was one in which ownership was not as important as reliability, punctuality, efficiency and safety, and we must concentrate on those factors now.

Under the Government's proposals, the idea is that assets will return to the public sector after they have been upgraded. I appreciate that, in politics, one should always look a gift horse in the mouth. However, in this case, we have as good a financial deal as we are going to get, and the only realistic alternative is for the entire country to pay to upgrade London Transport through taxation. I do not think that hon. Members could reasonably propose to do that. Bonds are an attractive option, at which we should look. However, that is not a free option, and the idea that a bond issue could be wholly self-financing is theoretical rather than practical. No one will fund a bond issue with nil return, as risk and exposure are involved and interest payments have to be met. The idea that such an issue could be completely ring-fenced and self-financing is more hopeful than practical.

The key issue is the need to take action now in the names of Londoners and to make safety paramount. The scares about fragmentation leading to Hatfield-type disasters are not appropriate, as that is not what is being proposed.

The motion deserves to be voted down. Any Opposition Member who supports it in the Lobby should hang their head in shame and ask themselves: what did we do during our 18 years that made the situation better? From where I stand—not the man on the Clapham omnibus, but the man on the District line in the morning—I see an underfunded tube system that is just about on the edge of disaster. We must rescue it. Let us do it in the name not of ideology, but of practicality and, above all, urgency.

6.30 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Surely what is right is what will be the right structure to secure quality of service, value for money and safety, not fatuous debates about who did what.

In the United States, bonds have been a successful way for municipalities, particularly the New York subway, to fund themselves. An interesting irony has not been drawn out. When politicians use bond funding, in essence it makes them and the organisation capitalist because their success rests on the efficiency and success of the operation. If a mayor of a major city faces the prospect of that city financing a collapse and refunding bond lenders, he and his party will not get elected again for a long time, so bond funding puts into politics and civil transport a strong capitalist motive.

I have no doubt about the ability of London, if politically endowed, to raise the money. Do not forget that it is as large as Switzerland. London's credit-worthiness would be undoubted. We are in an age where there is a great shortage of bonds. The problem with pension funds and annuities is that there are not enough bonds to invest in, so there would be ready demand for issued bonds.

The operation must service the interest—that goes without saying—but, stepping back, that option is likely to be cheaper than the public-private partnership investment option because there is no profit element involved. The crucial thing is: if it stayed wholly within the public sector, could the service be run as efficiently and as safely, and better, than under the PPPI structure that is proposed? I share the doubts of many. What has happened is that the Government have funked the full option of privatisation for a halfway house, which may not be the right way to run a major subway system.

I close by saying what others have said. The public want to know what the recommendations are. The United States has one of the best records in turning around past failures and making a success of them. No one can go to New York without feeling that it has a thoroughly efficient subway system, which, unlike many of those in continental Europe, is not a huge drag on the taxpayer, but there is one caveat: such bond issues must not have any central Government guarantee. That would undermine the whole discipline and process. To look at it the other way round, a risk of PPPI is that the Government are potentially more exposed to picking up the tab than they are by a municipal bond issue that is ring-fenced. As has tended to happen in rail and other sectors, it becomes irresistible for the Government to get involved in providing public sector money when things start to go wrong.

We have a new political situation. For better or worse, the new Mayor was elected on a particular mandate. We have staggered to where we are in terms of the proposals. It is so important for the long term that the position should be looked at anew, particularly in the light of the recommendations of Mr. Kiley, perhaps the world expert, on how it will be most practical to run London's subway for the future.

6.34 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I declare an interest as a current director and founder chair of Public Private Partnerships Programme, which is the local government private finance initiative company and which began to operate in 1996, under the previous Government. It is all party. We have Conservative Members, including a Member of the other place, Liberal Democrat Members and Labour Members. It has been uncontentious and an avenue for the investment of some £20 billion of funding, which is flowing into local government in a wide range of sectors, including education and social services.

We have public-private partnerships for hospitals. I was pleased that, today, the Secretary of State for Health has announced the PPP for my local hospital, Queen Mary's. I mention those to show that we are talking about something that, other than in respect of the underground, appears to have broad support. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) has mentioned Tramlink. One end of it was in Croydon. The other end was in Merton, where I had the great honour to serve as the leader of the council. I was pleased to see that PPP go forward.

I was not able to be in the House to listen to the contribution from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), but it surprises me that the number of PPPs that Brent council has had over the past three years has not been commented on by him, as far as I know, in the House at any time, so the problem does not seem to be the concept of PPPs.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend will be aware that people who object to the PPP do not object to PPPs in principle. They object to this misbegotten PPP.

Mr. Colman: I am glad that my hon. Friend believes that with all other PPPs, which run into many billions of pounds, there is no problem, but that there is a problem with this one. All of us—well, perhaps all of us; all sane Members—*[Interruption.]* I withdraw that. All Members who can see the clarity of the situation would oppose the view that has again been expressed by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), who I think I am still able to claim as a constituent—but perhaps he has moved on. The Conservatives' view appears to be based on privatising the underground. It is unvarnished—they see it disappearing into the private sector. We all know—it has been mentioned by other Members—what has happened in the past three years and the huge number of additional accidents that have occurred through privatisation of British Rail.

The second alternative, which seems to be espoused by Liberal Democrat Members, is bonds. What we opt for must provide best value, but the key point about bonds is that the risk is retained within the public sector; the risk is retained by the council tax payer and taxpayer. I am not keen that the risk be held by those taxpayers. That is not the way forward, especially given that such experience and expertise has built up over the past three years of the Labour Government.

Incidentally, I was pleased that the first legislation that we passed in the House in the current Parliament was the Local Government (Contracts) Act 1997, which sorted out the mess that the Tories had made of PPP. It sorted out who was going to do what and on what basis we could go forward to ensure that subsequent decisions were not deemed ultra vires. Our proposal went forward based on the utmost clarity.

My involvement with PPP came when I was elected as leader of Merton council. I had to travel from Morden to the City on the Northern line, which at that time was in a deplorable state. I am therefore pleased that, with colleagues, I have been able to persuade my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to go forward with a PFI PPP for the Northern line trains. That took some eight years to get through but the trains started to run under that arrangement last year. That success shows the incompetence of the Tories in trying to sort that out. I hope that, after the three to four years that we have had in government, the PPP that will emerge shortly for the underground will be something with which we are all happy on the basis of best value for taxpayers and the safety of London.

Mr. Brake: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain why Londoners voted overwhelmingly against PPP in the Greater London Assembly elections.

Mr. Colman: There were a number of issues in those elections: PPP, privatisation or bonds. We are now studying that range of options.

Other hon. Members have mentioned their constituencies. I give two vignettes about the District line, Wimbledon branch. East Putney station had to be restored after decades of dereliction under the previous Government. The work overran by nearly a year. I tried to obtain compensation for my constituents who live next to the station, but was informed by London Underground that, as it was itself performing the contract, it was unable to offer compensation.

In the other case, about two weeks ago, there were great delays, which were attributed to flooding, on the track between Wimbledon Park and Southfields. Although the reason given for the delays would seem to make sense, the track is on a 30 ft high embankment.

Clearly, in both cases, the contractor organised by London Underground failed to deliver that which it should have delivered. I want a public-private partnership that keeps accountability in the public sector, but enables private finance and management to be used on the infrastructure. I believe that such an arrangement would be the right one for the people of London.

6.40 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): This has been an important debate, and we have had some good speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) said, not only is this the fourth time that we have debated the tube, but all those debates have been held in Opposition time. It is a pity that the Government, who control so much of the House's timetable, have not initiated a debate on this topic and allowed hon. Members to have their say. One half-day Opposition debate is probably not sufficient to allow all hon. Members who wish to speak on the subject to do so.

We are all disappointed that the Deputy Prime Minister has not attended the debate, to speak and to listen. However, perhaps his absence is understandable, as the Government seem to have some "good news" Ministers

[Mr. Robert Syms]

and some "bad news" ones. The Deputy Prime Minister, when he is not in Tokyo or Delhi, seems to be one of those who attends when he has good news or there is money to give out, whereas the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), and his sidekick the other Under-Secretary the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), are wheeled out when there is a difficult debate or an Opposition day to deal with. Those two Ministers do their best, but perhaps their best is not good enough.

Today, the more the hon. Member for Streatham tried to describe the PPP, the glummer Labour Members became. They all seemed to realise that, at the next general election, they will have to explain the proposals on the doorstep, and that there is no way the proposals can be explained simply. Recently, while electing a new Blairite leader, even the modernised London Labour party could not stomach this PPP. I therefore tell Ministers to look not at those who are in front of them, but at those who are behind them. It is from behind them that their difficulties will come.

The London underground caters for 3 million trips per weekday, including journey-to-work trips made by 35 per cent. of people in central London. Additionally, about 90 per cent. of tourists use the tube during their stay. The tube annually generates more than £1.1 billion in fare revenue. It is a very important part of our capital's transport infrastructure, and it truly is the only real method of rapidly transporting large numbers of people around London.

We all want London to have good public transport. London is a world-class city and it deserves world-class transport. However, what is the Government's record? Although Ministers have been slow in dealing with the tube, that should not surprise us, as the hallmark of the Government's transport policy has been to think about things rather a lot, but to do very little. We are now three and a half years into this Government, but we are still discussing what Ministers will do to try to improve the situation.

As we learned on the previous Opposition day, this year the tube will receive £753 million—which is a substantial reduction on the £1,035 million that the previous, Conservative Government were investing in 1996–97. The tube needs more investment, but successive Governments have not invested enough in it. The fact, however, is that state-owned enterprises have to compete with hospitals, schools, social services, pensions and many other priorities. Therefore, as we have heard in previous debates, it is no wonder that the tube has occasionally been starved of investment.

A recent MSB survey stated:

> the number of regular users who see the Tube as poor value for money has doubled in a year, from 32 per cent. in 1999 to 65 per cent.

As the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said in his speech, there are significant problems with the tube. He cited the examples of one in six escalators not working, and a breakdown in the system every 16 minutes.

In a very thoughtful speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster likened being caught in the tube to being in the black hole of Calcutta. I think that we can all appreciate the difficulties that tube travel sometimes entails.

There have been criticisms that the PPP is over-complicated, and I think that hon. Members, after hearing the Minister try to explain the PPP, will agree with those criticisms. There is a question mark over whether the PPP structure will generate sufficient cost savings, and whether the proposals will provide value for money. The Library brief points out that fees for consultants working on the proposals already amount to £60.3 million. Originally, and optimistically, London Transport estimated that the total cost to establish the PPP would be £65 million.

There will also be significant costs involved in monitoring the PPP and negotiating and administering contracts. The hon. Member for Brent, East estimates that the PPP will entail more than 150 various contracts, all of which will provide very substantial work for the lawyers. Additionally, an endemic problem in such proposals is the difficulty of dividing risk between the private sector and the public sector. We also do not know how the proposed penalties and incentives will work.

The length of the contracts—30 years—has also come in for substantial criticism. As it is unrealistic to specify service levels for the next 30 years, there will have to be formal reviews. As Professor Stephen Glaister has argued, there are fundamental difficulties with 30-year contracts.

The hon. Member for Brent, East also made the very good point that some contracts will allow only 95 per cent. of performance targets to be met. There could, therefore, be reductions, in addition to the hoped-for improvements, in performance levels. It is a potential difficulty.

What assumptions have been made about the PPP? London Transport expects that, in the next 20 years, peak-time traffic will grow at 1 per cent. per annum, and that off-peak travel will grow quite significantly. It also assumes that fare income will increase by 40 per cent., mainly because of a greater volume of passengers. The assumptions are key ones. If the increase in passenger numbers occurs at peak time, there will be gridlock. Moreover, I am not quite sure how anyone can argue that there will be a very small increase at peak time and a substantial one at off-peak times.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said, the Jubilee line, which the previous, Conservative Government promoted, is an excellent line which has air conditioning and which demonstrates the tube's potential. The PPP does not seem to provide for new lines—new link lines such as the Croxley link line which my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) mentioned. We all have a shopping list for how best to increase the tube's capacity. I think, however, that the Government's PPP proposals will not deliver the substantial tube improvements that we all want.

Mr. Bob Kiley has been central to today's debate. On the PPP, he said:

> I have been trying to figure it out for about five weeks now and still haven't managed it. I have a rule that anything that takes that long to understand is not going to work.

The Minister said earlier that the Government had given information to Mr. Kiley. However, the hon. Member for Brent, East questioned that and said that Mr. Kiley had not been given the most up-to-date contract information. I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify what information has been given to Mr. Kiley. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said, it is interesting that the person who knows how to run such networks is being shut out by the Deputy Prime Minister, who has not had any experience of running such networks.

The Economist has described the PPP as

half baked and either naive or dishonest,

and the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs called it a "convoluted compromise". It is not a proposal that finds great favour with many of the bodies that have examined it.

There is a genuine lack of accountability. The Government do not seem to have obeyed the logic of their own arguments on devolution and the restructuring of government. We have a Mayor and an Assembly, and the responsibility for running most services will rest with them. It makes sense that the professional individual employed to run the services should have some input into the setting up of the organisation. I understand Ministers' worries that information may have to be provided. It is strange that we have a former employee of the CIA to whom the Government do not wish to give information.

This ill thought out proposal does not find favour with many people and I would be surprised if it became a reality. The electors of London will have ample opportunity to give their views on it at the next general election.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): It is a pleasure to serve before you today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is unable to be here today, but he has sent his A-team along in the shape of the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), and me.

We have had an interesting tour of the underground from Upminster to Uxbridge by way of Ruislip, Ealing and Putney. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) wisely chose not to discuss his party's own plans, but chose instead to place his talents at the disposal of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). The hon. Gentleman was, I am sure, grateful, but as he has so often demonstrated, he is perfectly capable of looking after himself.

Let me reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary: public-private partnerships are very different from the wholesale privatisations on which the Conservative party is still hooked. In the London Underground PPP, strategic control will be maintained by the public sector, which reports to the Mayor. Private companies will maintain and upgrade the hardware. London Underground will run the network, signals, stations, trains and safety. The Government believe that is the right way to lever in private sector investment and project management expertise while preserving the necessary safeguards that the travelling public need and deserve.

As in so many areas of the public sector, the Conservatives left behind a massive backlog of investment on the tube. They planned to cut tube spending still further, down to £161 million last year and to nought for the current financial year. They were also committed to repeating many of the mistakes that they made with the national railway system. They are so keen on selling off the tube that they have relaunched the policy twice in opposition, making it clear that they intend to break the tube into as many as five pieces.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said, we have already provided considerable extra funding to London Transport over the past three years.

Mr. Jenkin: Less than us.

Mr. Mullin: I shall come to that point in a moment. We have prevented any further increase in the investment backlog. We have invested on average more than £500 million in the core of the underground network in each of the past three years, compared to an average of £370 million a year over the lifetime of the previous, Conservative Government. With the additional funding that we have provided, London Transport will be able to invest £3.4 billion in the underground between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Most important, we have rejected outright privatisation in order to put in place a funding regime that will genuinely deal with the long-term needs of the underground. The London Underground PPP will enable us finally to reverse the historic decline of the tube. In contrast to the fragmented scheme proposed by the official Opposition, our scheme will preserve public accountability and a unified safety structure. Again in contrast to their "flog it and forget it" proposal, the assets will return to the public sector at the end of the contract in a much improved condition.

I shall try to address, in the short time available, some of the points raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) asked what would happen in the event of a contract failure. Should an infrastructure company fail, there would be a mandatory sale procedure under which the contract would be offered in the market. Ultimately, London Underground could take it back. The hon. Member for Brent, East is right to say that the banks would be recompensed, but he omitted to say that the entire shareholders' equity would be forgone. There would be no question, therefore, of anyone making a profit out of a failure.

On the timing of the safety case, London Underground expects to submit the case in December. It will be up to the Health and Safety Executive to improve it, and we expect that to be done by March 2001. Regarding the timing of the National Audit Office's audit of the public sector comparator, the NAO work will be completed before the selection of a preferred bidder, and it will be published. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members have asked some questions, and I am doing my best to reply to them. That is a fairly unusual feature in some winding-up speeches.

[Mr. Mullin]

The hon. Member for Brent, East mentioned that Mr. Kiley had not yet seen the bids. I hope that the hon. Gentleman—who is not in his place, for reasons that he explained earlier—will understand that this is an evolving relationship involving powerful market sensitivities, and we shall assess our approach in the light of those considerations. As was made clear at the outset, we are anxious to work closely with Mr. Kiley, and we shall do so.

The hon. Members for Brent, East and for Poole (Mr. Syms) suggested that the public sector comparator was out of date. The comparator was produced in March, and it was proper that that should have been done before the receipt of the bids. Obviously, work needs to be done to update the comparator and to reflect changes to the contract documentation. London Underground has offered to take Mr. Kiley through those issues.

The hon. Member for Brent, East said that companies had to meet only 95 per cent. of their performance targets. That is not strictly the case. The 5 per cent. starting benchmark is not a target indicating the level of performance that we expect from the PPP: it is merely a point of reference for determining rates of payment or abatement. To obtain the levels of return that they expect, bidders will need to achieve a substantially higher performance, and to have committed to doing so. The 5 per cent. benchmark applies not to performance across the board but to delays caused by asset failures such as train breakdowns or signal failures. Those vary enormously from year to year. In other words, the benchmark applies not to all the criteria, but only to one.

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) said that she did not expect any delays, while suggesting a number of ways in which the proposals could be delayed. We do not expect any delays in the PPP programme, but we are not going to be held to a timetable that would allow bidders to hold us to ransom. I am sure that when Opposition Members reflect on that, they will realise that it is sensible.

The hon. Member for Brent, East said, surprisingly, that bonds could be organised in a matter of weeks. I am advised that that is doubtful. Even the Industrial Society's report suggested that it could take up to two years. As the hon. Member for Beckenham said, we cannot afford delays of such length.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) was a little cheeky, I thought, in coming forward with a shopping list of projects, given that the previous Government contributed so little to investment in the underground.

The London Underground PPP is well on course to deliver around £13 billion worth of new investment and maintenance during the first 15 years of the contract, with more to follow after that. It will lead to reduced journey times, greater reliability, brighter stations, better trains, more capacity and, above all, greater safety and security. It means that the tube will be publicly owned, publicly run and publicly accountable. The difference is that now it will be properly funded as well.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 180, Noes 287.

Division No. 326] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John

Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha

Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 177.

Division No. 327] **[7.15 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*

Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howarth
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's implementation of its manifesto commitment to create a Public Private Partnership for London Underground which will bring in £8 billion of new investment and up to £5 billion worth of maintenance over the next fifteen years--leading to faster, more reliable journeys and a safer, more attractive Underground of the kind Londoners deserve; supports the doubling of the resources available to the Mayor for transport in London over the next three years; condemns the previous Government's record of under-investment in transport and in particular their erratic investment in London Underground, which left it with a £1.2 billion backlog; and deplores the Official Opposition's plans to privatise London Underground, which will fundamentally undermine public accountability.

Millennium Dome

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Before I call the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) to move the Opposition motion, I should inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.26 pm

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the financial mismanagement of the New Millennium Experience Company; notes with concern that the cost to Lottery funds has exceeded the budget by £229 million; believes that this represents a serious waste of public funds; and regrets that Ministers have neither apologised nor accepted responsibility for the failure of this national project.

The House last had an opportunity to debate the dome on 21 February. On that occasion, the House approved a Government amendment that expressed the view that the millennium experience represented

an excellent celebration for the people of this country and a tangible and enduring legacy for future generations.

The Government majority also welcomed

the announcement that the New Millennium Experience Company team will be introducing improvements which deliver even greater value for money both to the paying visitor and to the Millennium Commission.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1348.]

That is what the Government required Labour Members to support, and they duly did so, making themselves look absurd.

Tonight, we are offering those Members the chance to redeem themselves by supporting our motion, which reflects both the facts and the vast body of public opinion.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ainsworth: I suppose so.

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman—so gracious and courteous—was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the former dome Minister, Virginia Bottomley—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that he should refrain from using the name of any Member to whom he refers.

Mr. MacShane: When pulchritude and the name go together, I dare make a mistake, Madam Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) is a former Secretary of State for National Heritage. The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) was her PPS at the time when she promoted the dome and when the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)—now Leader of the Opposition—crawled on his knees to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—then Leader of the Opposition—to ask for our support. If the hon. Member for East Surrey has problems with the dome, will he confess his own involvement in it and apologise for it?

Mr. Ainsworth: That was hardly worth giving way for, but I am delighted to have the pivotal role that I played in the past Conservative Administration recognised at last. One of my proudest memories is that I had the honour to serve as Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley). If the hon. Gentleman has followed matters at all, he will know that I was indeed—I confess it freely—an enthusiast for the dome project at that time. Unlike Labour Members, however, I am quite prepared to admit that the whole thing has been an unmitigated failure and to express my regrets about that.

Some £628 million of lottery money has been wasted. The Ministers responsible have, at least in the eyes of the public, been disgraced. A lot of water has flowed under the closed millennium bridge since we last debated the dome, and hundreds of millions of pounds worth of lottery money with it.

The original lottery funding was £399 million; about a year ago, the project received an extra draw-down facility—repayable—of £50 million; it received £60 million in February; £29 million in May; £43 million in August; and an extra £47 million in September. That is the shameful record of the dome's miserable year.

Getting to the truth about what went wrong with the project has been a slow and painful process.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) *rose—*

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman rises on cue.

Mr. McCabe: The hon. Gentleman tells us that he is convinced that the dome has been an unmitigated disaster. Did he support his former boss, the right hon. Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), when she extended the life of the Millennium Commission in order to cover the funding because the Conservatives knew that their financial projections would not hold up?

Hon. Members: That is a good question.

Mr. Ainsworth: It is a very silly question, because no one in their right mind could have imagined that, under Labour, the project would have cost an extra £239 million.

Getting to the truth about the project has been slow and painful, but one by one, like rotten teeth, the facts are beginning to be extracted. It was not the fault of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport but an indictment of Ministers that, after numerous inquiries, last summer the Committee was forced to admit that

it has been virtually impossible to ascertain the precise budgetary position of the New Millennium Experience Company.

We have pointed out previously that the whole scheme was characterised by a lack of candour that ill befits a major public project. The problem began with the appointment of the man who is now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), as sole shareholder—[Hon. Members: "Where is he?"] We should have realised that trouble was coming because, when the right hon. Gentleman was appointed, he complained to the Select Committee about the "excessive accountability" of the dome. The Government do not like accountability. But the public will hold them accountable.

The report of the National Audit Office, which was published last week and which is to be the subject of detailed consideration by the Public Accounts Committee

on Wednesday, at last revealed something of the truth. In clinical prose, it charted the decline and fall of new Labour's flagship project and shed light on a sordid tale of expediency, vanity, half-truths and evasions.

The Minister who has been responsible for the dome for the past 23 months is not in this House—indeed, Lord Falconer is not accountable to this House. When the right hon. Member for Hartlepool was forced to resign his former ministerial position—in short-lived disgrace—we urged the Government to appoint a non-controversial figure in his place: someone with relevant operational skills, who knew something about running a visitor attraction. Instead, we got a man whose only previous claim to fame was that he once shared a flat with the Prime Minister and had apparently had something to do with a May ball at Cambridge.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Does the hon. Gentleman recall the comments of his right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who, in the most offensive terms, castigated Labour Front-Bench spokesmen in opposition for rubbishing the dome for cynical political gain? Is that not exactly what the hon. Gentleman is trying to do?

Mr. Ainsworth: Absolutely not; I am trying to give the House an opportunity to express a verdict on the dome. No doubt it will do so later.

Lord Falconer's responsibilities for the dome are helpfully set out in the NAO report. Those responsibilities include

> setting the strategic direction of the company and monitoring it in terms of cost.

That failed. Lord Falconer had responsibility for content—failed; for national impact—failed; for legacy—failing; and for effective management—pull the other one.

The report makes it clear that, since August last year, Lord Falconer attended 16 of the 22 board meetings and was represented at two. He must have known what was going on, but when PricewaterhouseCoopers produced its report on the dome in September, with damning evidence of the sorry state of the project's finances, he wrote—on 21 September—that he was "shocked" by its findings. Despite his assiduous attendance record as a shadow director, was he the only person who did not know how bad things had become?

On 20 February, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport wrote to Lord Falconer stating that

> It seems possible that the board failed to take decisive action until after a date when the company became technically insolvent.

What did Lord Falconer think about that? On 25 May this year, after the dome had been granted a further £29 million of lottery money, why did he think that the directors had lined up to ask for indemnities for any wrongful trading actions brought against them by creditors? Did he think they were making that application for fun?

How did Lord Falconer respond to the letter from the chairman of NMEC of 14 July informing him that the finances had further deteriorated, or to the information that the commission's view was that the company might run out of money within two weeks and might require an additional £45 million? Did he think that it was all a storm in a Chianti bottle?

In the light of what Lord Falconer must have known, how truthful was it of him to tell the House of Lords on 17 July that the company was trading solvently? Six days after the warnings about the need for additional funds, he told Parliament:

> I repeat: the National Millennium Experience Company is confident that it will deliver the project within its lifetime budget of £758 million.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 July 2000; Vol. 615, c. 1162.]

How truthful was that?

How did the Secretary of State feel about those bland reassurances? What action did he take to the set the record straight? As chairman of the Millennium Commission, he has acted as banker to the project for the past three and a half years. Twice, his accounting officers advised that granting the dome extra money would not represent a proper or prudent use of public funds. Twice, the Secretary of State has been party to overruling that advice.

The Government claimed that it was in the national interest to bail out the dome. It was not. It was in the interest of the Labour party and, in particular, of the Prime Minister in whose image the whole project was fashioned by his cronies the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Lord Falconer.

What use are reassurances from the Secretary of State in any case? When he replied to my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), who had rightly inquired about the additional grant of £60 million that had just been made, the Secretary of State said:

> I strongly point out to the hon. Gentleman that such funding will and must be repaid.—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 764.]

Will the right hon. Gentleman repeat that clear assurance? Will the money be repaid? The right hon. Gentleman will not answer because—like the remainder of the £230 million overspend—the money will not be repaid.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): My hon. Friend sets out a damning indictment of the stewardship of Lord Falconer and of the Secretary of State. However, might not Lord Falconer say that what was really wrong with the dome was the rubbish that was put inside it—the trite content? Is that not entirely the fault of the current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. The content of the dome is a serious disappointment; it is a bossy mish-mash of reproving statements, improving statements and childish gimmicks. If the content had been half way decent, there would not have been such a problem with visitor numbers.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Does my hon. Friend recollect that the taxpayer had to pay for the visit to the United States of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool so that he could see how the Disneyland attractions were run because he had sole charge of the design of the dome's contents? Did we receive any value for that money? Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman could not run an attraction as well as Mickey Mouse.

Mr. Ainsworth: My right hon. Friend is right. The visit to Disneyland showed clearly the right hon. Gentleman's involvement in the content and his responsibility for its failure.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): If the content of the dome is so bad, will the hon. Gentleman comment on the fact that 88 per cent. of visitors said that they were very satisfied with their visit and with the content?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman raises a sensitive point. Clearly, if the number of people attending the dome had gone half way towards expectations, the Government would not have this problem now. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] If Labour Members will give me a chance, I will answer. It is not that difficult to have a good day out with the children. One can have a good day out with the children in Hyde park, but it did not cost £400 million or £600 million to develop Hyde park so that people could have a decent time there.

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham) *rose—*

Mr. Ainsworth: I shall not give way just yet.

The Secretary of State's failure to answer my question about whether any of the money will be repaid has been noted by the House. In answer to a question asked by the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), the right hon. Gentleman said that he had

> made it clear to the New Millennium Experience Company that it must operate within the budget now set for it. I was delighted that Mr. Gerbeau has confirmed on a number of occasions that he will not be returning to the Millennium Commission for extra funds.—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2000; Vol. 353, c. 612.]

Well, £90 million pounds later, we know the value of that assurance.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman, and I must say that the words "pot" and "kettle" come to mind. Will he consider the comment of the National Audit Office:

> By June 1996 it had become clear that the private sector would not accept the risk associated with mounting the exhibition . . . ?

On mature reflection, does the hon. Gentleman not think that that might have been the right time at which to pull the plug on this deplorable effort so that we would not incur further enormous liabilities?

Mr. Ainsworth: No. The hon. Gentleman—who, as far as I am aware, has never been responsible for running anything—is talking nonsense. If he is patient, I shall come to the point about who is responsible for the failure of the project.

A little space should be found in the hall of shame for the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting, who is sitting on the Front Bench smiling. In May, she told the House:

> The investment in the millennium dome has a huge halo effect round the country.—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 486.]

In July, when I asked her whether anyone in the Government would apologise, she said:

> There is no need to apologise.—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2000; Vol. 353, c. 608.]

Her tone was a little different last week when she said:

> The Government are the first to acknowledge that the dome has not been the success for which everyone hoped."—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 9.]

Despite that, we have yet to hear an apology from any member of the Government for the deplorable waste of public funds that have been sunk into the dome. It has been obvious to everyone that the project has been a disaster from the opening night, if not before.

Mr. Paul Clark: The hon. Gentleman asks for an apology, but I have yet to hear him refer to the Opposition's record. I want to give him the opportunity to confirm something for the record. Will he confirm that his right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, was a member of the GEN 36 Committee, the Cabinet Sub-Committee that was involved in the planning, financing and co-ordination of the millennium dome?

Mr. Ainsworth: That was another rather silly point. There is no secret about the fact that the dome project was conceived under the Conservative Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Labour Members think that they have discovered something new, but it is utterly risible to suggest that we are trying to pretend that we had nothing to do with the conception of the project, which none the less suffered a hideous trauma between its conception and its birth under this Government.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): On that point, can the hon. Gentleman name the date by which Conservative Members suddenly thought that the project had become a disaster? Will he also tell the House exactly how much private sector money the previous Government had managed to raise by 1 May 1997?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman is clearly unaware that, after the general election in 1997, and throughout 1998, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham and I were constantly approached by Ministers, including Lord Falconer, begging for our support for the project. The one thing that I seriously regret is that we did not urge the Government to cancel the project while there was still time to do so—although I doubt very much whether they would have taken our advice.

Everyone knows that the project has been a disaster for at least the past two and a half years. We warned Ministers that it was going wrong, but they did not heed our advice. The Deputy Prime Minister once famously said:

> If we can't make this work we're not much of a Government.

He was unaware that things were going wrong. In answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the right hon. Gentleman said in his inimitable prose:

> On the right hon. Gentleman's point about my comments on whether the dome would be a success and that that should be a measure of the Government's competence, I happen to believe that it has been a success.—[*Official Report*, 24 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 965.]

The Deputy Prime Minister said that midway through the year, when the dome had already received two injections of extra lottery funds. By then it had consumed an additional £139 million.

The Government's attempts to portray the dome as a success have been farcical, but not as farcical as their latest attempts to pin all the blame for everything that

has gone wrong on the previous Government. Their first reaction to the project's failure was to go into denial. After all, in the words of the Prime Minister, it was to be

> the first paragraph of my next election manifesto.

After the Prime Minister had said that, the Government knew that they could not allow the dome to fail. But they did allow it to fail and, when all the spin and the hype were overwhelmed by the cold sad truth of squandered money and wasted opportunity, they turned like cornered rats and said that it was all our fault.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would have had to be a pretty good project to attract people to London from the north-west of England? It would cost families quite a sum of money to make such a visit. I have only spoken to five people from my constituency who have been to the dome. Is it not natural that they should compare the money that has been wasted on the dome with what could have been achieved for schools, education and law and order in the north-west?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend makes a good point. If the content of the dome had been up to scratch, people would have travelled from far and wide to see it.

Mr. McCabe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ainsworth: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman has already had his chance.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will answer the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and tell us whether he will scrap the new opportunities fund, which puts money precisely into health, education and the environment?

Mr. Ainsworth: The Secretary of State goes on and on about that point. He will have to be patient: we will announce our policies at the appropriate time.

Nobody believes the Government on the subject of the dome: nobody believes them when they say that it is a success and nobody believes them when they try to blame us. What people see is a Government who are prepared to take the credit for everything and responsibility for nothing.

We know from the National Audit Office report that, after the election, the Government reviewed the entire project. We know that they reviewed the visitor number forecasts and that they ignored the advice of Deloitte Touche and of Millennium Commission officials. The Government decided on a forecast of 12 million visitors. The Government are responsible for the visitor forecast and they are responsible for the content, for the budget and for the decision by Lord Falconer to insist on 1 million free school visits against the advice of the board. That blew a huge hole in the dome's finances. The Government have also been responsible for the appalling media relations: both before and during this year, the dome has been a public relations nightmare.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ainsworth: If I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to put his hand up and admit responsibility for the gross financial mismanagement of the dome, I would be willing to give way, but I suspect that he is not going to do that.

We also know why the Government decided to go ahead with the project. The Prime Minister himself ordained that they should go ahead at the fateful Cabinet meeting on 19 June 1997. Despite the misgivings of a majority of the Cabinet, the Government went ahead with the project. Despite the Chancellor's rather ludicrous suggestion that the project should meet five key tests—we have heard that somewhere before—the Prime Minister announced the same day that the project would proceed. He said:

> In the year 2000 all the eyes of the world will be on Britain—

Would that they might avert them now! He continued:

> This is our chance to make a statement of faith in our capacity to do things bigger and better than anyone else.

The Government's attempts to blame the Conservatives for their own failings are undignified and would be laughable were they not so contemptible and cowardly. Indeed, the Prime Minister's antics have become frankly comic, although his behaviour is more akin to that of Alan B'stard than to that of Jim Hacker. We now know that Lord Falconer has not resigned because he is acting as a human shield for the Prime Minister.

The Foreign Secretary summed up the position when he said on 19 June 1997:

> We can always blame the Tories if we stop now. If we go ahead we'll have to take the blame if the whole lot goes wrong.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Exactly right.

Mr. Ainsworth: Indeed, but that does not say much for the Foreign Secretary's political morality.

The future of the dome is yet again uncertain. Doubts have persisted over whether the proposed deal with Legacy will go ahead. The task facing the Government is to ensure that, by selling the dome, they achieve a maximum return to lottery players and a maximum national gain in terms of long-term jobs and regeneration on the site. It is not possible to understand how that will be achieved by engaging in a hole-in-the-corner discussion with a single bidder which happens to have donated large sums to the Labour party and the Secretary of State's constituency association.

The site's future should be thrown open to fresh competition. Retaining the dome itself should not be a condition of the sale. Most people would rather have some of their money back after this dreadful year than see the dome retained as a symbol of a Prime Minister's vanity. As it is, there is a real risk that in the coming months the dome will stand idle and empty, a mute but powerful reminder of the cynicism, cronyism, arrogance and wastefulness of an incompetent and discredited Government. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool said that the closing ceremony would

> reflect the full breadth and success of the celebrations that we have planned.—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 473.]

How right he was for once. On 31 December, someone will quietly switch off the lights for the last time—but the memory of the dome's one appalling year will stay fresh in the public's mind and they will not forgive this Government.

7.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

welcomes the publication of the National Audit Office report, which gives a detailed account of events at the Dome; agrees that politicians of all parties involved in the project share responsibility both for the successes in regenerating this depressed part of South East London and its failings to reach its original visitor estimates; and deplores the decision by Her Majesty's Opposition not to support the original bi-partisan nature of this national project.

I begin by offering you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my warm congratulations on the assumption of your august office. I am sure that every hon. Member would join me in that. May I also say that, as ever, I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate the dome on the Floor of the House.

I was somewhat surprised that the Opposition decided to pre-empt the Public Accounts Committee hearing scheduled for Wednesday. I very much regret that they are effectively undermining the PAC deliberations by tabling a motion that asks the House to anticipate the PAC.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Secretary of State makes a fair point. Will he guarantee us another Opposition day before Christmas?

Mr. Smith: The allocation of Opposition days is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. Their precise content is entirely a matter for the Opposition.

The Government have already welcomed the National Audit Office report, which gives a detailed and accurate account of the origins of the dome and of the events during its year of operation. We welcome the PAC's inquiry and we will work fully with it.

We recognise the problems that the dome has faced. In particular, it is a matter of great regret to all of us who had high hopes for the project that the original visitor target will not be met. That has been at the root of all the dome's problems this year. It has led to a 65 per cent. drop in visitor revenue and the consequent need for additional lottery funding. It has placed enormous strain on NMEC as it sought to attract visitors by introducing better marketing and developing the product on offer.

Mr. Redwood: When Ministers said at various times throughout the year that no more money would be available, were they misleading the House or was the company trading when it was insolvent? Which is it?

Mr. Smith: It is neither. When I informed the House of the comments made by Mr. P-Y Gerbeau in July—the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) referred to this—I was reporting exactly what Mr. Gerbeau had said about his intentions and hopes for future visitor numbers.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: In that case, was Mr. P-Y Gerbeau misleading the Secretary of State?

Mr. Smith: We now know with hindsight that Mr. Gerbeau was wrong. That is public knowledge.

In the conclusions to the NAO report, the Comptroller and Auditor General said:

it is clear that the main cause of the financial difficulties is the failure to achieve the visitor numbers and income required.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Mr. Keith Bales, a former senior Disney executive, told the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in 1997 that no one on the board of NMEC

has ever run, managed, designed or promoted in any way whatsoever a major international leisure attraction.

He went on to say that he did not believe in the visitor numbers. Why, therefore, has it taken the Government three years to go cap in hand back to Disney to get professional help to sort out the problems? Was it because the Government were so arrogant that they knew best? Does the Secretary of State think that he should have gone to Disney sooner?

Mr. Smith: No, but that is the first sensible point that the Opposition have made this evening. There is a genuine issue about whether it is right for the Government to seek to run, or to be involved in the running of, a visitor attraction. We have recognised for some time that we got that wrong. We have accepted that. Bringing in Mr. Gerbeau in February this year was almost certainly bringing him in too late. We now know that. One lesson that we have to learn from the story of the dome is that, with a project of this size and scale, we need to ensure that the experts are brought in to run it from an early date.

Mr. Ainsworth: May I take the Secretary of State back to the inaccurate information that he says P-Y Gerbeau gave to him. If P-Y's information was wrong, are we to take it that the company was trading insolvently, albeit without P-Y Gerbeau's knowledge? If that is the case, what does it say about the competence of Lord Falconer, who is the shareholder and Minister responsible?

Mr. Smith: The issue of trading insolvently is appropriate only if a company has no reasonable expectation of being able to trade itself out of insolvency. Each time Lord Falconer and others came to Parliament on this matter, there was every expectation either that the issue of inadequate funds was about to be resolved or that it had just been resolved. That is the point that the hon. Gentleman needs to take into account.

Mr. Redwood: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: No, I must make some progress.

I agree with the Comptroller and Auditor General's conclusions. He is right to identify the reduction in visitor numbers as the main source of the dome's difficulties, although there were other issues, to which I shall come in a moment or two.

It is of course very disappointing that the dome will not meet its original visitor target of 12 million. Since the Millennium Commission set out its guidelines for a national exhibition in 1995, many Members on both sides of the House have shared its aspirations for an exhibition to rival those of 1851 and 1951. Those guidelines suggested that the millennium exhibition should attract between 15 million and 30 million people. That was a

laudable ambition, but one which, with the benefit of hindsight, we know to have been seriously over-optimistic. We must all—on both sides of the House—put up our hands and admit that we got it wrong. I am happy to do so. Indeed, all of us on both sides of the House need to accept that there were things about the project, especially the visitor number projections, that we simply got wrong.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, I remind him that, in 1995, the Millennium Commission, chaired by the then Secretary of State for National Heritage, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), set an aim of 15 million visitors; that in July 1995, the aim had become between 15 million and 30 million visitors; that on 18 January 1996, the target was 10 million visitors; that in February of that year, the target was between 10.9 million and 16 million visitors; and that, by 11 December 1996, the target had become 13.5 million visitors. That is the story of expectations throughout that period, so we shall take no lessons from the Conservative party about the mistakes that were undoubtedly made. Members on both sides of the House were responsible for getting it wrong.

Mr. Gale: Having come from "We'll take the credit" to "Let's please share the blame", the Secretary of State should be referred to page 4 of the National Audit Office report, which we are in effect debating. Referring to May 1997, paragraph 16 states:

> At that stage, however, final decisions had not been made on the Dome's contents, on ticket prices, on marketing strategies, and on whether there would be access to the area by car for the purposes of dropping off and picking up.

In other words, every major decision, other than the decision to have the spiked hut, was taken by this Government. If there were a shred of honour left in the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and for Culture, Media and Sport, or in Lord Falconer, all three would resign.

Mr. Smith: I hesitate to point out to the hon. Gentleman that the decision to build the dome was taken under the previous Government; that the decision to build it at Greenwich was taken under the previous Conservative Government; that the original chairman and chief executive of the dome company were appointed by the previous Government; that the corporate structure was decided by the previous Government; that the use of lottery money to support the project was decided under the previous Government; and that the role of the shareholder was created under the previous Government. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is simply unworthy of his usual high standards.

Mr. Maples: The long list of things that the Secretary of State said were decided by the previous Government omitted the content of the dome. I took my family, along with another family, to the dome very early in January. We all thought that we would have had a lot more fun at the local fair and learned a lot more at the science museum. The problem with the project is not the concept, the space or the wonderful tube ride to get there but the trite content. Nobody blames the Secretary of State for that; he is much too civilised to have passed off such rubbish as appropriate content. It is surely the fault of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and he ought to be answering this debate.

Mr. Smith: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is a fan of the science museum and that he can now take his children to it for free following our decision. His experience differs markedly from 88 per cent. of visitors to the dome, who come away saying that they have had a really enjoyable time and would recommend it to their friends.

In the context of the history of the project, I find the attitude of the hon. Member for East Surrey and his party leader pretty unedifying. One—the hon. Member for East Surrey—was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for National Heritage, and the other sat on the Cabinet Committee that decided to take forward the exhibition under the previous Government. When the previous Government set up that Committee, the then Secretary of State announced on 28 February 1996 that, in order to ensure that the Government's participation in that significant national event was well planned and co-ordinated, she had asked the First Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister to convene a ministerial group. The Leader of the Opposition was a member of that ministerial group from the outset; the public record confirms it. I do not think it unreasonable, in the light of the Opposition's comments in this debate, to point out that they were in it from the start.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Smith: No, I want to make some progress.

Now we have an Opposition, including the hon. Gentleman, who engage in what I would call not so much shuttle diplomacy as shuttle expediency: when something is going well, one goes ahead with it, giving it all one's support and praising it to the skies; but when it turns out three months later to be unpopular with the media, here are the Opposition going in the opposite direction, saying that the project is a complete disaster and was nothing whatever to do with them in the first place.

I remind the hon. Gentleman of what he said, not in 1995 or 1996 but in the middle of 1999:

> I enjoy visiting the dome, and I have seen a major transformation on that site since it was a barren wasteland.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1999; Vol. 335, c. 674-75.]

Not to be outdone, the Leader of the Opposition said of the dome on 23 December 1999:

> I think it's now the job of all politicians to make a success of it. So we shall go there and join in the party.

Perhaps most significant of all, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey, said when presenting to the House in December 1996 the decision to go ahead with the dome:

> we believe that the potential for tourism is important, not only nationally—15 million visitors are expected—but internationally.—[*Official Report*, 28 February 1996; Vol. 272, c. 888-90.]

Mr. Ainsworth: The Secretary of State is merely reiterating the point that the Conservatives had the original vision for the dome. He knows perfectly well that we did

[Mr. Ainsworth]

not want this thing to be the failure that it has become. We warned the Government that, if they went ahead as they were going, it might be such a failure. It is their fault that the project has become a failure. At least we can recognise that, now that it has.

Has the Secretary of State read the National Audit Office report? If he looks at paragraph 1.27, he will see that all his points fall away. It states clearly:

> The then Official Opposition agreed to these arrangements, but reserved the right to review every aspect of the delivery of the project if elected to Government. The new Government undertook such a review.

The figures were the Secretary of State's; it was the Government's decision.

Mr. Smith: Not only the original concept but the structure of the company, the decision to go ahead with it and the original visitor number expectations, which are at the heart of the NAO report, were put in place by the previous Government.

The hon. Member for East Surrey has spoken about my noble Friend Lord Falconer of Thoroton. The previous Government recognised the national significance of the project by appointing a Minister the sole shareholder in the operating company. We retained those arrangements because we believe that it was right that a national project of such scale should be subject to ministerial accountability. As an NMEC shareholder, Lord Falconer is accountable to Parliament through the other place for the Millennium Experience. That means that he needs to take an active interest in the project's development and progress along the critical path. However, that is very different from interfering in day-to-day management, which is the responsibility of NMEC's board.

I especially deplore the cheap political point scoring to which the Opposition have sunk—

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Mr. Smith: Right on cue, here is the right hon. Gentleman to make more cheap political points.

Mr. Redwood: The Secretary of State gave an interesting answer earlier: he said that the company was not trading when insolvent because it had a reasonable expectation of getting more money—and, as we know, the money came from the Millennium Commission, the taxpayer and the millennium fund contributor. Is he not telling us, therefore, that the Minister was saying one thing to the company to reassure it that money would be made available, and another to Parliament, which was told that no money would be made available?

Mr. Smith: No, I do not agree with that analysis.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: Yes, because it is the right hon. Lady, but this must be the last time.

Mrs. Bottomley: Is the right hon. Gentleman not aware that all the public servants who have worked on the project bitterly resent the degree to which the Labour party has tried to party politicise the dome events? It tried to make it a glorious Sheffield rally by imposing Labour party imagery and ideology on the project—even launching it at the People's Palace, where Labour celebrated its campaign victory. A million free tickets for schoolchildren were given away in the face of advice from those within the organisation. The Labour party lost public support for the project by trying to turn it into a Labour party legacy.

Mr. Smith: No, if any party is trying to make party political capital out of the dome, it is the Conservative party.

Lord Falconer sets the strategic direction of the dome and monitors NMEC's progress against the criteria that we set it. He has been tireless in his defence of the dome and in his work to raise awareness of its achievements. He has shown leadership in standing by the dome's loyal staff, in visiting it regularly and in monitoring its progress through turbulent times. His job is an important one and he is doing it well in the teeth of enormous difficulty and flak. It is certainly not in the interests of the British people that he should resign.

Lord Falconer has never lost sight of the good things about the dome, and nor should we. Despite the undeniable problems identified by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the dome is a remarkable achievement. For a start, it is a stunning building, recognised as a great construction achievement and a triumph of British engineering for which the engineers, Buro Happold, won the prestigious Royal Academy of Engineering MacRobert award, which is Britain's premier prize for engineering.

Greenwich council, which has supported the project from the outset, is proud of what it has meant to one of London's poorest boroughs—and so it should be. In less than four years, the largest track of derelict urban wasteland in Europe has been transformed into a busy, attractive place—one where people want to live, in one of the new homes in the millennium village; a place where they want to shop, in Sainsbury's new store, which has just won a national award for environmental sustainability; a place where they want to stay in the new hotel and come to enjoy themselves at the millennium dome.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Given his enthusiasm for the structure, which I share, will the Secretary of State guarantee that the millennium dome will not be bulldozed?

Mr. Smith: I very much hope that the dome will not be pulled down, but the ministerial team—which, of course, does not include me—that will determine the future legacy of the dome will have to take into account the iconic nature of the structure, the regeneration effect that it can have and the best possible return to the lottery player and taxpayer. Those considerations must be carefully balanced by the team.

The construction phase of the dome and other developments on the peninsula have created employment for 8,700 people, and 5,500 are employed in the operation. Greenwich council predicts that 30,000 permanent jobs will be created in the borough within seven years as a result of the investment on the peninsula. The council is right to be proud of all that has been achieved.

The people who work at the dome are also proud of what they have achieved. They know that they are doing a good job because people tell them so: as I said, in a recent poll, 88 per cent. of visitors said that they had enjoyed their day at the dome and 94 per cent. that they had enjoyed the millennium show. Those satisfaction ratings are something of which to be proud, as is the fact that the dome has attracted more visitors this year than any other paying attraction in the UK: the dome's 4.5 million paying visitors to date mean that, after only 10 months, it has attracted almost twice the yearly total of visitors to the next most popular attraction, Alton Towers.

I am also proud of the dome work force—not only because of the way in which they have stood up to the trials and tribulations of the operating year, but because of the unfailing courtesy, good humour and professionalism that they have displayed throughout. Other people are also proud of the dome. Let me give just one example. Pat Nunn of Ossett in Yorkshire wrote to *The Guardian* on 28 October to say:

> I went to the Millennium Dome expecting rubbish—

she had been listening to the hon. Member for East Surrey too much—

> but what I found was impressive. If there was a gold medal for knocking things, we British would win every time. I'm no flag-waver, but I felt proud of what I saw and experienced.

We must remember that the millennium celebrations are not only about the dome. The vision for celebrating the millennium includes not only capital projects, but more than 1,000 large-scale community projects throughout the UK under the umbrella of the millennium festival, and more than 12,000 awards for all so far distributed to community arts, sports, heritage and charity projects in every part of the UK. Of the 180 capital projects funded by the Millennium Commission, 90 are now complete, and two thirds of the 3,118 umbrella projects have now opened. Recent openings include "Turning the Tide", which is a wonderful project restoring England's only stretch of magnesium limestone coastline in Durham—restoring the beaches, removing coal waste and derelict structures and creating new cycle paths and walkways to enhance the area's accessibility. ECOS at Ballymena is a new 57 hectare town park and environmental visitor and education centre, which will house the Northern Ireland environmental information centre. The national wildlife centre in Liverpool is a centre for creative conservation, promoting the use of wild flowers in the wider process of regeneration.

None the less, we all need to learn the valuable lessons about the assessment and management of capital projects that the dome project has taught us, some of which are set out in the National Audit Office report. I identify four key lessons. First, adopt a clear management structure. An alternative structure to deliver the exhibition from the outset might well have achieved a different outcome. The tight time frame meant that no acceptable alternative was available for the dome, but, for the future, we know that a less complex, more directly accountable structure is probably better.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): My right hon. Friend mentions the tight time frame. Is it not absolutely remarkable that the dome building was ready on time and open when it needed to be open, on a fixed timetable? By contrast, we have the disaster of the British Library project, whose cost doubled and exploded and the building was not nearly ready on time—and that happened under the Conservatives.

Mr. Smith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the remarkable achievement whereby the millennium dome was completed and made ready for opening. Everyone knew the time frame that had to be adhered to.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: The second lesson is to bring in the experts. Managers with experience of running large-scale visitor attractions should have been engaged by NMEC for the operational year. All parties acknowledged that when the project was reviewed in February this year, and undoubtedly we should have recognised it.

Mrs. Bottomley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: I said to the right hon. Lady that I was giving way for the last time, but because she is so persistent, I will allow her to make another intervention.

Mrs. Bottomley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Does he feel able to pay credit to Jennie Page?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I am delighted to pay credit to Jennie Page for having achieved the construction of the dome by 31 December 1999 in the very efficient way in which that was done.

The third lesson is to make prudent estimates at the outset. We have already acknowledged that the initial visitor number estimates of 12 million were too high, although experts said at the time that the figure was not unrealistic. We have learned from that, and I am pleased to say that now, for every major capital project, the Millennium Commission examines the business plan and the operational expectations in detail and tests carefully whether they are correct.

The result, I am pleased to say, has been enormously successful. The Eden project is now 70 per cent. over its visitor number target. The Lowry in Salford is 54 per cent. over its target. Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh is 32 per cent. over its target. The national botanic garden of Wales is 26 per cent. over its target. The Big Idea in Irvine is 17 per cent. over its target, and @, Bristol is 11 per cent. over its target.

The fourth lesson that we need to learn concerns risk assessment and risk management. We have always recognised that the dome project was risky. My Department is now working hard to improve our performance—everyone's performance—on risk analysis, to ensure that everything possible is done to minimise risks similar to those that have arisen during the Millennium Experience project.

What I have said will, I hope, help to redress the balance of what the hon. Member for East Surrey laid before the House. I also hope that it gives him some pause

[Mr. Smith]

for thought. It is easy and cheap politics to knock a project which his previous boss described in 1996 as

Britain's shopfront as we go into a new century.—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1996; Vol. 287, c. 607.]

We shared that vision. We are, of course, sad that the visitor numbers have been lower than hoped for, but pleased that those who came have enjoyed themselves. The regeneration benefits will be felt in the area for years to come.

What we do not want to do is engage in the tawdry hypocrisy of praising something one year, damning it the next, pretending that it is nothing whatever to do with us, and failing to address the serious wider issues of governance and risk management that are genuinely thrown into the public domain by this project and by what has happened. That serious task is one that we are taking forward and will continue to take forward.

8.23 pm

Mr. Michael Heseltine (Henley): I can claim to be the only Member who has been involved in every stage of the Millennium Commission and the saga of the dome. Indeed, in a rather unusual circumstance, I was the Deputy Prime Minister who negotiated many of the arrangements of government that have been discussed today.

As a millennium commissioner, on the change of Government I was consulted by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), and as a result of that was asked whether I would remain in something of the same position as I had held in government, in order to preserve the continuity of the decision-making processes that had been established and were under way.

Consequently, I have seen the inside story. With hindsight, all of us would do things differently. One thing that I would not do differently in any way was the decision to attempt to replicate the great historic successes of 1851 and 1951. Nor would I change the decision to use the opportunity for the dome investment to regenerate one of the poorest parts of the London borough of Greenwich.

I feel particularly strongly about that because in 1979, I made one of the more regrettable decisions of my career: I left out the sites at Greenwich and Lewisham from the decision that we took to take over land in the five London boroughs to the north of the river. Fifteen years later, the Greenwich site was as derelict as on the day I left it out.

I have thus seen matters from the inside. It would, I suppose, be possible for me not to participate in this debate, which is inspired by my political party, but it would, I think, be less than frank and honourable to the House, which is entitled to hear the views that I have developed.

I shall keep the House for only a moment or two, and explain, as the Secretary of State said, that if the accounting officer of the Millennium Commission is to appear before the Public Accounts Committee in the next few days, and if the accounting officer for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is to report on events for which I had responsibility, it is incumbent on me not to make their task more complicated than it is bound to be.

There are three issues on which I shall speak: first, the all-party, non-party atmosphere in which the project was conceived and delivered; secondly, the decision about the 12 million attendance; and thirdly, the after-use of the Greenwich peninsula.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), when he was Prime Minister, asked me to become a millennium commissioner. He named a number of colleagues with whom I have worked over the years. Some of them have gone and been replaced, but the one certainty about the decision that he took is that the commission would be non-party, all-party. To this day, I could not tell the House in all honesty which way members of the Millennium Commission would vote in a general election.

I know that the late Lord Montague—Michael Montague as he was then—was appointed to the Millennium Commission as a nominee of the Labour party, so from the earliest days, clearly, one of our members was appointed in order to ensure that the Labour party believed in and was on side with all the decisions of the commission. He became a Labour life peer before his premature death after the election.

I now know, of course, that Patricia Scotland QC has become a Labour working peer, but when she initially became a member of the Millennium Commission, I did not know that she was a member or supporter of the Labour party.

Listening to the comments in the commission, I could guess at the political affiliation of one or two of my colleagues, but certainly not all of them. I can never remember any stage, in any of our discussions from that moment to this, when party politics or party allegiances played any part whatever in the decision-making processes in which we engaged.

When we faced a significant hurdle in the life of the dome—that is, the general election campaign—I became preoccupied with the uncertainty inevitably created in the circumstances. There was a moment—I have been critical of this matter in public—when I thought that the Labour party would stand back from decisions of which it had clearly been aware and which it had supported—decisions made after consultations with those on the Labour Front Bench.

So preoccupied did I become by the damage that this was doing to the dome project that I asked to see the then leader of the Labour party, the present Prime Minister, and put to him as strongly as I could the fact that his party had been committed to the project from the first stage. Labour knew all about it, and had complete access to all the information and figures. In those circumstances, a sudden decision by the Labour party to abandon the project would have been—at least—a major breach of integrity.

Hon. Members have referred to the reappraisal that took place. The new Government decided to proceed with the project, and I remained part of a working team that met almost every Tuesday afternoon. The plans were unfolded at those meetings. My colleague from the Millennium Commission, Simon Jenkins—again, of no known political affiliation—took an equal part in those decisions.

My second point is about the projected 12 million attendance. I have spent much of my commercial life launching projects. I have never known one yet that was certain, did not carry an element of risk and did not involve consultants who said, "It can't be done." However, the Millennium Commission took the best evidence that it could about possible numbers. It was ultimately down to the commissioners, not the Government, to decide whether to proceed on the basis

of figures that were high but not unreasonable. I vividly remember the meeting when we made that decision. I shall not say that my views were uninfluenced by my judgment of consultants—I have used many consultants. The late, great Charles Clore said:

> My accountant is right 99 times out of a hundred. The other time, I make a fortune.

An element of that applies to consultants.

The other profound influence on my views was my experience with the Liverpool garden festival. When the plans were put to us, I was told, "Secretary of State, we are forecasting 3 million visitors. We'd like you to endorse that figure." I said that I would state that I was advised that we were expecting 3 million visitors; I was not prepared to endorse the figure. I felt ashamed of that later because 3.6 million visitors went to the garden festival on Merseyside in six months.

When I took part in the decision-making process on the dome, I remembered that 3.6 million visitors had come to Merseyside in six months. I knew that the dome would be a national endeavour, sited in London, that it would embrace a huge number of tourists, and that it would carry all-party support and massive private sector financial support and all that went with that. It therefore seemed reasonable to back expert advice that around 10 to 12 million visitors were possible.

The precise moment at which everything appeared to go wrong does not accord with my memory of the reporting of the dome endeavours from the mid-1990s onwards. I have been engaged in the development of many controversial public projects, but I have never known one so undermined and vilified by the national press from the moment that it was announced. Of the many reasons for not achieving this, that or the other target, one reason for not gaining the private sector financial support that we might have expected, was that every time we endeavoured to raise money from the private sector, our attempts were met with massive contemptuous dismissal from the national press.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Did I misunderstand my right hon. Friend, or did he imply that it was his intention from the start that the project should go to London?

Mr. Heseltine: I personally was inclined that way. I appreciate the persuasive battle that my right hon. Friend fought for Birmingham. I was open-minded, but I had an instinct that we were considering a national project for the capital city. I shall outline the factors that determined that the project went to Greenwich, and influenced my other colleagues on the commission, who spoke for themselves.

My right hon. Friend can at least give me credit for being one of the national exhibition centre's most frequent visitors. However, we did not believe that it offered the opportunity for a spectacular architectural innovation; we believed that the Greenwich site did that. Secondly, we did not believe that the national exhibition centre offered the same incredible regeneration opportunities—opportunities that were not so desperately needed on the NEC site as they were in Greenwich.

Mr. McCabe: If regeneration was such a central criterion for the right hon. Gentleman, why was it not mentioned in the original competition that the Millennium Commission announced? Why were the Birmingham NEC group and the city council told that they could not use regeneration arguments to support to their bid?

Mr. Heseltine: I would have to look back at the relevant documents to ascertain whether I agree with the simplicity of the hon. Gentleman's case. Let me put a counter-argument as it occurs to me. We divided the competition into two parts: proposals for building the dome and proposals for a site. With hindsight, the Millennium Commission had no power to organise the dome. We could only ask others to present proposals. We were preoccupied by the risk that we might have got a fantastic site in, for example, Birmingham and a wonderful proposal for, for example, Derby. We had to decide how we would cope with that. We therefore decided to split the competition between the organisation and the site. Birmingham had incomparably the best proposal, which was presented by Gary Withers of Imagination. However, the problem of the site remained.

There was also a powerful additional argument for Greenwich that I had not deployed before the hon. Gentleman questioned me. In Birmingham the motorways were a problem. The NEC would have been a car-served site.

Sir Norman Fowler: There is a railway.

Mr. Heseltine: Yes, but an enormous number of people would have travelled by motorway. They could not have been stopped. The NEC is served by cars. For many of us who travel along the motorways of the west midlands on a Thursday or Friday, the idea of injecting an enormous extra flow of private transport into that area was perceived as a disadvantage at the time. Those are broadly the arguments that led us to Greenwich. Again, with hindsight, I would not rely on public transport. There is a psyche attached to the use of the car and the way in which families entertain themselves that imposed a serious liability on us as we tried to achieve our targets.

My third point is about the after-use of the site. We are all agonising about the regrettable way in which the project has worked out. No one feels that more strongly than me. From the experiences of the London Docklands development corporation, I am aware that none of us really knows how regeneration projects will work out. Nobody would have believed me if I had stood at the Dispatch Box in 1979 and proclaimed the success of Canary wharf, City airport and Excel. I would have been laughed to scorn. Yet that was the beginning of an extraordinary phenomenon.

I do not know what will happen in Greenwich, but I know that there is a remarkable building there. It would be a tragedy if, in the short-term aftermath of the collapse of public confidence in the project, we tore down the building as an act of contrition. I hope that the Government and the Millennium Commission, which will be consulted and of which I am a member, will keep its nerve. I hope that when considering the £10 billion of lottery money that was raised through the foresight of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, hon. Members will bear in mind that the expenditure—far more than we ever wanted—is still to be seen in the context of the most remarkable creation in a generation of expenditure on culture, heritage and the arts that this country has ever seen.

8.40 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) and I have known each other for a long time, going back to our undergraduate days. It is 20 years since we faced each other regularly across the Dispatch Box. We argued about a great many things. As he is not standing again at the next general election, perhaps we shall not speak again in the same debate in the House. That being so, I pay tribute to him for the regenerative work that he did when Secretary of State for the Environment. I differed with him a good deal about some of it but he did a great deal. I thank him for the money that he put into Moon Grove in my constituency. We had a bitter argument in the Chamber, and behind the Chair he agreed to put money into my constituency, with no conceivable political gain for himself. I pay tribute to him for that and for his honest and honourable speech this evening.

The right hon. Gentleman has cause to be proud of the dome as an icon of the United Kingdom. Coming into the country from the air, it is a great landmark. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I hope that we shall be able to keep it for a long time, as it fulfils an honourable function.

If the official Opposition had conducted the debate in the manner adopted by the right hon. Gentleman, it would be a different occasion. I know that too many Conservative Members are beyond shame, but I hope that when they listened to the right hon. Gentleman they felt some shame about the way in which they are seeking to make cheap party capital, which they will fail to do, over what was intended to be a national project. It was intended to be a non-party project, and it should have remained so. Had that happened, it might well have achieved more of the visitor numbers which the right hon. Gentleman and Labour Members wanted.

The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), the former Secretary of State for National Heritage, paid tribute to Jennie Page, who is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met, for the way in which she delivered the dome on time. It is extremely difficult to deliver a huge building project on a specific day, one day beyond which would have been regarded as a catastrophe. She is a remarkable woman. I said to her face that her determination and single-mindedness made Margaret Thatcher seem humble. She took that in good spirit. As we said in a recent Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report, I hope that she will be able to do further valuable work in the public sector.

We now know, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said and as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said at the Labour party conference last month, that a serious error was made, which was to believe that Governments or public bodies know how to run visitor attractions. The Select Committee, of which I am Chairman, had a relevant witness at its first hearing and first inquiry three years ago. If it was an error, and it was, that is because Jennie Page, with all her extraordinary virtues, did not know how to run such an attraction. That is no discredit to her. However, if we had known that, things might have been very different.

It is all very well for Conservative Members to sneer and talk about Mickey Mouse. The Disney organisation knows how to run visitor attractions, but Disneyland Paris was a catastrophe when it first opened. It is now the only visitor attraction in democratic Europe that has more paying visitors than the millennium dome. However, it got it all wrong to begin with. With its incredible wealth, it had to bail everything out and start again. A huge commercial organisation that knows how to do things, has huge experience and has a brand name unrivalled in the world could not get things right. It is regrettable that the Conservative party started to make cheap political capital out of the dome, and discreditable even to it.

Mr. Gale: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No. I shall proceed.

We have only to look at the history. I am making no excuses for my right hon. Friends. They are the Government, and they should take responsibility. Let us remember, however, that the Government had been in office for only six weeks when they decided to continue with the dome. Most of my right hon. Friends in the Cabinet had no experience of government and had never sat on the Government Benches. I thank the right hon. Member for Henley for saying that they decided bravely to continue it. It had started under a party which had been in government for 18 years. We were told that it was the party of business.

I do not think that we can blame a fledgling Labour Government, after 18 years in opposition, for believing that the Government who had been in office before them knew what they were doing. The timetable can be traced in the report which the Select Committee published in August. In June 1994, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), as the first chairman of the Millennium Commission, talked about

> the idea of a Millennium Festival with an Exhibition as its centrepiece.

In February 1996, the Millennium Commission selected the Greenwich site. With great respect, I believe that it was right to do so. There was the road transport factor along with regeneration and the symbolism of the meridian line, which I believe was extremely important. The commission did that long before the general election. At the beginning of 1997, it set up the New Millennium Experience Company and appointed Jennie Page as the chief executive. It decided, a policy which the Labour Government continued, to appoint a Minister as sole shareholder, rightly believing, as did the previous Government, that in the end the matter came back to the House, or in the case of Lord Falconer, the other place. *[Interruption.]* There is no point the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) giggling about the House of Lords being a House of Parliament. When Harold Macmillan became Prime Minister, for a time he had a Member of the House of Lords as his Foreign Secretary. It is a House of Parliament, and the Conservatives dominate it, so they had better not sneer at it quite so much as they do.

I do not criticise the Conservatives for doing all that. It is easy with hindsight to say that the big error was the estimate of visitor numbers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in a non-contentious manner, gave the history of the estimate of visitor numbers. The Select Committee has conducted a series of inquiries into this matter. Its eighth report published in August contains a

memorandum submitted by the Millennium Commission on 24 May 1995, which is nearly two years before the Labour Government came to office. It said:

> The Commission agrees site selection guidelines which set the "brave but defensible" aim of a minimum 15 million visitors . . . For site selection purposes, in particular regarding maximum site capacity, guidelines remark that a figure in excess of 30 million visitors unlikely.

But 15 million was considered likely.

A memorandum in July said:

> The first set of guidelines to potential operators issued by the Commission included in the site criteria the indicative target of achieving between 15 and 30 million visits over the year.

In February-May 1996, a year before the general election, a memorandum said that the commission

> explored the feasibility of an Exhibition with an attendance target of 10 million or more, an arena for 12,000, and a three-year national programme.

On 16 May, it said:

> Commission adopt a more modest plan involving temporary buildings, with no arena or national programme and a visitor target of 10 million.

In January 1997, it said:

> MCL business plan revised by MC staff. Visitor assumption reduced to 10 million. Indicative budget approved by Commission 13 January.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the right hon. Member for Henley are absolutely right to pinpoint the fact that those, as it turned out, highly over-optimistic projections are at the root of the financial problem. All the overhead factors were built in on the basis of that visitor number. Once they were built in, they could not be built out again. We could not change the building. We could not suddenly reduce the number of staff. As my right hon. Friend said, the staff are wonderful. Their sheer courtesy and kindness help to make this visitor attraction a great experience for those who go to see it.

Let us be clear about this. The hon. Member for East Surrey said that we should have realised long ago that the dome would be a failure. It is a failure in relative terms: it is not a failure as a paying visitor attraction—it is an amazing visitor attraction.

Members on the Conservative Front Bench—not the few grown-ups left in the party, such as the right hon. Member for Henley—have dissociated themselves from this project. I was on the underground train on the night of 31 December last year with my niece and her husband. They had come down from Leeds to join me in the celebrations. She has a proud picture taken with the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition on the underground station. He was there that night. He did not dissociate himself from the dome that night. He was part of it. It would be greatly to his credit if he remained part of it. He is doing his party no good, because the electorate are not fools. A Gallup poll in *The Daily Telegraph* today shows that 42 per cent. of the electorate blame the last Conservative Government for the present rail chaos, and 15 per cent. blame the present Labour Government.

One of the reasons why the Conservatives will be trounced at the next election and why their chances of returning to office at any time in the foreseeable future are small is that they have contempt for the electorate. Eighteen years in opposition at least taught me not to have any contempt for the electorate. I learned that the voters know what they are doing.

Mr. Gale *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman: I shall give way to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale).

Mr. Gale: The right hon. Gentleman is courteous as always. He chided us for making party political points, and since then has done nothing but make party political points. Does he realise that some Conservative Members believed passionately that the regeneration of Greenwich was a good idea? They believed that to put the dome, as a fine building, as close as possible to the meridian line was the right idea, and that the concept of my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) and the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), and others was right. It is because of that and because we had a sense of national pride that we now feel a burning sense of national shame and anger at having been let down by what went into the dome, by its mismanagement and by the fact that people have been unable to get to it.

Mr. Kaufman: I do not know of any national sense of burning shame and anger. As the right hon. Member for Henley said, people criticise the large sums of lottery money that are spent on the dome, but the Conservative party decided to do that. People say, "That money should have gone to the national health service and schools," but that was not the view of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) nor is it the view of the Conservative party today. It does not advocate spending money on the national health service or education, but simply wants more of the same—spending on the five sectors that were decided on by the Conservative Government and championed by the right hon. Member for South–West Surrey.

I hope that the Government will revise the categories, and I believe that there is a good argument for spending large sums of lottery money on the NHS, education and other core services. However, the Conservative party, not the Labour party, decided on the additionality principle, although it will get angry with us if we do not continue that approach.

Mr. Fraser: I, too, sit on the Select Committee. During the production of our report, which was referred to by the right hon. Gentleman, there were several departures, in particular by Sir Cameron Mackintosh, Stephen Bayley and Eric Sorensen. What is the right hon. Gentleman's opinion of that? At that time, the general public felt no confidence in the project. That should be coupled with the opinions that my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley put to the Select Committee. He said:

> If you cannot answer the question about the contents, you cannot get somebody to sign up for the money.

There was prevarication during that period, and resignations, and a consequent lack of confidence. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman agrees.

Mr. Kaufman: The hon. Gentleman knows that I hold him in high regard. He also knows my view on

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that matter. Cameron Mackintosh is a highly successful theatrical producer, but he has made terrible mistakes, too. The successor to "Miss Saigon" flopped and had to be closed and re-opened, and "Moby Dick", which he absolutely adored, was a catastrophe. As for Stephen Bayley—a more trivial person it would be difficult to find, even on the Conservative Benches. The hon. Gentleman knows how fond I am of him, but on this occasion we have to differ.

Interestingly, despite all the electorate's feelings of burning anger and all the rest of it, building the dome was right, even though, given the chance, I believe that they would have said, "No, let's build some hospitals and new schools." The regeneration of Greenwich is an extraordinary achievement, and would not otherwise have occurred. As the right hon. Member for Henley said, it was one of the most polluted areas in Europe, but it is now proud and regenerated, and thousands of new jobs have been created.

It is a pity that even the Conservative party should conduct itself in this way, but, on the whole, I do not particularly mind. When the Labour party suffered a blip in the polls a couple of months ago, there appeared to be a possibility of the Conservative party winning the next election. However, the electorate's sheer revulsion at the prospect led to the Labour Government's return to popularity. I say to the Conservative party, "Go on like this, please, I beg of you." I have increased my majority at every general election since 1970 and, with the help of the Conservatives, I shall do so again.

9 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): It is odd, given that the Conservative party called this Opposition day debate, that more Liberal Democrats than Conservatives have been present throughout. It seems that the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) is not shared by colleagues who are not giving him the proper support from behind.

Before the typically interesting speech of the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), we heard a rather predictable exchange between those on the two Front Benches. We heard from the Conservative side that everything was the fault of the present Government—that the Dome had been left in pristine condition in 1997, and that everything had gone terribly wrong since then. We then heard from the Labour side that it had been a disaster from the start—that in 1997 it had been impossible to save it from its present fate, and that it was all the fault of the Conservatives. Finally, there was the "let's hug each other" arrangement, whereby the parties agree to blame one another and say that that is a bipartisan approach. This is a very interesting lesson in politics.

I think I can safely say with hand on heart that we have not been part of the "bipartisan approach". We are not represented by any MPs on the Millennium Commission, although it contains two Ministers and an Opposition Member, and we have not been involved in discussions in that context across the Chamber. It is, in a way, interesting to sit here on the sidelines listening to Conservative and Labour Members blaming each other for the Dome. Our amendment points out that it is not all the fault of either Labour or the Conservatives—that there are faults on both sides. To be frank, I suspect that had we been in government a bit of blame would have attached to us—although perhaps not as much as has attached to the Government or the Conservative party.

It is true—it is clear from the National Audit Office report—that there were serious faults in the way that the whole dome project was established. There were faults in terms of assessment of visitor numbers, for instance. I heard the comments of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman); but, according to the NAO report, visitor numbers were assessed without reference to the contents, without reference to the prices, and without reference to the marketing strategy. That does not strike me as a very sensible way of proceeding. There is also the highly complex management structure referred to in the NAO report. That was set up by the Conservatives, but inherited and continued by the present Government.

There was also what could be described as a culture of secrecy, which has not been mentioned so far. Members of Parliament were unable to obtain information, especially when the then Minister without Portfolio was in charge of the project. I am sorry that he has not seen fit to grace the House with his presence, unlike the right hon. Member for Henley, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley)—a previous Secretary of State—and others on both sides of the House. The right hon. Gentleman has been the one absentee. It is a pity that he has not turned up to give his views—but then he was never very keen on coming to the House for that purpose. He had to be dragged here kicking and screaming for a five-minute session, after the House had been sitting in the present Parliament for six or nine months. He does not treat the House with much respect in regard to these matters.

Let me concentrate on the good points—for there are good points, which have been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House. First, we should admit that many people have enjoyed themselves. Secondly, there has been a much-needed regeneration of Greenwich. It must be said, however, that that objective did not seem to rate particularly highly until recently. It has now been dragged out as something that was always there in the beginning, but has somehow moved to centre stage as other, unsuccessful objectives have fallen.

The millennium dome has good staff, and I feel sorry for them. They have been let down by the dome's management, and by Ministers in both this and the previous Government. The structure of the dome is a wonderful architectural achievement, and I hope very much that it is saved. I agree with the right hon. Member for Henley about that. It would be a pity if it were not saved, because I do not think the structure is at fault. No one seems to have criticised the structure, although there has been criticism of the contents, the management and everything else. Although many people want to erase the dome from their memories as a bad dream, the structure should not be erased.

Last week or the week before, I asked the Secretary of State whether he would list the dome, because I thought that that was a way of securing its future as a building. He declined to do so, which gives the nod to the possibility, at least, that it will be demolished, which would be a pity.

Mr. Chris Smith: It does no such thing, but follows existing practice that buildings less than 10 years old are simply not listed.

Mr. Baker: I appreciate that that is normally the position, but the Culture Secretary could, if he wished, list the millennium dome, although he chose not to do so. Given the fact that the land is worth more without the dome than it is with it, it is possible that the dome will disappear, especially if the discussions with Legacy do not reach a satisfactory conclusion later this week. However, the tube station is a fantastic achievement, which no one has mentioned tonight. The Culture Secretary referred to the lessons that had been learned, which will be helpful in future. I agree that we can lay blame in different quarters, which I do as much as anyone else. However, we all need to learn lessons, and there are lessons to be learned, as the NAO report clearly set out.

It is a little hypocritical of Conservative Members to say that it is all the Labour Government's fault and that everything is terribly wrong. Presumably, had Conservative Members still been in power, everything would have been all right—at least that is the implication of what they have been saying in the press. The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) told the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport:

> It is a little like Cadbury's developing a wrapper without actually deciding what the chocolate bar is going to be.

I think that Conservative Members are guilty of that and are responsible for the culture of secrecy that enveloped the dome.

For goodness' sake, when the Labour Government came in, several Cabinet Ministers were sceptical about the scheme. They had a review, and, given the poor management structure, the ambitious visitor targets and the culture of secrecy, I fail to understand why they did not conclude, calmly and logically, that it was not sensible to proceed.

Mr. Efford: Visitor numbers were revised on several occasions before 1997, but not once did visitor projections go down below 10 million. The scheme proceeded on that basis, and, in that respect, everyone has been consistent in their approach to the dome.

Mr. Baker: I am happy to accept that visitor numbers were adjusted before the election, as others have said. However, the adjustment of visitor numbers appeared to take place in a vacuum, without the benefit of knowing what was in the dome, without a proper marketing strategy and without a clear indication of what the prices would be. One cannot set visitor numbers without a decision on such matters.

According to *The Mail on Sunday*, a thoroughly reliable paper that I always read, the Chancellor said in June 1997:

> I have a series of worries. It's public money—if anything goes wrong it will all come back to us.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment allegedly said:

> I am deeply against it, frankly. We ought to be honest and say it would cost £450 million.

Of course, that was an underestimate, as the dome cost considerably more than that. The Secretary of State for International Development said:

> I'm vehemently opposed. This will be a political disaster.

The then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), said:

> I'm against. Public money and lottery money are indistinguishable in the public mind.

The then Leader of the House, the present Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), said:

> We could be spending more on schools and hospitals instead.

Senior Cabinet Ministers clearly held the view that the project should not go ahead. With all those views against it, how on earth did it go ahead? Will the Culture Secretary or the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting in her winding-up speech tell us whether there was a vote in Cabinet to proceed with the project? Or did the Prime Minister simply decide that it should go ahead, and the rest of his Cabinet Ministers were wheeled in behind? I accept that in those early days the Labour Government were new and did not have the previous Government's experience in office, as the right hon. Member for Gorton said. However, they should have been even more careful, given the scale of the project, and the possible use of public funds, including lottery funds.

Lord Falconer has been mentioned briefly. There have been persistent calls from a number of sources for his resignation. I do not believe that he is the only person who has made mistakes on the project, but he certainly has made mistakes. Even from the point that he took over, serious mistakes have been made with the dome. For example, a bewildering succession of people have been in charge of the dome, even in the past 12 months. They seem to come and go; we cannot keep up with it.

There has been a bewildering succession of pleas for more money for the dome, most of them in the parliamentary recess, when it was impossible for Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account. One of the pleas was made in August, immediately after the House went into recess, when I am sure that information was known.

There are questions about the financial management of the dome, which clearly involve Lord Falconer. Paragraph 2.44 of the NAO report says:

> In the light of the advice received from the Company's solicitors, the Company's Chairman notified the Shareholder on 25 May that the Board members would have to "consider their personal positions" if the Government did not provide indemnity against any wrongful trading actions brought against them by creditors.

It goes on to talk about insolvency, but paragraph 2.45 shows that, about a month and a half later, Lord Falconer gave evidence to the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport and said:

> the position would not be reached where the Dome was insolvent. It has always been monitored extremely closely and we have only proceeded on the basis that the Dome can continue successfully to the end of the year 2000.

Those two facts offer something of a contrast. Lord Falconer should explain that contradiction. He has not done so, so he is implicated in the events of this year. He has not yet answered his critics.

It is equally the case that, going back to the history of the current Parliament—I can speak from personal experience only about this Parliament; obviously, I was not in the previous Parliament—we were sceptical as a

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party from the beginning: from early 1997, when I took over as spokesman on the issue. I remember in 1998 warning the Minister without Portfolio, as he was then:

> Many people think that it—

the dome—

> is a total waste of money, and that . . . it has been badly handled, and has failed to capture the public's imagination.

I set out steps that I believed needed to be taken at that point—two years ahead of opening—which would have turned the dome into less of a failure, if you like, or more of a success than it has turned out to be. I was shot down for that. I was told that I was being disloyal, I was talking Britain and the dome down, and it was going to be a fantastic success, yet it has not turned out that way.

Instead, what did we hear? We heard from the Minister without Portfolio:

> Spending is within budget, costs are firmly under control . . . The millennium company is performing highly competently.—[*Official Report*, 28 January 1998; Vol. 305, c. 276-81.]

We also heard something about surf ball. I am not sure what that was, but it seems to have disappeared from the agenda, too.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Critics of the dome are sometimes accused of exercising hindsight, but in June 1997 the Millennium Commission staff produced a written appraisal of the company's business plan. They expressed concern then that

> the plan lacked detail on commercial, operational and pricing strategies and that there was no substantive information in the plan on . . . the content of the Dome.

It is a question not of hindsight, but of people not listening at the time.

Mr. Baker: I entirely agree with that intervention. The hon. Lady has been clear about her views from the beginning. It is a pity that members of the Government did not listen to her, too, rather than just shrugging off any criticism of the dome from Members on both sides of the House, saying that they were being disloyal to the dome. Lord Falconer therefore has some responsibility for this year's events. He has criticisms to answer about financial management.

There is another matter to be addressed. There is a tradition in British politics that people take responsibility for something that goes horribly wrong. With the best will in the world—I am sure people have the best intentions—this has gone horribly wrong. There is no point denying that.

Of course, the visitor numbers are there, but let us look at the cost: £628 million of lottery money—what a cost. The public in my constituency and elsewhere are appalled at the amount of money that has been spent on the dome. Irrespective of whether they think its contents are good, they are appalled at the amount of money that has been spent. They feel that it has been mismanaged.

There have been continual claims for more and more money. The management has changed constantly. It is inconceivable that there can be mismanagement on such a scale and that no Minister is prepared to take responsibility for it.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does my hon. Friend recall that the last senior Minister to resign on a point of principle, although it was no fault of his own, was Lord Carrington over the invasion of the Falklands? Since then, not even after the BSE bombshells that were presented to the House has any Minister taken personal responsibility for a disaster on this scale.

Mr. Baker: My hon. Friend is right, and it is a pity that that tradition seems to be ending.

I do not often make such statements, but I think that Lord Falconer should go—not because he is responsible for everything that has gone wrong at the dome, which he is not, but because someone has to be seen by the public to be taking responsibility for the situation and to accept that both the previous Government and the current Government got it wrong. Lord Falconer happens to be in post at the moment.

Mr. McCabe: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is appropriate that the person who has what may be called the misfortune to be the incumbent should take all the responsibility, whereas, as the hon. Gentleman's own speech makes clear, the origins of the problem go back much further?

Mr. Baker: As the Liberal Democrats' amendment to the motion states, responsibility lies with both the previous Government and the current one. People should be prepared to acknowledge that.

The public feel cheated and believe that huge sums have been wasted. In those circumstances, the Government have to take responsibility, as does the Minister who is currently responsible for the dome. He is in post. When the music stops, the person left standing has to go. In this case, that is Lord Falconer.

My dictionary defines a dome as a "self-supporting structure", but that is far from true in this case. Indeed, the "millennium tent" in *Private Eye* is probably a more appropriate description of the dome. Nevertheless, I admire the building, although its content requires huge sums.

What about the future? Legacy is in negotiations with the Government, although it is not the Government's first choice. Dome Europa is long gone, and we are now dealing with the Government's second choice and plan B, which puts Legacy in a very strong position to lay down the terms that it wants and to threaten to walk away if it does not get them. One Sunday newspaper described that as the "dark dome" scenario in which the dome sits empty because no one can take it over and it is too embarrassing to demolish it—although that has not been ruled out in this debate. It would be an unfortunate end to that building and to this episode of British politics.

Today, we need a statement from the Minister telling us where we are with the Legacy negotiations. Is it true that Legacy has laid down terms to which the Government have to agree by Friday? Will the Minister undertake to come to the House to make that statement, so that hon. Members do not have to hear about it on the "Today" programme? Are not the Government over a barrel in negotiations with Legacy?

It is a sorry end. I hope very much that the dome's structure will survive and that lessons will be learned, as the Secretary of State says must happen. He has outlined some of those lessons.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baker: I shall not; I am almost finished.

A lesson in modesty might also be in order for politicians who are in charge of Governments and of the Departments with responsibility for the dome.

9.18 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. The dome has been a target since its inception and that criticism has intensified. It is always easy to denigrate and to write knocking copy, and there has been something of a bandwagon in dome criticism—which must surely be the most ironic and hypocritical attack coming from Conservative Members, who initially established the project. These days, Conservative Members are taking a swipe at the dome although they were the ones who laid its foundations: That is no more than blind opportunism of the kind that might have been expected. If the dome's future is a great one, the Conservatives will undoubtedly rediscover its Tory roots and reclaim it as their own. It is true that we said that the dome would be the first paragraph of our general election manifesto, but one thing is for sure: it is the last word in Tory hypocrisy.

Let us be quite clear about it at the outset: as we have already heard, the dome is the most popular paying attraction in the United Kingdom. Although one would never know it from the opprobrium that has been heaped on it, particularly by the media, the dome is not the least popular attraction in the United Kingdom.

It says something about the remaining vestiges of snobbery and elitism in the United Kingdom that the Royal Opera house in Covent Garden can receive large cash injections to be renovated and promoted, whereas the dome, in east London, is regarded as the embarrassing lowly cousin. As I have said on many occasions, over the past few years, businesses, institutions and companies have been moving eastwards in London. The centre of metropolitan gravity has been pulling in the direction of that part of London—an area which has, historically, suffered deprivation and poverty, of which it still has more than its share. New opportunities have opened up with the regeneration of east London, and we are now beginning to see how local communities can benefit from positive changes in the area's economic and social environment. No longer is it the case that people are excluded; they are getting the jobs now. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) in respect of the Thames gateway.

The dome has been part of that change. Far from being a folly, it has regenerated an area that was previously derelict and a rather sad spectacle—and thousands of jobs have been created. These days, when I look across the strip of the Thames between my constituency and the dome across the water, the view is spectacular—a real credit to the area and no longer the wasteland of pre-dome days.

Once the decision had been made to create the dome, the local environment began to improve dramatically. The site was decontaminated, and plans for vastly improved transport connections were drawn up. The idea that the Greenwich peninsula could have a new, vibrant life had its doubters. Given its location and the condition of the site, its regeneration was always going to be a massive undertaking—especially given the relatively short time in which the work had to be completed for the millennium eve celebrations.

Mr. Sheerman: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the site was the greatest area of contaminated land in the south of England and that it was a massive—and massively expensive—job to clear up the contamination?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: The right hon. Member for Henley said that he recognised the mistake that he had made by not including the area in the London docklands development area when he designated it 15 years earlier.

The efforts of all those committed to the project deserve a congratulatory mention. The dome remains an amazing achievement in terms both of size and of quality of construction. We often hear talk of how much this country needs to promote the value of engineering. Here we have a triumph of engineering that some people do nothing to salute. It is time that those people recognised the significance of the achievement, instead of diminishing it. Thousands worked on its construction; thousands more, of course, have been employed to service this huge visitor attraction.

Forgetting the critics for a moment—if only we could—local people and local businesses were generally quite positive about the project and its ability to revolutionise the profile of the area. Once again, that is something that is not often trumpeted. The dome symbolised the way in which so much potential could burgeon into something impressive and of benefit to the whole region and to the United Kingdom. Why should it not symbolise that potential in the future? It is a stunning building. It is hard not to be impressed with it when you see it. It is a feat of architectural splendour to be proud of.

The dome is unique, and has won the MacRobert award, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said. Visitors like it; 88 per cent. of the 4.8 million interviewed said that they enjoyed the experience, and 94 per cent. that they enjoyed the spectacular show. But the dome is more than a day out enjoyed by its visitors—pleasing though that may be. It is also about participation, and I would like to say a few words about that important part of the dome's work.

McDonald's has been involved with the dome from the early days, and one way in which it has interacted with the dome is in the McDonald's "our town story" programme. "Our town story" involves the whole of the UK in the year 2000. Local education authorities across the UK are participating in the programme, and each produces a show at the dome involving up to 100 young people from local schools. These shows dip into the history and present-day life of their region, town or village. They also take a look at what the future may hold for their home town. The shows are inclusive, and children of varying abilities and experiences get involved. My latest experience, Newham's "our town story" day at

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the dome, was last Friday. I spoke to Stephen Hall, the McDonald's community affairs manager, and his colleague Victoria Hague. They advised me that they had invited 210 local education authorities to participate, expecting a reasonable response. All 210 local education authorities had said yes, and Jersey had applied to be included, making 211. The programme has involved around 20,000 students across the country in one small aspect of dome activity that cannot be costed and quantified.

In Canning Town, the regeneration partnership ran a painting competition not long ago for school students with the theme "What's good about Canning Town?" Of the 50 shortlisted finalists, every one showed Canary wharf, the dome and London City airport. None of them are actually in Canning Town, but all of them can be seen from Canning Town. If the new exhibition and conference centre, Excel, had been built then, I know that it would have been featured. Those visual images of the dome showed that the structure was and is part of our landscape in east London. These young people, aged from five to 18, were saying, "This is our town. These are our buildings. This is our future."

The dome is an important marketing tool for London abroad. It is one of our best known modern features, ranking with Canary wharf's 1 Canada square and the London Eye, as well as historic buildings such as this place. Tourism is a key part of our future and the dome must play an important part in that. Once this year is over and the errors of judgment fade, we will still have the Jubilee line extension. The Greenwich peninsula will remain decontaminated and I hope that the dome's structure will be there to play its part.

Finally, I commend the dome's staff. They have had to put up with the most outrageous attacks over the past 11 months, but on each occasion that I have visited, they have been first class—positive, motivated and professional. I hope that they see out their contracts; it is disappointing that they will not have the collective end-of-season party they deserve, but I am sure that they will make their own arrangements to celebrate their efforts.

Despite the errors, the dome should stay and be used to help promote east London, this great capital city and the United Kingdom throughout the world. It would be an act of vandalism for it not to remain.

9.26 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I shall keep my comments brief because I know that other hon. Members would like to speak.

We have heard it said several times this evening that the millennium dome was conceived by the previous Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) described the purpose of the project in the evidence that he gave the Select Committee in 1997. He described the legacy that the previous Government had hoped the dome would leave as an image of the country at the forefront of cultural, artistic, engineering and scientific activity and attainment. It was to have a sense of unity, bringing the nation together and, of course, regenerating a derelict and contaminated area of London. That was his vision and it was ours. However, it was destroyed when the Millbank machine took control. When the Labour party decided to make the millennium dome a symbol of new Labour, it took that vision away.

It is easy to point to the Conservative party and say that it was our idea, but the tragedy of the dome is not its design but the Government's shameful hijacking of the nation's project for its own ends. Quite simply, people do not want to see what the Government have presided over. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said:

> those looking for fun might prefer a theme park, and those hoping to learn something might do better to visit the Science museum.

However, it is not surprising that it is so unappealing; the man in charge of overseeing its contents in 1997 said:

> it must be a mixture of exciting and serious stuff.

That is not particularly appealing when the Government are trying to attract sponsorship and want people to go to the dome in the first place.

Mr. Gale: Does my hon. Friend also accept that when this vision was dreamt of, there were people in the House—on both sides, to be fair—who believed that the millennium dome might just have something to do with the millennium, as a celebration of the birth of Christ, which has not been mentioned tonight?

Mr. Fraser: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that comment. In evidence to the Select Committee, Ministers could not even decide whether the dome should have a faith zone. I refer back to that evidence, which makes interesting reading.

The failure of the dome comes down to visitor numbers. The business plan was based on the assumption that it would attract 12 million visitors. However, the figure was arrived at before the contents of the dome were decided. The ticket prices had not been decided and the decision not to allow cars near the dome had not been made. Those are contributory factors to the lower than expected visitor numbers. I go back to what I said earlier to the Secretary of State about what Mr. Keith Bales, the senior Disney executive, said to the Select Committee about the visitor numbers and the people in charge of the dome. The Secretary of State did not answer that point and I hope that the Minister will do so in her reply.

There was great scepticism about people on the board and great scepticism about the numbers. The Government had three years in which to talk further to Disney, but they did not. They went cap in hand only at the last moment.We can look back at the figures I have jotted down. By November 1998, it was estimated that 8.74 million people were "likely" to visit the dome and that a further 3.65 million "could be persuaded" to do so. However, as the report states, those surveys excluded education groups and potential overseas visitors. The company considered that that provided comfort for the overall projection of 12 million visitors.

Such figures may have provided comfort until the Prime Minister announced that a million schoolchildren would be allowed to visit the dome for free. I do not object to that in principle, but the business plan should have revised given the direct revenue cost of about £7 million. That did not happen, and decisions were taken in the light of the knowledge that the company saw risks that the dome would

> not be a priority for many overseas visitors, who would be more likely to visit the Tower of London or Buckingham Palace . . .

However, despite that knowledge, the dome was still allowed to open with little idea of what would happen if the number of visitors fell below 12 million.

The NAO report states:

> in essence . . . the strategy had been to draw on the cost contingency and to plan on the expectation of receiving proceeds from the sale of the Dome.

We know that even that issue is unresolved. We are reaching the end of the year, but we do not have answers to those important questions.

The Government cannot claim that no one foresaw the problem of visitor numbers. The NAO report states:

> the Commission's staff had recommended that the Company's business plan be based, for the sake of prudence, on the figure of eight million visitors which was the "worst case" of the estimates provided to the Commission by its consultants, Deloitte & Touche Consulting Group.

On 28 January 2000, the New Millennium Experience Company revised its forecast down, as we heard from my right hon. and hon. Friends. It is important that those figures decreased week after week, month after month, while the number of cash handouts was increasing. The Millennium Commission awarded £60 million in February; £29 million in May; £43 million in August; and £47 in September, bringing the total grant funding to £628 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey has said.

Mr. Sheerman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fraser: No. The hon. Gentleman wasted my time and that of the House when he tried to intervene on me during a previous debate, and I shall not give him that privilege this evening.

When leaving the sinking ship, the Minister then responsible, who is now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, told the Millennium Commission:

> It is not public money, no. It is lottery money.

The people of this country will not be pleased to read what was written down by the Committee on which I am proud to serve on occasions when we reach decisions that are worthy of the House. In the 1997 report, the Committee said:

> in the context of accountability, this is a distinction without a difference. It is not money raised by taxation and it may be excluded from certain public expenditure definitions, but it is still taxpayers' money, and expenditure which must be held to account in the same way as money paid in taxation, whether directly or indirectly.

Unfortunately, the Government ignored that.

The project has been mismanaged by the Government, who tried to take it on and use it for their own political advantage. What the Prime Minister has said beggars belief. He said:

> we will say to ourselves with pride: this is our Dome, Britain's Dome. And believe me, it will be the envy of the world.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman regrets saying that now.

The Government have made a mess of the dome, with the politicisation, the over-hype, the interference and the insistence on filling it with politically correct nonsense that no one wants to see—but there is a vital component missing: accountability. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey has said, Lord Falconer has talked about what has gone on at the dome but has not apologised. The Government have not apologised, and tonight they should come forward and say that they have made mistakes. To help them on their way, I remind the Secretary of State that the then Minister told the Select Committee:

> I will come on any occasion to meet any of my colleagues in Parliament and provide them with any information on a public or confidential basis . . . in order to make sure that people like you are satisfied that we are acting in a proper and transparent way. You have that undertaking from me today.

I look forward to the Minister's winding-up speech, but I doubt very much that we shall get much from the Government.

9.35 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your elevation to the Chair.

A comparison of the contributions made by the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) and his Front-Bench colleague the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) makes it clear why the Conservatives will not be trusted by the people and will not win the general election. Their shabby opportunism and the shallowness of their debate on the dome have shown the shifting sands beneath them as they try to duck responsibility for the decisions that they took in the past. They do the House no credit.

The overriding matter affecting and undermining the dome has been its visitor numbers. We all accept that the estimates were not realistic. Although revisions were made several times by both the previous and present Governments, at no stage did estimated figures fall below 10 million visitors. We shall never know the full effect of what the right hon. Member for Henley called the vilification and undermining of the dome project. How many visitors were prevented from going to the dome because of negative publicity and the sniping that it has consistently endured?

The dome represents a major regeneration achievement. The Royal Arsenal used to employ 80,000 workers not far from the Greenwich peninsula, but that figure had fallen to 6,000 by the beginning of the 1990s. As a former Greenwich councillor, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Henley and his colleagues who heard our pleas for redevelopment of the site. It is not true that it was not included in docklands development because the previous Government made a mistake. In fact, the private sector was not prepared to take on the huge cost of decontaminating the site. The commercial return on investment would have taken too long to be realised. Only a scheme on the scale of the millennium experience, underwritten by the Government, could ever have resulted in regeneration that would bring the site back into use. No private investor was prepared to carry out that regeneration. I hope that the dome remains, because, now that decontamination has happened, I am sure that people will be lining up who would like to get their hands on that prime piece of real estate on the river front.

We should consider the benefits of the dome. The halo effect for job creation was projected to be 25,000. There are 5,700 operational jobs at the dome, and 2,300 employ people who live in Greenwich, a borough that was the 14th most deprived in the country when the scheme was conceived. Some 300 acres of derelict land have been decontaminated, and there are 50 acres of new park,

[Mr. Clive Efford]

including ecological park and terraces. There are 1,004 new homes in the millennium village, of which 266 will be for rent. There are two miles of river walk and cycleway. There is a new, 160-room hotel, and a 14-screen multiplex. All that, plus new schools and health centres, is happening on the millennium peninsula because of the investment that came in around the millennium project.

Is the Conservative party seriously saying that it would have turned its back on all that regeneration in south-east London?

Mr. Greenway *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Efford: Without the millennium dome, none of it would have been possible, which is the fact that the hon. Gentleman must recognise and cannot get away from. Without the investment generated by the project, none of that would have been possible.

Mr. Greenway *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Efford: I have just explained all that, and I am sorry that I do not have the time to repeat it all so that the hon. Gentleman may understand it.

I am not surprised that the Conservatives do not care one jot about the jobs that have been created, nor that the people who work at the dome might have profited from some continuity of employment had it not been for the fact that the scheme has been so undermined that the future of the dome is in doubt. However, that is the reality that we face.

There have been 5.4 million visitors to the dome; it is the second most popular paying attraction in Europe. We should not decry the scheme; we should celebrate it. Disney did not achieve that when EuroDisney opened—that theme park was a disaster and had to be relaunched. The dome is a remarkable achievement; that should be acknowledged on both sides of the House and we should all celebrate it.

9.40 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Once again, the Opposition have given the House the opportunity to debate the dome. It is clear that Members on both sides of the House hold strong views on the subject. Those Members with a constituency interest have rightly voiced their concern on behalf of their constituents.

Our motion reflects the fact that the debate on the dome needs to move on from the sterile arguments about whether it should have been built. We believe that it was right to build the dome. The hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) rightly pointed out that it is a fine engineering achievement. We agree.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) explained why the dome was built at Greenwich. The hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) has rightly put a constituency point of view as to what was achieved there; we, too, support regeneration in Greenwich.

However, Parliament's concern should be the issues raised by the National Audit Office report, which we outline in our motion. It is clear that some right hon. and hon. Members have not read the motion, which cites the financial mismanagement of the New Millennium Experience Company. The dome has not been a financial success. Why has an additional £229 million of public money been wasted? Above all, why is no Minister willing to accept responsibility and take the honourable course and apologise—or, better still, resign?

Of course, it suits the Government to blame someone else, but the facts show clearly that the blame for mismanagement rests fairly and squarely with them. Before the election, the Millennium Commission—not the GEN 36 Committee, as some right hon. and hon. Members suggested—had agreed to build a dome at Greenwich with lottery funding. The Labour shadow Cabinet supported that view, conditional on a review of the decision if they won the general election.

Everyone knows that the review took place in June 1997 and that the Prime Minister not only backed the dome—overruling most of his Cabinet, we gather—but took credit for re-launching the project. The press release makes it clear: "Blair rescues millennium dome". The way in which the Prime Minister responded to concerns about the future of the dome and dealt with most of his Cabinet does not leave much doubt as to his claim to ownership of the project.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) says that the project should have been non-partisan. However, he must answer the question: why did the Prime Minister try to claim the project for himself and new Labour? The right hon. Member for Gorton referred to Disneyland in Paris. Yes, that project was a flop initially, but it did not receive £600 million of public money.

Those who try to blame the Conservatives—as the Liberal Democrats appear to do—are saying, in effect, that the dome was bound to fail from the start. That is the politics of despair. Clearly, the Prime Minister did not agree; on the contrary, he wanted to claim the credit for a successful dome. Nor did the current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; when he appeared before the Select Committee, he would not even countenance the idea that there could be fewer than 12 million visitors. Furthermore, the sponsors did not think that the project would fail. More important, paragraph 16 on page 4 of the National Audit Office report points out:

> Final decisions had not been made on the Dome's contents, on ticket prices, on marketing strategies.

All those crucial matters were decided by this Government.

More crucially, the original vision for the exhibition was drastically altered. Indeed, the Prime Minister's press statement said:

> Mr. Blair demanded a number of changes.

It added:

> The current concept being worked upon until now is not good enough and has to be changed.

There we have it—the Prime Minister wanted the concept of the dome to be changed. When Labour Members seek to discover why there was mismanagement, they must face the fact that it was their Government who changed matters considerably. The scale and detail of the mismanagement is there for all to see in the NAO report.

On the key issue of visitor numbers, Ministers must explain why a 12-million visitor target was adopted when they inherited a target of only 10 million from

the Millennium Commission. Indeed, the commission subsequently recommended that only 8 million was a feasible target.

Visitor numbers were inextricably linked with the exhibition's likely content and how that could be marketed. Ministers constantly interfered in the content, so they must shoulder responsibility.

Mr. McCabe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: I will not give way, because there is no time.

Ministers must shoulder responsibility for the NAO's finding that the dome's content had not been sufficiently explained or promoted. The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) said that the public had not been inspired. There was no marketable coherent vision beyond the Prime Minister's constant rhetoric about cool Britannia. The public simply did not know what the dome was for, and £20 a time, plus all the travelling costs, was perceived to be too high a price for such an uncertain experience. The travel arrangements also acted as a disincentive. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley acknowledged, it was a mistake not to provide a car park or even a drop-off and pick-up facility.

All the problems arose as the direct consequence of decisions taken by Ministers and NMEC. They led directly to the financial crisis that overcame the dome in the first few weeks after it opened for visitors. The scale of the mismanagement was quickly picked up by the Secretary of State in his now famous letter to Lord Falconer in February, when he complained about a lack of leadership and serious failures of financial management, and concluded that the company was already technically insolvent.

Earlier in the debate, the Secretary of State said that P-Y Gerbeau was wrong. We take that to mean that the dome was insolvent, so ministerial statements were inaccurate and Parliament was misled, however inadvertently. The record needs to be corrected. The dome has never recovered from the financial crisis caused by the clear failures of management. As a result, and to save face, more and more public money has been poured into the project. Ministers have still not explained why more than £200 million was wasted in that way.

The board clearly knew that the game was up because, as early as May, it sought and was granted financial indemnities. The Millennium Commission's accounting office twice sought a ministerial direction to pay grants that he could not justify on value-for-money grounds. When, on 22 August, PricewaterhouseCoopers declared the company insolvent—a fact that must have been obvious to NMEC directors—the Secretary of State and the shareholder, Lord Falconer, must have known months before that that was the case. Yet no apology has been made and no one sees fit to resign. The indictment stands not on speculative guesswork by the dome's critics but on information that was well known to those responsible and which the NAO report now confirms. Some £229 million has been wasted and, even by the Chancellor's definition, that was public money.

It is no wonder that people throughout Britain were so incensed every time another bundle of money was found to bail out this failing project. Can the Minister tell us that not a penny more will be granted? The Secretary of State could not say whether the money will be repaid. Labour Members know full well that their electors agree with every word of our motion, and it is up to those Members to explain themselves if they choose not to support it.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Janet Anderson): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the beginning of the debate, we welcome the National Audit Office report. It is factual and accurate, and it will provide useful material that will enable the Government and, I hope, politicians of all parties to learn the lessons of the millennium experience. We shall be happy to work with the Public Accounts Committee in its inquiry into the dome's operations. We have done all that we can to co-operate with the NAO on this complex inquiry, and we will co-operate equally with the PAC.

There used to be a similar spirit of co-operation between the political parties on this issue. The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), who is not in her place, said:

> I welcome the Labour party's constructive approach . . . I have no wish for the exhibition to become the subject of party political disagreement.—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1996; Vol. 285, c. 680.]

I very much regret the Opposition's breach of convention in insisting on holding a debate about an NAO report—they made it plain that the report would be the subject of the debate—immediately after its publication and before the PAC has held its hearings. Their action is highly irresponsible. It is a long-established convention that the Government do not respond in detail to recommendations in NAO reports until the PAC has completed an inquiry and a formal response has been made.

I will not be in danger of breaching convention if I point out some of the report's important findings. We have tonight heard a lot of bluster about the dome, and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, there has been a deplorable unwillingness on the part of Opposition Members to acknowledge their role in many of the key decisions at the outset. We have heard serious points and not so serious points.

The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) is well known for his commitment to regeneration, and I thank him for his contribution. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who pointed out that the right hon. Member for Henley is one of the few grown-ups on the Opposition Benches. The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) asked about negotiations with Legacy. He will know that those negotiations continue and that they are commercially confidential, but I assure him that any decision will be communicated to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), in whose constituency the dome lies, made important points about regeneration. The Minister for Housing and Planning has attended the whole debate and has always been a keen supporter of the dome.

I shall try to answer some of the points made by the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), but some of them did not make much sense. The detailed points about

[Janet Anderson]

the management of the dome during its year of operation will of course be considered by the PAC. The NAO report's finding—with which the Government entirely agree—is that the bulk of the difficulties associated with the dome are the result of the lower than expected number of visitors. We have heard much this evening about forecasts. Opposition Members have lined up to demonstrate their hindsight and show off their wisdom after the event. Yes, it is disappointing that the dome will not receive 12 million visitors; yes, the Government recognise that that means that the dome has been less of a success than everyone hoped. However, I remind Conservative Members, who are always keen to jeer when it suits them, that under the previous Government, the estimates of visitor numbers varied widely. Indeed, those various different estimates have been referred to in the debate. I remind the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) that he admitted on 9 November 1996 that the numbers were all over the place.

Mr. MacShane: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Janet Anderson: No, I will not give way, if my hon. Friend will forgive me. I do not have much time, and the Secretary of State gave way a great deal.

Yes, it is true that the Government looked at the estimates and agreed a business plan that was intended for 12 million visitors, but we will not take lectures from Conservative Members about forecasts for visitor numbers. The target of 12 million was always ambitious, but we believed that it was achievable, the Millennium Commission believed that it was achievable, and when they were in government, the Opposition believed that it was achievable.

Such a figure was not unprecedented. We must remember that the dome is a national celebration, for one year only, of a once-in-a-thousand-years event. Moreover, it is a national celebration of international importance: celebrating the millennium in the home of time, on the Greenwich meridian. Yes, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps the figure was too challenging, but the Conservative party agreed and endorsed it. As the NAO report shows, the figure was the key issue. Many of the problems that the dome subsequently faced stemmed from the fact that it received fewer visitors than forecast. So, of course, it received income less than forecast.

I want to dispel another myth about the dome. A number of Conservative Members have accused the Government of doing nothing to help the dome as difficulties emerged. That is simply not true. When it became apparent soon after the dome had opened that changes needed to be made to its day-to-day operations, changes were made. The board took decisive action in February to bring in new management with enhanced skills in the operation of visitor attractions. The dome was made more welcoming, queues were managed better and a greater variety of ticketing options was introduced, including the ability to buy tickets on the door.

Later in the year, when the dome needed a marketing push, the company produced a new marketing plan and the Millennium Commission provided additional funds specifically to support it, which helped to attract more visitors to the dome. In the summer, when NMEC's board was able to gain a fuller picture of the company's financial position, it took firm action again, bringing in an experienced specialist in company rescue, David James—the ideal man to give the company firmer management for the remainder of the year.

No one would pretend that this has been an easy year or that the dome has been as great a success as we all hoped it would be, but we have been constantly active in monitoring its progress and in encouraging it to take action to improve. It would be tragic if this debate ignored the benefits. Many of the regenerative benefits for the peninsula have been referred to. Let us not forget all the good things about the dome.

The dome is the most successful paying visitor attraction in Britain. By the end of the year, getting on for 6 million people will have been there and enjoyed it; 87 per cent. say that they enjoyed their visit to the dome. Of course we must learn the lessons that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have to teach us, but for those millions of visitors, and especially the millions of children who have visited the dome, it provides an amazing and unforgettable day out. I am confident that they and many others will deplore the Conservative party's attempt to exploit the matter in a partisan way. We know that the Tories are so desperate that they cannot see a bandwagon without jumping on it. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 182, Noes 304.

Division No. 328] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr. Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian

Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon. John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
(Dunfermline E)
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack
(Copeland)
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne

McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 174.

Division No. 329] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David

Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
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Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wnght, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Don Touhig.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David

Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the publication of the National Audit Office report, which gives a detailed account of events at the Dome; agrees that politicians of all parties involved in the project share responsibility both for the successes in regenerating this depressed part of South East London and its failings to reach its original visitor estimates; and deplores the decision by Her Majesty's Opposition not to support the original bi-partisan nature of this national project.

Control of Fuel and Electricity

10.25 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I beg to move,

That the Energy Act 1976 (Reserve Powers) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2449) dated 11th September 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12th September, be approved.

On 7 September, following similar events in France, protesters blockaded the Shell refinery at Stanlow in Cheshire. The oil companies told my Department that such action, if repeated at other refineries, could quickly and seriously disrupt national fuel supplies. As a consequence, the Government sought an Order in Council under section 3 of the Energy Act 1976. The Energy Act 1976 (Reserve Powers) Order 2000 was made by Her Majesty on Monday 11 September and laid on 12 September. The order came into force on 11 September, it being considered that the exceptional urgency of the situation justified the order coming into force before it had been laid. Were the House and another place to approve the order, it would expire on 10 September 2001—that is, 12 months after it was made. Failing such approval, it would expire at midnight on Sunday 19 November. The order was approved in another place on 7 November.

Paragraph 2 of the order declares that

because there is imminent in the United Kingdom a threatened emergency affecting fuel supplies which makes it necessary in Her Majesty's opinion that the Government should temporarily have at its disposal exceptional powers for controlling the sources and availability of energy, the powers of sections 1 . . . and 2 . . . of the Energy Act 1976 shall be exercisable to their fullest extent.

Those sections enable the Secretary of State to make orders and to give directions to regulate the production, supply and use of certain fuels, including petrol and diesel.

It was considered in September that it was necessary for the Government to have those powers at their disposal, given the serious threat to fuel supplies, and hence to emergency and other essential services, to the health service and to food distribution. Using those powers, the Secretary of State subsequently made orders designating priority retail fuel sites and priority purposes to facilitate the orderly return to normal when protests ended. Those arrangements would have ensured continuity of essential services for a longer period had the blockades continued.

While the order is in force, the Secretary of State can, under sections 1 and 2, regulate the production and supply of fuel and direct companies and others as to the use of petroleum products or the price at which they are sold. Examples of orders and directions that the Government might want to issue would be directing petrol suppliers to supply only to specified locations and for priority purposes or restricting private, commercial or public transport activity, for the purpose of conserving supplies.

I remind the House of the Government's approach in responding to the fuel disruption in September. The Government made clear from the first our determination to ensure that supplies were returned to normal, in view of the risk that the disruption threatened to national prosperity and, potentially, to lives. As soon as it became apparent that supplies were being affected, we took action to ensure that the necessary procedures were put in place to allow for supplies to return to normal as quickly as possible.

The oil industry's standing emergency committee met daily to report the position in the refineries and the effect that that was having on distribution, and to review its list of priority petrol stations and depots. The ministerial civil contingencies committee met regularly to receive reports and co-ordinate action being taken around the country.

As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, using the exceptional powers available under the Order in Council, made further orders designating petrol stations and depots around the country priority suppliers, and requesting oil companies to ensure that available supplies were, in the first instance, used to keep those stations open. We received representations from priority users, businesses and the public about the lists, and in response made further orders adding other petrol stations and depots. On the list of petrol stations, we also specified about 300 outlets that were primarily to serve essential users. We issued a list of essential users, including important business sectors such as food distribution as well as the emergency services themselves.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Can the Minister explain why animal feed companies on the list were not granted exemption under the derogation orders?

Mrs. Liddell: A number of issues were brought to the Department's attention when the emergency orders were put in place. Since then we have had an opportunity to review those matters. The list of exemptions is now much wider, and the number of designated filling stations is much greater. At the time, the main priority was to ensure that fuel supplies reached essential services—food distribution, in the first instance. The opportunity also existed to extend the orders if the disruption continued.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): This is a factual question. Can the Minister tell us whether in her view, and according to the advice she has been given, the list of filling stations is now accurate? There were problems with the first list.

Is there now a publicly available list of those who are to be supplied as a matter of priority? And is there is a common place in government where anyone who wants any such information can have access to it on an up-to-date basis, either in the Minister's Department or in any other Department of State?

Mrs. Liddell: Let me explain how the list of priority filling stations and depots was compiled. It happened in consultation with the police and local authorities, following representation from essential users. As I have said, there is now a list of some 600.

The DTI is operating a telephone call centre. Anyone can telephone and find out whether their station or depot, or one that they would wish to use, is on the list. We shall certainly take steps to ensure that Members are aware of the full scope. Some have mentioned problems that arose in their constituencies last time. Many of those problems arose because of the speed with which the issues had to be addressed.

In addition to the September list of petrol stations, we specified about 300 outlets that were primarily to serve essential users. We issued a list of such users, including business sectors such as food distribution as well as the emergency services.

Although the powers under the Order in Council would have enabled us to issue legally binding directions, we decided that the arrangements should be non-statutory. They were handled by local authorities and the police, and co-ordinated by the Government office in each region. The emphasis was on common-sense decisions on the ground in the light of local circumstances.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): My constituency contains a company called Clos-o-mat, which provides toilet facilities for disabled people. Although it is based in my constituency, it provides a service across the country. When I approached the Department asking for the company to be designated an essential user, I was told to advise the company to approach the local authority. Surely in the case of a company that provides a national service there is a need for a national designation, which should not depend on a single local authority.

Mrs. Liddell: I will take up the hon. Gentleman's point. I was not aware of the difficulty that was experienced in his constituency. We have learned a lot from the events in September. I hope that we have managed to overcome the problems, as he will find as I make progress, but I will look into the circumstances surrounding the difficulties in his constituency. I understand his anxiety about it.

Guidance on the measures taken in September was placed on Government websites and distributed through police stations, local authorities and health authorities. We set up two telephone hotlines for priority users and members of the public who wanted information. The situation returned to normal. I am sure that every hon. Member hopes that the disruption is not repeated, but the speed and scale of the disruption took everyone by surprise. It remains essential to ensure that disruption on that scale cannot be repeated.

For that reason, the Prime Minister set up a task force, which, on 29 September, published a memorandum of understanding between Government, the oil companies, trade unions, hauliers and the police. Its purpose is to ensure that fuel supply is maintained in the event of any future disruption by committing all signatories to take the necessary contingency action.

On 2 November, the Home Secretary further told the House that the task force was putting in place measures aimed at ensuring, in the event of future disruption, the delivery of fuel to petrol stations, with priority for essential users; better preparation for disruption by local authorities and other essential users; the availability of Ministry of Defence drivers to drive tankers as a last resort; the protection of food depots and other potential targets; and the keeping open of major roads. Last week, we reopened the Cabinet Office's national information and co-ordination centre, which will gather information to enable us to build an accurate picture of what happens throughout the country, so that extra support can be given to forces that need it.

I regret that we appear to be faced with threats of further disruption. We have no alternative but to seek extension of the exceptional powers, so that we can take responsible action to safeguard essential services. The Government are in no doubt that it is necessary to have those powers available for some time to come, in order to

[Mrs. Liddell]

take the action necessary to preserve essential supplies and services. The Government are firmly of the view that a situation continues to exist in which there is a real threat of disruption to fuel supplies and that it is our responsibility to be prepared to act quickly to maintain essential services, particularly at this season of the year.

The section of the Energy Act 1976 in question—section 3—had not previously been activated, so that was not something that we would do lightly. Careful thought was given before an order was sought in early September, and very careful thought has been given again to the issue, but it is our considered view that it is right and necessary to extend those powers.

10.38 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): For the record, I should like to declare an interest, which I have put in the Register of Members' Interests, concerning my overseas visit in September to meet representatives of oil companies, oil regulators and the Department of Energy in Washington at the invitation of the United States oil industry.

I listened carefully to the Minister's comments in introducing the order. I also listened carefully last week to the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement. The whole country watched hour by hour as the fuel protest in September brought the country to a complete standstill.

In addition to the order that the right hon. Lady proposes, another key document in the saga, as she mentioned, is the memorandum of understanding between the Government and the oil companies, police and road hauliers. All those documents—the memorandum, the order and the pre-Budget statement—deal with the symptoms of a problem, rather than the problem itself. The root of the issue is the Chancellor's decision from his first Budget onwards inexorably to continue to raise taxation on fuel, mortgages, marriage, pension funds, waste, insurance and property—extra taxation even on people over the age of 60. The total tax burden has added £670 a year to the tax bill of a typical family—over the lifetime of the Parliament £1,500 has been added to the bill of every taxpayer in Britain.

In four Budgets, the Government have increased fuel duty by 15p per litre, from 46p to 61p per litre. That is the principal reason for the increase in the petrol price at the pumps, from 59p when Labour came to power, to 82p now. There has been a 23p increase, of which 15p has been caused by taxation.

I shall put Labour's fuel duty increases in the order that they were made, starting with the earliest first. In July 1997, there was a 4p increase. That was followed, eight months later, in March 1998, with a 4.4p increase. In March 1999, there was a 3.8p increase. Finally, in March 2000, there was a 1.9p increase. That is the correct order of the increases. Now, let us see who in the Government got it right, and who got it right in the fastest time. In fact, no one in the Government got it right at all. There is a tedious dishonesty in the way in which Ministers seek to hide the 15p fuel duty increase.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that, in the past two years, the oil price per litre has increased by 19p, of which tax accounts for only 2p, whereas the international oil market accounts for 17p of that increase? The "information" that the hon. Gentleman is giving us is, therefore, no more than fatuous propaganda.

Mr. Gibb: No. The point that I am making is that the Government are deliberately issuing false and fatuous propaganda on the issue. The hon. Gentleman is making the very point—almost verbatim—that the Minister for the Environment made in the House a few weeks ago. The Minister said:

> Since the March 1999 Budget, petrol prices in the UK have risen from 66p per litre to about 80p per litre today, an increase of 14p, but only a very small percentage—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 235.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I tell the hon. Gentleman and the House that this debate is on a quite narrow subject and hon. Members must not stray into the issue of general taxation, or even too far into the issue of petrol itself.

Mr. Gibb: I accept your point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am just making some key preparatory remarks before dealing with the order itself.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): When will we get to the order?

Mr. Gibb: We shall get to it in due course.

An example of the Government's false propaganda is that, although they accept that there has been a 14p increase since the March 1999 Budget, they say that, of that 14p, only 1.9p was caused by the 2000 Budget. Although that is correct, in the three previous Budgets, regardless of the world oil price, there were duty increases amounting to 13p. If those extra duties had not been imposed, petrol at the pump would be 15p per litre less than it is today. The dishonest use of statistics is one of the things that people find so distasteful about politicians and why there is such cynicism about United Kingdom politics and politicians.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gibb: No; I should like to make some progress before Mr. Deputy Speaker reprimands me again.

People also find the yah-boo arguments irritating. Of course the fuel duty escalator started under the previous Government. However, it started as an honest attempt to reduce fuel use and CO_2 emissions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman guessed aright. I would be grateful if he would now confine his remarks to the order that we are debating.

Mr. Gibb: I shall obey your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The point is that this is a self-made, self-inflicted crisis, and the Government are using the order to try to deal with its symptoms.

The order contains far-reaching powers for the Government. Under the order, as the Minister said, the Secretary of State may provide

for regulating or prohibiting the production, supply, acquisition or use of—

(a) any of the following substances

including petrol, diesel and gas.

The order was made by Her Majesty on 11 September, as requested by the Minister, and laid before Parliament on 12 September. The House returned from the summer recess on 23 October. It has taken the Government until today, 13 November, before arranging for the order to be debated. Nevertheless, in her speech, the right hon. Lady said that the Government took the order very seriously indeed.

The order contains extensive powers which, frankly, should have been debated at the earliest possible time—24 October, or at least in our first week back. In fact, they should have been debated on the recall of Parliament, which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition called for in September. If the right hon. Lady is serious in her expressed concern that this is the first time that those powers have been used since the 1976 Act came into force, the Government should have recalled Parliament. The fuel protest was a crisis and these are serious powers. Why were the powers not debated earlier? Are they being debated today simply because if they were not, in six days' time they would lapse, under section 3 of the Energy Act 1976, which requires them to be debated within 28 days of the Order in Council when the House is sitting?

If passed, the order lasts for a full 12 months. Could the Minister tell the House about the Government's intentions regarding those powers? If it becomes clear over the next few weeks that they are no longer needed, will she move an order to revoke them? If not, why not? The Opposition would have had no objection to the powers being sought during what was clearly an emergency in September, and we shall not oppose the order tonight, but would it not make more sense simply to exercise those powers when they are needed, rather than now, when it is unclear whether they are required?

The exercise of the powers under the order appears to be something of a shambles. The main order was laid on 12 September. At 4 pm that same day, the Motor Fuel (Designated Filling Stations and Fuel Depots) Order was laid. That was revoked at 2 pm the next day and replaced by the Liquid and Gaseous Fuel (Designated Filling Stations and Fuel Depots) Order which, in turn, was amended some two hours later by the Liquid and Gaseous Fuel (Designated Filling Stations and Fuel Depots) (No. 2) Order.

Some 23 and a half hours after that, both orders were replaced by the Liquid and Gaseous Fuel (Designated Filling Stations and Fuel Depots) (No. 3) Order, which itself lasted three and a half hours until 7 pm on 14 September when the No. 4 order replaced the No. 3 order. The No. 4 order was, in turn, replaced by the No. 5 order at 6 pm the following day.

I am pleased to tell the House that that order lasted a full two weeks until 4 pm on 29 September when the Liquid and Gaseous Fuel (Designated Filling Stations and Fuel Depots) (No. 5) (Revocation) Order was made, revoking the whole lot. Could the Minister explain what was going on with all the orders and revocations? Was it just a case of "Don't panic, Captain Mainwaring. Issue something—anything"? Were the original lists of designated filling stations and fuel depots contained in the earlier orders simply out of date and therefore wrong? Was that the reason for the numerous reissues?

What do those statutory instruments achieve? From reading them, it is not clear precisely what powers are being exercised. Issuing a list of so-called designated stations does not actually achieve anything unless it is accompanied by powers specifying who can use such filling stations, who is entitled to take fuel and who is not. I can see no such powers being exercised under any of the six statutory instruments. Could the Minister explain?

Is not the truth that the orders, as drafted, have no legal effect? The noble Lord Sainsbury said in the other place that the Secretary of State

subsequently made orders designating priority retail fuel sites and priority purposes to facilitate the orderly return to normal when protests ended.

Could the Minister confirm that that is an accurate statement? If it is, could she tell the House where in the orders it specifies the priority purposes referred to?

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is patiently taking the House through what passes for the logic of the Government in proposing the orders. We understand ministerial fetishes so far as orders are concerned, but would my hon. Friend be good enough, at this relatively early hour, to advise me what he regards as the improvement in the last order by comparison with the first?

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend raises a good point. The difference between the later and earlier orders is that the documents attached to them got thicker.

Lord Sainsbury went on to say:

we took the view that the arrangements should be non-statutory and handled on the ground by local authorities and the police . . . Guidance was placed on government websites . . .—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 November 2000; Vol. 618, c. 1436.]

That reflects what the right hon. Lady said earlier this evening. However, is it not rather a lax approach to place on local authorities and the police the duty to determine who could and could not obtain fuel from those filling stations, without having any legal authority? The basis for determining who qualified was made simply on the basis of a text of Department of Trade and Industry guidance issued on a Government website.

This issue is about the rule of law. To exercise powers—or, rather, not to exercise powers—through so-called guidance is surely an abrogation of that duty by the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) gave an example of the difficulties that that causes at a constituency level. Would it not have been right to have issued such guidance through the proper exercise of a statutory instrument rather than through this curious vehicle?

From my experience as a constituency Member of Parliament during the crisis, the emergency planning officers in my area were rather perplexed by the absence of any explicit powers. They were given the duty to decide who should be allowed fuel and, with the police, were expected to enforce that on the ground. Had the crisis continued, the situation on the forecourts could have

[Mr. Gibb]

become ugly, yet the enforcement officers had no legal powers to deal with matters and allocate fuel. What was the Minister's reasoning for that approach?

Another curious non-parliamentary document is the memorandum of understanding drawn up between the oil industry, road hauliers, the police, the Government and trade unions. Paragraph 6 says

the UK Government, the Scottish Executive and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales are willing to consider exercising their powers to permit certain flexibilities and temporary changes in the application of regulations . . .

Could the right hon. Lady explain the concept of permitting certain flexibilities? I understand the concept of exercising powers under statute to change regulations. However, I do not understand how permitting certain flexibilities works. Does it involve an order coming before the House, or is it simply Executive action not to enforce certain laws, without any recourse or accountability to Parliament?

Finally, will the right hon. Lady explain the Government's intentions on training the military and requisitioning private sector articulated fuel tankers? Do the Government intend to take powers under section 2 of the Emergency Powers Act 1920, as she said might be the case in her written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), if the fuel protests that we see today escalate?

New Labour in office is an interesting, if depressing, phenomenon. The Labour party was swept to office because people believed that new Labour had learned the key economic lessons espoused by the Conservatives over the previous 18 years. The truth is that they learned the key economic lessons of the problems that we faced in the past, but they have not understood those lessons, or how to apply the principles inherent in those lessons to future problems and to new circumstances.

Britain's main economic problem today—and it is a serious one—is our failure as a nation to benefit from productivity gains arising out of the new economy.

Mr. Beard: What has productivity to do with the order?

Mr. Gibb: I shall come to that in a moment. The United States has had five years of such gains. Britain, by contrast, has seen its productivity improvement rates fall from 2.4 per cent. on average to just 1.4 per cent. over the past three years, compared with the United States figure of 2.7 per cent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is again straying well wide of the mark. Can he please come back to the order?

Mr. Gibb: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Productivity is one of Britain's key problems. We can see from the order that the Government are dealing with the symptoms of the problem, not the real problem. We need the Government to deal less with the symptoms of the problem, as epitomised by the order, and to deal instead with the deep-rooted economic problems facing the country.

10.54 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): My colleagues and I, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) in his response to the Home Secretary last week, have made it clear from the outset that we fully supported the Government's efforts to assume whatever powers were necessary to prevent massive disruption of emergency supplies and the economy. If it was right in principle to have powers to prevent Arthur Scargill's flying pickets from disrupting emergency supplies and the national economy, it is surely right that right-wing Arthur Scargills who are not bound by trade union legislation should be constrained in a comparable way. There must, of course, be a right to protest, and we defend it, but what has happened has been well in excess of what is acceptable.

In many ways, the order is probably academic. Its purpose has already been achieved. The combination of the threat of these powers and the ability and willingness of the police to act professionally to enforce the law over the past few days has effectively meant the crumbling of the protest movement to the point at which it is no longer a serious threat. Introducing the order is probably largely superfluous, although there may be contingencies under which problems could recur.

I shall devote most of my speech to the Minister's remark that we have learned a lot over the past two months. As we look back over the initial crisis, we can ask why the distribution system unravelled so rapidly and disastrously. If the emergency powers are designed to counter the problems that caused that, we should ask how they arose in the first place.

I used to work in the oil industry, although I have rather lost contact with it now. The origins of the problem lie in the fact that the mental picture that most of us have long had of the industry no longer applies. The old picture is of a command and control system and of oil that flowed from pumps in the ground to petrol pumps through integrated companies in an orderly fashion that ensured security of supply. That model has completely broken down. The distribution sector is now extremely competitive, comprising three quite different types of company. The first type is the big oil companies and some small and medium-sized companies, which still operate in the traditional way. Secondly, Tesco and Sainsbury's in many ways dominate oil distribution. Thirdly, independent companies compete with each other. It is a cut-throat and competitive industry in which margins are small.

There has, consequently, been tremendous pressure within the industry to cut costs and, arguably, corners. That has happened in two main ways. First, the industry runs on low stock levels. As in most industries, there is tremendous pressure to have minimum stock because stocks are costly. Inventories are run down to the lowest level possible, and that meant that the industry was exposed to disruption when, for the first time in its existence, it was seriously threatened. Secondly, to cut costs, the industry sub-contracted its tankerage operations, which meant that it did not have the power to instruct drivers to carry loads. Drivers were bound by contracts and penalty clauses, but they were not employees and no one could control them.

A further important factor, which has not been publicly discussed, is the health and safety culture of the industry. Since the Piper Alpha disaster and a series of others,

such as the Exxon Valdez, there has been a proper preoccupation with health and safety. Everyone in the oil industry is aware that every tanker, on road or on sea, is a mobile incendiary bomb. Enormous care must be taken. I do not know whether the arguments advanced in the emergency about health and safety were excuses or were reasonable, but that was one factor advanced by the industry to explain why so little could be done to get tankers on the road.

Having offered an analysis of the problem, I must turn to the action that the Government have taken. I shall only ask questions about that; I do not know the answers. If a memorandum of understanding exists with the industry, how far is it binding on all parts of the industry? I can understand how it is possible to have a memorandum of understanding with, say, BP, but it is less clear how a meaningful memorandum that is binding on large numbers of independent companies or supermarket chains can exist.

If there is a health and safety concern, how will that be met in emergency conditions? If an Army driver is driving a commandeered truck in an emergency and an explosion occurs, who has liability for such a disaster? Is it the company or the Government? Who is responsible for maintaining the health and safety standards that the industry believed to be a major constraint on its operations?

If the crisis has revealed a chronic stock shortage, have the Government decided what the proper level of stock should be? Presumably, there is a figure for the stocks of petrol or crude oil that we need to hold within our national boundaries for a week, a month or three months. An analysis must have been made, and it would be useful to be given some information about that. How far does the industry fall short in the provision of adequate security of supply through stocks? Who will pay for that? Under whose instructions will such stocks be provided? All those questions arise from our experience of the crisis. Can we learn from that for the long term?

In effect, the order updates a previous order made in 1976, when conditions were different. That measure incorporated substantial elements of price control. Is it intended that if the emergency powers were to be activated price control would apply, or is that a historic legacy from the previous measure? Is it an active provision under the emergency powers? How would price control powers be utilised?

We are all aware of the obvious problems of price control; for example, there would be a practical problem if the Government decided that in order to prevent profiteering in an emergency, the price of an oil product should be fixed, but as the operating company would be buying and selling crude oil in a volatile market, who would carry the risk associated with such price-controlled transactions? Is price control part of the package? Is it intended to be used actively?

Under the order, price control applies to natural gas. However, the price of natural gas is already controlled by a regulator. Do the powers supersede those of the regulator? To what extent are those powers over price control relevant to the action that the Government propose?

I was forcibly struck by the fact that suppliers anywhere in the world would be subject to the order. I do not understand what that means currently, although I can understand what it might have meant in 1976. At that time, BP was still a mainly nationalised British company. Under emergency powers, for example, BP's activities in Alaska would have been governed according to British priorities. However, as that is no longer the case, it is difficult to understand how such powers could be applied extraterritorially, as would seem to be the intention. What is the meaning of the statement that supplies anywhere in the world should be subject to the order? What is its contemporary relevance?

We fully support the general principle that the emergency powers should be used to prevent the disruption of emergency supplies and of the national economy.

11.3 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I fully support the order. There are law and order issues to be addressed. The people who took it upon themselves to restrict the flow of fuel to the nation were clearly putting lives at risk. They did so with no electoral mandate. They took to themselves rights that are denied to people involved in an industrial dispute. The reserve powers were thus needed for the protection of the public.

My second point is on the use of the powers. I had some experience of the crisis in the London borough of Havering, where the community management team worked to keep essential services going. The community management team is made up of the police, the local authority and representatives of the health and emergency services. It met immediately the fuel crisis arose, and put into effect policies to assist wherever possible.

After the crisis ended, the team reported to the community planning forum to which Members of Parliament in my area are invited. We discussed the powers and how efficient the team's planning had been. The only criticism was that there had been a lack of co-ordination at a central level in terms of the guidance that was given by Government Departments. At a local level, plans were made to meet the problems of keeping fuel flowing and providing special services, but the implementation of those plans was not helped by the different advice received from different Departments.

Different parts of the country had different experiences, so it would be useful to analyse those experiences to see whether the reserve powers will be able to deal with circumstances such as that arose during the crisis. An inquiry or report into those experiences should be debated on the Floor of the House, because it may be necessary to have different reserve powers on the statute book in future so that much more efficient arrangements can be put in place. I do not want to be critical, because the crisis was a unique experience that arose suddenly; none the less, I would like to hear my right hon. Friend the Minister's response to those points.

11.7 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I want to ask a few brief questions. I have the privilege of having the headquarters of the defence fuel group in my constituency and the crisis has shown the importance of that tri-service organisation. Its reorganisation has proved to be effective and the group has worked hard to make contingency plans. I would like to show my appreciation of the work that it has done.

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

Is it correct to suggest that, as a result of the introduction of ultra-low sulphur petrol and ultra-low sulphur diesel, this country will depend increasingly on imported refined products? Traditionally, we have refined the product in this country, having imported it in an unrefined state. However, is the ability of United Kingdom refineries to deliver the Chancellor of the Exchequer's commitment that everyone would have access to ultra-low sulphur petrol by next March achievable only—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying outside the terms of this debate. I would be grateful if he would confine his remarks to the order and its effects.

Mr. Chope: I shall certainly do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is my understanding that, under the powers in the order, the Secretary of State can intervene to direct the distribution and production of particular types of fuel. Because the order will extend over the next 12 months, will the Minister tell us whether it can be used in any circumstances to ensure that ultra-low sulphur petrol is distributed to 100 per cent. of petrol stations by March, as the Chancellor has said it would be?

Under the price control mechanisms in the order, did the Department—and particularly the Prime Minister—intervene in September to ensure that the price of petrol at filling stations did not rise above 79.9p immediately after the ending of the fuel protest and at the start of the 60-day period? It has been said that the Prime Minister used influence—backed, perhaps, by the powers in this order—to put pressure on the oil companies to keep down the price of fuel at the filling station. Consequently the wholesale price of diesel increased by about 8p a litre, and within a fortnight no fewer than 164 of the country's small filling stations went out of business. They will not reopen, and that will exacerbate the distribution problem to which the Minister referred in her opening remarks. I would be grateful if she could tell us who took responsibility for that price control exercise, and under which powers.

Will the Minister also deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), among others, about the impact of tax on the availability of stocks? As I understand it, filling stations large and small have to pay the 75 per cent. tax on fuel as soon as it is brought out of the refinery and delivered to them. Not surprisingly, they do not want to hold large stocks that they cannot sell within two or three days if they have to pay that much tax in advance. However, the refineries do not have to account to the Exchequer for the tax that they receive from the filling stations for 60 days. Does the Minister accept that the need for the order would have been significantly reduced if the Government had changed the tax regime as it impacts on individual filling stations?

Finally, the Minister said that many lessons had been learned in the past few weeks. Do the Government now believe that it would be more sensible to make greater use of pipeline distribution of fuel than has been the case hitherto?

11.12 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I return to my earlier point about the definition of priority users which was picked up by the hon. Members for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) and for Upminster (Mr. Darvill). I understand that under the current arrangements, which were introduced in September in the order approved by the Privy Council, priority users are defined by local authorities even though they may service the whole of the United Kingdom. In my area and elsewhere, that led to confusion. The arrangement also makes it difficult for people to access information about priority users centrally because central Government Departments will tell them to ask their local authority, as the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West said.

Would it not be better if priority user categories were decided centrally? Otherwise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has pointed out, and as the events of the past few months have demonstrated, there will be confusion locally and nationally. There may also be a sense of injustice because someone who may be regarded as a priority user by one local authority is not regarded as such elsewhere. Such an arrangement does not work well for industry advisers or for those who are trying to go about their business.

11.13 pm

Mrs. Liddell: I have taken careful note of several points that have been made. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made a common-sense point, and I undertake to ensure that my officials consider it carefully.

I regret to say that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) has misjudged the seriousness of the situation that we are discussing. He sought an opportunity to engage in party political tit for tat, and the importance of these issues transcends that. I urge him to take a leaf out of the book of his colleague Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish, who spoke on these matters in another place. We are discussing steps to ensure the protection of the vulnerable in our society and of the prosperity of the nation.

Mr. Gibb: I accept that these points are very serious, but I do not believe that the right hon. Lady believes that they are very serious. If she did, she would have agreed to the recall of Parliament as proposed by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition a few days after the order was laid. If such matters are so important, why did not she, her party and the Prime Minister recall Parliament?

Mrs. Liddell: The greater responsibility at the time was to ensure that the country was no longer disrupted. Indeed, that view has been broadly shared among many hon. Members. I deplore the way in which the hon. Gentleman is trying to engage in a post mortem of a situation in September. He asked why the order is before the House this evening. It is because the order runs out on 19 November and it is important to ensure that the Government can take action if necessary.

The hon. Gentleman asked why there was not an earlier debate. I suspect that he has not been paying attention. There was a debate on the fuel crisis during the first week

following the summer recess—the week beginning 23 October. The Home Secretary made a statement on 2 November. In another place, there was an oral question on the matter on 5 October, and a debate on the order on 7 November. There have been many opportunities to debate the fuel crisis. Tonight, we are about trying to ensure that we have the measures in place to protect essential services and the prosperity of the nation should there be future disruption in the event of action taken at filling stations or elsewhere.

The Energy Act 1976 provides the Government with temporary and exceptional powers to regulate or prohibit the production, supply, acquisition or use of fuel and electricity, either where there is imminent and actual threat of emergency in the UK affecting fuel or electricity supplies, or to meet international obligations. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) referred to that. We must meet certain international obligations. I bow to the hon. Gentleman's knowledge of the oil industry. Some of his points on changes in the way in which the oil industry does its business were very important. The introduction of the just-in-time system, not just in the oil industry but in manufacturing, was very much underlined by the situation that we faced in September.

While I am on health and safety issues, I should point out that, following Piper Alpha, any one employee in the oil industry who has an anxiety about safety may, without reference to a superior, cause a stoppage or conclude the process in which he or she is involved. That is understandable in the wake of Piper Alpha.

I know from discussions with tanker drivers—I visited the refineries—that many were very much aware of what they were driving. In effect, as the hon. Member for Twickenham explained, they were driving a highly explosive device—a mobile bomb. Because of the 180 cases of intimidation, details of which are available in the Library, drivers were anxious about what might happen to them. There were instances of bricks, plumb lines and so on being thrown from bridges, and of tankers being forced on to the hard shoulder. That is very frightening not just for the tanker driver but for society in general. The worry about what might happen was considerable. The issue of health and safety must predominate in the oil industry, and I, as the Minister with responsibility for Energy, would not want it to be otherwise.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked about the use of Ministry of Defence drivers. Such drivers have been trained, but in the hope that it will not be necessary to use them. I should point out, however, that, in directing those controlling the tankers to co-operate with the police or the military in securing supplies, we are not taking powers directly to requisition tankers. That is an important point, which must be borne in mind.

The Emergency Powers Act 1920 provides wide powers to make regulations which could be used to control goods or instruct members of the public or companies where the community's essentials of life or transport system are threatened by disruption of the supply and distribution of goods, including fuels. In such circumstances, the Act could be used to requisition tankers or create exclusion zones around specific sites. However, I am sure that the House, like me, hopes that the likelihood of that is extremely remote.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton tried to make political capital out of the previous orders that were laid. The speed, scale and effect of the disruption last time took everyone by surprise, and measures had to be implemented quickly. I accept that there was a degree of confusion, and we have reviewed the arrangements so that we are better prepared for any repetition of the disruption. The changes in the regulations reflect consultation with business, local authorities and the police. Rather than criticise, Conservative Members should congratulate local authorities, the police and business throughout the country on the hard work that they put in to ensure that fuel supplies were maintained as far as possible and normality returned as quickly as possible.

The orders demonstrate flexibility in a fast-moving situation. We are trying to ensure that we have in place orders that allow us to act flexibly and to take into account the nature of future disruption, which I hope will not occur.

Mr. Gibb: Will the right hon. Lady explain the purpose of the five orders issued under the previous Order in Council? What do they achieve legally?

Mrs. Liddell: The purpose is to give the Secretary of State powers, for example, to designate priority filling stations and depots. I am sure the House recognises that that is critical, especially as, although many public service and local authority users get their fuel from depots, a significant number, especially those in rural areas, get their fuel from ordinary filling stations. That is why it is necessary to designate such filling stations.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I have gone through the 25 pages of the documents, and I can find only two designated filling stations in my constituency, which is a big one with a large rural collar. There are 600 outlets nationwide. Is there a cap on the total number of filling stations that can be designated, or can local authorities, in conjunction with police, propose additional garages?

Mrs. Liddell: Local authorities, in conjunction with police, constructed the list. There is no artificial cap. I undertake to examine the position in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. Gibb: Will the right hon. Lady explain the effect of designation? As far as I can tell, all that the lesser statutory instruments issued under the order do is provide a list of filling stations—that is it. They provide no powers other than the power to create a list. What is the legal effect of creating the list?

Mrs. Liddell: The filling stations will be given fuel on a priority basis—that is the purpose of the list of designated filling stations.

I must now try to address the substantial number of points made during the debate. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) appears to have misunderstood the purpose of the order, in that he talked about ultra-low sulphur petrol and dependence. I am sure that his intention was not mischievous and that he of all people recognises the importance of these matters. It is the responsibility of the Secretary of State to ensure that fuel of whatever sort is needed is available. In September, some areas

[Mrs. Liddell]

experienced a shortage of unleaded petrol; in such cases, the Secretary of State would be anxious to ensure that unleaded petrol was supplied to filling stations, even if leaded petrol was available at those stations. The same applies to supplies of diesel and ultra-low sulphur petrol. I hope that the hon. Gentleman was not trying to score some petty political point. The key requirement is to make sure that fuel is available in filling stations for essential services.

Mr. Chope: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I would prefer to make progress.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the price control powers were used in September. They were not. He also mentioned the use of pipelines. Pipelines are used to supply operations such as major airports, but they are expensive to install. It is unlikely that additional pipelines will be constructed in the year in which the order will apply.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked about the explanatory note. As set out in the explanatory note to each order, the depots and filling stations were designated to allow the Secretary of State to make further orders or to give directions under the Energy Act 1976 by reference to those premises. In the event, in September the oil companies agreed on a voluntary basis to direct fuel to the designated sites and to supply at those sites only the categories of persons that the Secretary of State had instructed should be supplied.

A great deal of publicity was given to those arrangements at that time. Many of the 24-hour news channels on television had text at the bottom of the screen giving details of the filling stations available in particular areas.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham for the support that he has shown to the Government on this matter. We hope that the need for the orders is academic. The hon. Gentleman suggested that the need for them may have passed, but I believe that it is prudent for the Government to ensure that we can protect the most vulnerable and the nation's prosperity. That is the reason why the orders will lie, whether or not we need them during the next year.

On the points that the hon. Gentleman made arising from his own experience, the oil industry has learned a lot from the past couple of months. It has learned how its procedures can lead to disruption. With his background, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that a certain level of stocks are held—not in the same way as the strategic supplies in the United States, but there is a minimum level of 63 days, I think, in case of a major disruption of supply in the UK. We believe that those stocks should be used for emergency purposes, not as a means of manipulating the market. They should be available, should some extraneous event cause a disruption to UK supplies.

The hon. Gentleman asked an important question about liability for tanker accidents. An indemnity has been negotiated with the oil companies and hauliers to cover losses arising from tankers being driven by service drivers. Where a service driver was at fault, the Secretary of State for Defence would be vicariously liable in any event.

The hon. Gentleman asked about price controls. Those were not necessary during the September disruption, and we hope that they will never be necessary, but the Government are determined to do whatever is necessary to maintain supplies. As this point, it is important for us not to second-guess what attempts might be made to disrupt supplies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) made an important point about the need for co-ordination and communication. I hear what he says. The Government have been examining closely the requirements for co-ordination and communication and have been taking advice from many of those with whom we had dealings during the September situation.

As regards behaviour in the marketplace, the hon. Member for Christchurch asked about the difficulties of some small filling stations. The Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering complaints about anything that may be construed as anti-competitive behaviour. The Office of Fair Trading has received complaints about differential pricing policies and is examining the matter. The OFT has written to oil companies to ask for information on their wholesale pricing policies. I am sure that the hon. Member for Christchurch acknowledges that it is up to the Director General of Fair Trading to consider whether action under competition legislation is required.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I must try to draw my remarks to an end.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I shall take one final question, and then I wish to make progress.

Mr. Gibb: This is an important question, which I asked earlier. If it becomes clear in the next few weeks or months that the powers are no longer required, will the Minister return to the House with a revocation order, or will she leave them in existence for a full 12 months?

Mrs. Liddell: In considering that question, we get into interesting debates about what would make it clear that no further disruption will occur. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would expect a responsible Government to take responsibility for decisions. That means that we have to consider access to powers, in case we need them. I cannot discuss what would make it clear that no further disruption was likely. We are taking action to maintain supplies to essential users and essential industries. One of the regrettable aspects of events in September was that people at refinery gates tried to define essential and non-essential users.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton tried to score political points at the beginning of his remarks. I stress to him that responsible government means making decisions that mean that some people are sometimes disappointed. The Government are working to provide a long-term future for the whole economy, based on low, stable interest and mortgage rates and sound public finances on the basis of which people and businesses can plan ahead. We will not sacrifice the

economic stability that we have built up by reacting to short-term pressures in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests.

The reserve powers to which the Order in Council provides access enable us to make special arrangements to safeguard supplies of fuel to essential services. I emphasise that we hope that it will not be necessary to use them in the foreseeable future. However, we make it clear that we have a duty to take appropriate precautionary measures. Given the clear potential of the disruption of fuel supply seriously to damage society, business and the most vulnerable, I see no scope for disagreement, and I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Energy Act 1976 (Reserve Powers) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2449) dated 11th September 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12th September, be approved.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

FEES AND CHARGES

That the draft Consular Fees Act 1980 (Fees) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 19th June, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to Committees.

Ordered,

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

That Mr. Phil Willis be discharged from the Education and Employment Committee and Mr. Richard Allan be added to the Committee.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

That Mr. David Wilshire be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Mr. John Maples be added to the Committee.

HEALTH

That Mr. Robert Syms be discharged from the Health Committee and Mrs. Marion Roe be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Cleft Lip and Palate Patients

11.34 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I wish to present a petition in the name of Mrs. Sue Baillie of Mount Vernon hospital, Northwood Cleft Lip and Palate Association and 1,242 fellow signatories.

The petition states:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The Humble Petition of Cleft Lip and/or Palate NHS Patients and their Parents, Guardians, Carers, Grandparents, Relatives and Supporters sheweth

That having not received clear openness and transparency during the implementation of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group recommendations on Cleft Lip and Palate Services, and being denied fair and reasonable representation in the decision making process,

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House will request the Secretary of State for Health to initiate a full and independent quality audit of all current Cleft Lip and Palate Units before the designation of new centres. Your Petitioners also pray that your Honourable House will urge the Secretary of State for Health to reconsider the number of unit closures necessary in order to provide the new service without further unnecessary hardship for patients and their families.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Hospitals (West London)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

11.35 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Today, the public consultation period for the proposals on modernising specialist acute hospital services in west London put forward by Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority on behalf of the West London Partnership Forum of four health authorities in west London comes to an end.

This speech is my submission not only to Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority but to Parliament and the country on behalf of my constituents, and on behalf of the thousands throughout the United Kingdom and overseas who are appalled by the planned closure of Harefield hospital. They have expressed by letter, phone, fax, e-mail, petition and their presence at the five public consultation meetings in the Hillingdon borough their rightful indignation about what is proposed.

I have consistently sought to put the truth before the public, not only in my Adjournment debate of 2 December 1998 but in the summer Adjournment debate of 28 July 2000, in numerous parliamentary questions, in meetings with Ministers, letters to Ministers and in contributions at every consultation meeting held in the Hillingdon borough.

There has been little controversy over the proposals for specialist paediatric and renal hospital services in west London, but that a supposedly responsible national health service forum should propose the closure of Harefield hospital, the most famous cardiothoracic hospital in Britain, without even putting forward its modernisation and development as an option for consultation, has caused outrage.

Harefield has undertaken more transplants—more than 2,000—than any other cardiothoracic hospital in the world. Under the leadership of Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub, voted by the nation's television viewers as man of the year only a few weeks ago, its reputation for excellence and total devotion to patient care is unsurpassed anywhere. This is something that the general public understand. They accord the highest esteem to the human and even spiritual values represented by the dedication of Harefield's staff to the healing of broken hearts and lungs.

By contrast, what the West London Partnership Forum seems to hold in the highest esteem are the asset values of Harefield and the Royal Brompton hospitals. That is an unworthy and narrow perspective, as the future of Britain's most famous heart and lung hospital transcends west London or even the capital as a whole. Its patients come from far and wide, and only just over 10 per cent. come from the Hillingdon borough where it is situated.

The motives of those who would transplant idyllically tranquil rural Harefield to one of the most congested, polluted, noisy, crime-ridden, overcrowded, concrete jungles of inner London are bound to be criticised and scrutinised. They merit further deep investigation.

The conduct of the consultation process was unseemly from its inception in late July at the height of the holiday season. There was overwhelming public opposition to the destruction of Harefield, which the West London Partnership Forum had proposed, but the NHS representatives in their total intransigence showed a disturbing contempt for democracy, and utter lack of interest in any proposals other than their own. I hope they now give the impressive written responses from the Heart of Harefield campaign, residents associations, the borough council, Community Voice, the community health council, patients groups and individuals the genuine consideration that they deserve.

The Secretary of State too, if he is a democrat, should demand to study those responses. He knows the strength of public feeling, and has had letters of public protest enough. On 26 April, a petition with more than 80,000 signatures was delivered to the Prime Minister at 10 Downing street—an event which can hardly have passed him by, especially as it was well televised and led by an eight-year-old double heart transplant former patient, Sophie Park, and by the then leader of Hillingdon borough council, councillor Richard Barnes, now the Greater London Assembly councillor for Ealing and Hillingdon.

If care of patients were poor at Harefield, the fiercest critics would be its patients past and present. However, the Hamsters—the Harefield transplant club, which represents those who have had transplants there—are its staunchest supporters, as are members of the Rebeat club, which is affiliated to the British Heart Foundation and has some 400 members nationwide—people who are, or have been, patients at Harefield hospital, and their close relatives.

Were there a cogent case for Harefield hospital's closure, I as the local Member of Parliament would have had it represented to me by my electors, but I have not. Moreover, all parties on Hillingdon borough council would not have voted together to save and develop the hospital unless that were the wish of local residents.

There is much rhetoric about the NHS's response to the views of patients and the public. Indeed, the heading of the first chapter of the NHS national plan describes its vision as

a health service designed around the patient.

To modernise Harefield would cost a tiny proportion of the £180 million net capital cost of building and equipping the new hospital at Paddington basin, whose gross cost would be about twice as high were it not for the proceeds from selling the Royal Brompton and Harefield sites.

What is more, the outline business case projects that the closure of the Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals will be set against a requirement for only an extra nine cardiothoracic beds by 2006, which is when the new hospital is due to be completed, and an extra 27 by 2011. In relation to the overall number of beds in west London in the hospitals affected by the proposed changes, only an extra 24 beds are projected by 2011—an extra hundredth of a bed per 1,000 population.

Clearly, more than health economics is involved. I suggest the answer lies in the strategic objective to regenerate the Paddington basin in central London, to which aim Harefield hospital and its staff are intended to be sacrificed. I do not think that the prognosis for the Paddington basin site is good, because it was flooded on 2 November.

Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster is the health authority in the West London Partnership Forum, which is leading on the forum's proposal to sell Harefield

hospital and put the proceeds together with those from the sale of its hospital trust partner, the Royal Brompton, into the development of a new cardiothoracic hospital in Paddington as part of what the forum, in its outline business case, describes as

> the most significant land development programme in London since Docklands.

The House should note that the arbiter as well as the conductor of the public consultation process is the Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority. In an ethical world, the arbiter would be independent and objective, such as a health authority outside the area concerned. However, in this case the vested interest of Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster is clear, as it is progenitor, proposer, arbiter, prospective executor and beneficiary of the proposals.

Were there natural justice, such a flagrant business and pecuniary interest on the part of the Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority would invalidate the whole consultation process because, to quote the West London Partnership Forum again:

> St. Mary's NHS Trust and Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority are both members of the Paddington regeneration partnership. This group of landowners, business and local stakeholders has the objective of establishing Paddington as a premier residential and business district of London and to provide sustainable economic vitality for the area ensuring that the products of regeneration benefit the surrounding communities.

Over the 10 to 15-year development period, the combined schemes are due to create more than 30,000 jobs. Little thought is given to the jobs to be lost at Harefield, which has little employment other than the hospital, and hardly any of the hospital's staff are willing to move to Paddington.

The problems of access, parking, accommodation for visitors and staff, road user charges and physical safety for rehabilitating patients and their relatives are plain to all—except the West London Partnership Forum. The problems of travelling to Paddington should alone invalidate the Paddington basin site. However, Harefield is the optimum location: set in green belt in rural Middlesex with ample gardens and lawns, it has a helipad, cheap and friendly accommodation and easy access to the M4, M40, M1, M25, Heathrow, Luton, Northolt and Denham airfields, the tubes at Uxbridge and Northwood and rail services at Watford and at Denham.

History repeats itself, but each generation is reluctant to accept the lessons of the past. In her history of the hospital, "Heart of Harefield", the former consultant surgeon at Harefield, Mary Shepherd, points out that, in response to a report by the London Health Planning Consortium, which had similar centralising plans in 1979, Harefield commented on that report's lack of evidence for cardiac centres located in general or in teaching hospitals performing better than those that were not. She said that

> on the contrary the available evidence suggests otherwise . . . the proposals . . . for relocation . . . are not based on the preservation and development of existing standards of excellence for the benefit of the public but on the sterile logic of planning and perhaps the personal predilection of the authors. . . For service to patients teaching should be a subordinate consideration.

It is noteworthy that Harefield's finest work has been done in the past 20 years—since it beat off the threat to its survival from the London Health Planning Consortium. I again quote from its historic and mercifully triumphant response of 20 years ago:

> We must point to a simple truth . . . nowhere acknowledged in the report—

nor in this one, for that matter—

> the peculiar genius which inspires a team in our demanding speciality cannot be uprooted and expected to flourish elsewhere . . . talk of transplanting this excellence is simply a euphemism for its destruction.
>
> Industrial relations and service to the public are excellent. It has the space and ability to expand. Its location is more convenient for patients who come from all over the country and the world than any of the hospitals amongst whom it is proposed to divide its work. The quality of its treatment and the quiet peace of the surroundings outweigh all other considerations. The public is entitled to hear better reasons for its destruction.

Founded in 1915 as a hospital for Australian soldiers wounded in the great war—No. 1 auxiliary hospital of the Australian Imperial Forces—Harefield hospital has performed devoted service to the sick in peace and in war. As was written of the ANZAC casualties, who are still commemorated by the schoolchildren of the village every ANZAC day when they lay flowers on the 107 graves in St Mary's churchyard,

> For here in Harefield for them some corner of a foreign field, brave hearts find peace under an English heaven.

Long may it remain.

11.50 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on securing the debate. It gives the House an opportunity to discuss the existing disposition of some of the specialist services in west London, and the case for change that underpins the proposals for reorganisation that are currently the subject of public consultation. As the hon. Gentleman said, public consultation is about to close.

Although I shall inevitably need to rehearse some of the arguments lying behind the proposals that are currently out to consultation, it is important that I do not prejudge, or give any sense that I am prejudging, the consultation. Ministers will clearly need to approach the consultation, if and when it finally comes to us, with a fresh and open mind in regard to the issues that are raised. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if, for that reason, I do not engage in a detailed debate with him about some of his points. I think that would be wrong, given the present stage of the public consultation.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Does the Minister recognise that concern about the future of Harefield extends beyond the boundaries of the constituency of the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson)? In particular, does he recognise that my constituents' concern relates particularly to access to cardiothoracic services, and will he ensure that that is taken into consideration in the final decision about the future of Harefield?

Mr. Denham: I recognise the broad spectrum represented by those who are concerned about the issue. I have received letters from my own constituents about the future of Harefield hospital, and there is a wide range of issues—including those relating to access and transport—that will have been reflected in the public

[Mr. Denham]

consultation. If it is referred to Ministers, they will have to take careful account of those issues in the future. I acknowledge my hon. Friend's points, and his local concerns in particular.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood concentrated—as I think we all anticipated—on the future of Harefield hospital. It is one of the best-known heart and lung hospitals in the NHS, and I want to place on record the high regard in which we hold those services and the staff who provide them.

The hon. Gentleman has raised the future of Harefield hospital on many occasions on behalf of his constituents. I think we all know that, under the inspirational clinical leadership of Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub, Harefield hospital has been remarkably successful in its development of heart and lung services. It has also become a centre where research and development is an integral part of its work to improve life expectancy and the quality of life for those with serious cardiothoracic conditions.

Specialist care of the type that has been pioneered at Harefield is a crucial part of services that are provided for people with coronary heart disease. Services that begin with health promotion continue through primary care settings, with general practitioners and their staff assessing and diagnosing patients, referring them to cardiologists in the local acute hospital, As part of that pattern of service, emergency services are involved, including the highly trained paramedic ambulance crews who respond to the sudden and devastating coronary accident.

Many coronary heart disease patients are treated successfully without the need for referral to a specialist centre such as Harefield. Nevertheless, for those with particularly complex medical or surgical needs, the expertise available at Harefield and other centres of excellence can be the difference between life and death, and can give much improved quality of life and life expectancy.

No hospital is immune to pressures. Hospitals must modernise if they are to remain a vital and effective part of the larger entity that is the NHS. The willingness to embrace necessary change is key if we are to begin to build a modern NHS to meet the needs of patients both nationally and locally in west London. Harefield, along with the Royal Brompton, Hammersmith and St Mary's, is one of several centres in west London that provides specialist heart and lung services.

The hon. Gentleman is familiar with the background to the service reviews that have led to the public consultation by Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority. The consultation has been on proposals for modernising specialist acute hospital services in west London. It has run for some four months from July until today. The fragmentation of specialist heart and lung, renal and specialist children's services has long been of concern to all those who wish to see continued improvement in clinical care and outcomes and in education, training and research.

The hon. Gentleman will know that, as part of the independent review of London's health services, the Government asked Sir Leslie Turnberg to assess the need for change in west London. He was also asked to look at the process that had been developed involving both the NHS and its academic partners in shaping the change.

Sir Leslie was encouraged by the progress that he saw. His report registered a particular concern that the way in which the service is currently organised in west London might not be maximising its long-term contribution to national and international research. He advised the Government to ensure that plans for a more rational distribution of specialist services throughout west London were achieved. The hon. Gentleman may recall that, unlike the previous Administration with regard to many of the reviews that they commissioned, this Government did not cherry-pick the expert independent advice that they received.

In the Government's response to Sir Leslie's report, we accepted all the recommendations that it made. In taking forward recommendations, the NHS Executive asked hospitals and health authorities in that area of west London, along with Imperial College, to take part in a review of specialist cardiac and thoracic services. That review commissioned expert clinical input from a panel chaired by Sir Terence English, an internationally respected figure in heart transplantation who completed the first successful heart transplant in the UK, and a past president of the Royal College of Surgeons. The review was completed in July 1998. It broadly confirmed Sir Leslie Turnberg's impression that cardiac and thoracic services in west London were not organised in a way that would continue to support the highest quality service and academic endeavour.

Sir Terence English advised that three out of the four cardiac centres in west London were not seeing a sufficient number of patients to support the highest quality of patient care or research and teaching. He recommended that existing services should be focused on fewer, larger centres. He also advised that co-location of specialist cardiac services with other related specialties would bring benefits not available to single specialty hospitals such as Harefield.

We have a number of specialist hospitals in the NHS that, through the immense talent and vision of a small number of specialists, have developed services of the highest quality and innovation. In certain instances, those hospitals find themselves with a relatively small number of patients. They can be geographically isolated from other hospitals and from other related specialties. There is growing evidence that suggests that clinical risk is best managed by ensuring that highly specialised services are undertaken in large, multi-disciplinary centres, where all appropriate support specialties are close at hand.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned about the possible future location of those services. I can assure him that the aim of the proposals—certainly, my aim in considering any proposals—will be to ensure that patients are winners in terms of being able to access services that are uniformly of the highest standard; and that staff are winners in terms of working in multi-disciplinary teams enjoying state of the art facilities and the best education and training opportunities. We aim to ensure that researchers are winners in terms of having the best opportunity to undertake programmes of excellence and innovation worthy of the 21st century.

The West London Partnership Forum, chaired by Lord Newton of Braintree, a Minister for Health under the previous Administration, was established to enable senior

clinicians and managers in the NHS to discuss with colleagues in Imperial College how they should respond to the call within Sir Leslie Turnberg's review of London's health services for a more rational distribution of specialist care in London.

On 14 February 2000, the forum announced that its preferred option was for a new specialist heart and lung hospital alongside specialist children's services next to a rebuilt St Mary's hospital, as part of the Paddington basin scheme, which is London's biggest redevelopment. The forum's preferred option would also see the Hammersmith Hospitals NHS trust become the west London centre for specialist renal services.

As soon as the forum had a set of proposals, it laid them before the public in a consultation exercise. During the consultation period, the NHS has made available to the public large amounts of information to support the arguments in favour of the forum's preferred option and the other options considered. It has certainly been one of the biggest ever consultation exercises on proposals for change in the NHS, with 12 public meetings and large numbers of people attending each of them. There is an internet site with the consultation document available upon it. There will also be a further special public meeting, on 29 November, before the health authority considers the outcome of public consultation at its meeting on 13 December.

My understanding is that every effort has been made to ensure that those with an interest in the future of those services have had the opportunity to make their views heard. As I said at the beginning, I am unable to comment on the possible outcome of public consultation, as my position as Minister prevents me from doing so. However, our aim is to ensure that any change that flows from the process will be to the benefit of patients.

I do, however, understand that some people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency have strong feelings about the proposed changes. Harefield village quite clearly identifies with the hospital as an institution and sees it as part of the local community. The letters that I have received about Harefield express concerns about the proposed changes.

I should like to take this opportunity to mention various decisions that demonstrate our commitment to Harefield, both the hospital and the wider community. I should also like to remind the House that, regardless of the outcome of public consultation, capital investment is both justified and continues to be made in the fabric and services at Harefield hospital. A new patient services centre, for example, is being built at a capital cost of £4.2 million.

We are also contributing £2.5 million towards phase 2 of the heart sciences centre, which is a research facility that was opened in 1992. The case has been made for further development of the facility, to provide new laboratories to facilitate research in the areas of gene therapy, chronic rejection, homograft valve research and tissue engineering. When he was Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), made a commitment to provide £2 million towards the project.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health recently met Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub and, at that meeting, agreed to provide a further £500,000 towards phase 2 of the heart sciences centre. I think that that can be seen as reaffirming our commitment to support that centre.

The Secretary of State also heard more of current developments at Harefield and of the uncertainty that is inevitably felt at this time. Although there is no question of pre-empting the outcome of public consultation, he agreed to fund a feasibility study to explore the possible use of the Harefield site as a science park in the event that a decision is made to centralise clinical services elsewhere. I must emphasise that the feasibility study is being undertaken as a precautionary measure and in no way prejudges the outcome of the public consultation. I add that that study has been welcomed by health organisations in north-west London.

The common objective of all the Government's plans for the modernisation of the national health service is to ensure that the patient has equitable access to high-quality care and treatment. That is the objective of the NHS plan and of the national service framework for coronary heart disease. I believe that that is an objective shared by those who have been developing proposals for the re-organisation of specialist NHS cardiothoracic, renal and children's services in west London.

Whatever the outcome that follows from those proposals, the legacy of Harefield and its staff under the clinical leadership of Sir Magdi will be safeguarded for the benefit of tomorrow's patients. Harefield's contribution to the NHS is one that should be celebrated. I want to express my recognition and appreciation of that contribution—a contribution that will remain central to the success of clinical services, education and research for heart and lung disease and be recognised not only nationally, but all the way around the globe.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 21 November.

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER GROUP TREASURY PLC (TRANSFER) BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 21 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rural Travel Costs

1. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce** (Gordon): If he will provide an additional allowance to those in receipt of income support in rural areas of Scotland to take account of the essential travel costs that they incur; and if he will make a statement. [136321]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): No. The Government and the Scottish Executive have other measures in place to help rural areas.

Mr. Bruce: That is a rather disappointing if forthright answer. I remind the Minister of the first report of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs which identified car ownership as essential even for poor people in rural areas, and transport as a specific problem. The Government have pursued a policy of consistently increasing transport costs across the board, applying the inflation addition only to the increase in benefits. Is it not time that representations were made to the Secretary of State for Social Security to review the extent to which that has increased poverty in rural Scotland?

Mr. Wilson: Before coming here, I took the precaution of checking on comparative petrol prices, and I was interested to learn that the Esso filling station in Inverurie, where the hon. Gentleman's face is undoubtedly well kent, is selling unleaded petrol at 81.9p a litre, which is exactly the same as in West Hampstead. Therefore, it is difficult to say that rural motoring costs are more expensive than urban motoring costs. I also note today that the Liberal Democrats in Anniesland are against means-testing for pensioners and those in receipt of other benefits. I cannot think of a more divisive piece of means-testing anywhere in the country than giving people on income support additional help with motoring costs while not giving it to those who are not.

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Chancellor's package last week will make a big difference to rural motorists in my constituency and elsewhere? However, he will be aware that there is a big discrepancy in petrol pricing between my constituency and the rest of Scotland, a matter which is being investigated by the Office of Fair Trading. When will that report be finished, and will my hon. Friend undertake to take whatever action is recommended by the OFT as quickly as possible?

Mr. Wilson: I am well aware of that report, which I await with keen interest. My hon. Friend is right: there is a huge discrepancy in petrol prices within what is generically known as rural areas and, for instance, between the Western Isles and places such as Inverness and Inverurie. My primary concern in the matter is the genuinely peripheral areas where people are paying perhaps 10p a litre more than they are in what are sometimes called rural areas but which offer urban prices, and I want to tackle that differential. There is a real case for the OFT to investigate in the Western Isles, and I for one will be extremely curious to discover why filling stations with large volume turnover which are not paying a higher wholesale price than on the mainland are charging much higher retail prices.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I congratulate you on your appointment, Mr. Speaker, as this is the first time that I have been here since your elevation to your post.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Oh really.

Mrs. Ewing: I am honest.

We have had endless reports about price differentials in rural areas from the OFT, the Highlands and Islands convention and the Highland council, yet the matter has not been effectively addressed despite what was said late last night in the House on the Energy Act 1976 and the reserve powers order. I also draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the issue pertains particularly to those on low incomes, and those who want to go to the Benefits Agency to discuss the new deal are often deterred by the extensive costs that they have to pay to reach their destination.

Mr. Wilson: I agree with the hon. Lady's basic point. Through the new deal and other innovative approaches by the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency, help is available to people looking for jobs, and it is right that that should be so, whatever their specific needs and whether they are in rural or urban areas. If that helps people to obtain sustainable employment, that is a cost worth paying. Price differentials between areas need to be tackled, but we should not forget that taxation is the

same throughout the country, so wherever else the differentials come from, they do not come through the tax system.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): My hon. Friend is fully aware that fuel costs impact not only on private motorists but on business. Within the past 60 days, however, it has been drawn to my attention that some small businesses, usually in the habit of receiving bulk deliveries, have found that a few companies have escalated fuel prices for them, and it is cheaper to buy fuel at local filling stations. Surely that merits an investigation into what those fuel companies are doing.

Mr. Wilson: It is certainly not part of my role to defend every action of the fuel companies. I shall be pleased to refer my hon. Friend's comments to the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): It is interesting to hear the Minister avoiding the question again and again. I am not sure whether he has got his facts right about the filling station in Inverurie. I happen to know it well because my late grandmother-in-law used to own and operate it. *[Laughter.]* I do not see what is funny about that. She used to own it and serve the petrol there. If hon. Members had ever been to Inverurie, they would have seen her.

If the Minister accepts that petrol prices are an important part of essential travel costs in rural areas, why will the Government not listen to people who are suffering because we have the highest fuel tax in Europe, and cut fuel duty now? Is he proud of the fact that the Government have created in Scotland a level of rural poverty that we believed had been consigned to history?

Mr. Wilson: We have been waiting for some time to ascertain the Tories' remaining connections in Scotland. The hon. Lady had not previously struck me as a quine from Inverurie, but I am sure that she is proud of the designation. I received the figure from Inverurie shortly before lunch; unless a rapid price escalation has occurred in the meantime, my facts are right.

The hon. Lady said that we had the highest fuel taxation in Europe and she is right. However, she omits two salient facts. First, the proportion of the price of fuel that is taxation is significantly lower than when the Government came to power. We have reduced the proportion of tax in the cost of a litre of fuel.

The second fact is much more important. While our fuel taxation is high, a new study by Colin Buchanan and Partners has shown that our overall motoring taxation is below the median in Europe. In most countries, including France, Ireland and the Netherlands, motorists pay more in taxation although they do not pay so much of it at the pump.

Employment Trends

2. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): If he will make a statement on employment trends in Scotland. [136322]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Employment in Scotland is at record levels, with 2,376,000 people in work and an employment rate of 73.4 per cent. I do not have the breakdown of figures for Inverurie, but I can write to my hon. Friend if he wishes.

Mr. Griffiths: Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he will continue to promote policies such as the new deal, which has helped 25,000 young Scots from welfare into work, and the working families tax credit, which helps up to 100,000 Scottish families? Will he decisively reject the Conservative party's policies to scrap the valuable allowances and schemes? Such policies would return us to the era of mass unemployment and despair. Will my right hon. Friend turn his back on that?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I can promise my hon. Friend that I will do that. I believe that we are beginning to benefit not only from the new deal but from the stable economic framework that the Government have created and that has resulted in the highest employment that we have ever had in Scotland and the lowest unemployment since 1976. It is worth emphasising that the reduction in unemployment is not only good in itself, but, along with the reduction in debt, allows us to put money towards vital services such as education, health and transport that are benefiting from the tough decisions that were taken. Rather than spending up to 50p in every pound of taxpayers' money on debt repayment and unemployment, we are allowed to put 83p of every pound towards vital public services.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Although I welcome the trend, I hope that the Secretary of State acknowledges that we must never become complacent, and that we must ensure that every possible job in Scotland is available. To that end, what role does the Secretary of State play in ensuring that the United Kingdom Government have a coherent policy on the dispersal of civil servants' jobs? Is he worried about the report in *The Herald* in Glasgow about the apparent decision of the Department for International Development not to locate jobs in Scotland because of the anxiety about the lack of a talented work force there? Will he ensure that his colleagues understand that Scotland is an excellent place in which to locate work and that it has a talented work force? Will he also ensure that the Government have a coherent strategy for dispersing civil servants' jobs?

Dr. Reid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government should, whenever possible, help to support British industry and disperse jobs. On dispersal of jobs to Scotland, the Department for International Development has as good a record as any other Department, or even a better one. As he will know, there is a major section of the DFID at East Kilbride. Moreover, thousands upon thousands of jobs in Scotland depend directly or indirectly on the Government and the civil service through Departments such as the Ministry of Defence. I am glad that the Government have been fighting to create jobs in the public and private sectors, such as with the recent decision to award a contract to the Govan shipyard, which can secure the future of that shipyard.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): The Secretary of State has probably just answered my question. I was going to ask him whether he agrees with me that one of the biggest boosts to employment in the Glasgow area has been the recent welcome decision by the Ministry of Defence to award a substantial order to BAE Systems in Govan. Will he join me in congratulating the work force on their valiant efforts to secure that vital order? Will he tell the House how many such contracts would come to Scotland if it were not part of the United Kingdom?

Dr. Reid: As my hon. Friend feels that I have already dealt with his first question, perhaps I should answer the second. In the unfortunate circumstance of an SNP-dominated, separate Scotland, very few people would be involved in building the three rowing boats that would presumably form the basis of the SNP navy sailing endlessly between Gourock and Dunoon to bring security to the people of Scotland.

On a more serious note, as my hon. Friend said we should congratulate the work force at Govan on their efforts, not least their recent work on the auxiliary oilers. I am glad that we have been able to assist, but no one should be under any illusions because this is an extremely competitive industry internationally. All British shipyards face great competition not only against each other but internationally. It is down to the workers and the management to win contracts, although the British Government will do whatever we can to assist British workers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the Secretary of State aware that unemployment levels in 15 English constituencies and 6 constituencies in London are higher than the highest in Scotland, which regrettably is, I believe, your constituency, Mr. Speaker? Does the Secretary of State attribute that to the enormous amount of public money that pours north from England to assist with the process? If so, what will he do to put that injustice right and to ensure that a proper amount of public money is spent south of the border to give us the benefits that Scotland has had?

Dr. Reid: I would be the first to accept that there are pockets of unemployment in England and in the London area that are as bad or worse than in many parts of Scotland. We have constantly made the point that the difference within regions is as big as the difference between regions. The right hon. Gentleman asks me to attribute blame for those circumstances. Without being churlish, I contend that the blame lies with 18 years of Conservative government.

It is a fact that in London, as throughout the United Kingdom, since this Government came in we have diminished greatly the level of unemployment. We now have the highest record of employment that we have ever had, and we have the lowest level of unemployment since the 1970s. That is because the Government have created a stable economic framework that enables the private sector to create jobs, and through the new deal the Government have given individuals the confidence and the initiative to take up those jobs. It is a pity that the right hon. Gentleman's party is committed to getting rid of schemes such as the new deal, which have done so much, and would unfortunately take us back to the boom and bust of the previous Tory Government.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): To take up the theme of injustice, does the Secretary of State agree with me that one of the greatest injustices was the lack of a national minimum wage? Under this Government, more than 140,000 Scots earn at least £3.70 an hour, whereas in the days of the previous Government it did not matter to them that some people earned only 70p an hour.

Dr. Reid: I entirely agree. There were those on the Opposition Benches who predicted that if we introduced a decent minimum wage, we would lose hundreds of thousands of jobs. That has not happened. We have introduced a wage level below which people should not be forced to drop—it is the first time in British history that that has been the case—and, at the same time, created many thousands more jobs than would otherwise have been created. It is a pity, indeed a tragedy, that so many of the things that we are now able to build up because of the hard decisions that we made at an early stage would be abolished by a Conservative Government. I am thinking not just of the new deal, but of many of the benefits that we have been able to hand out to pensioners—including, of course, the winter fuel allowance.

Civil Service

3. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister about proposals to give MSPs greater access to the civil service. [136323]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with the First Minister on a wide range of matters.

Mr. Swayne: I think it quite important for us to know the answer to this question, rather than any other. Has the Minister discussed with the First Minister that First Minister's proposals to politicise the Scottish civil service?

Mr. Wilson: Not for the first time and doubtless not for the last, the hon. Gentleman is proceeding on the basis of a misapprehension. No such proposal has been made, and my colleague the First Minister is far too experienced to want for one moment to politicise the civil service any more than the civil service would want or allow him to politicise it.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Is my hon. Friend aware that, during my rather brief spell as a Minister in the Scottish Executive, I authorised a number of briefings for Tory and nationalist MSPs by the civil service? I am not sure whether anyone was any wiser as a result; we can but hope.

Is my hon. Friend also aware that those of us who believe in the United Kingdom see a strong case for more members of the United Kingdom civil service to be located in places such as East Kilbride? Following my hon. Friend's reply to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith), may I urge him to keep trying?

Mr. Wilson: I like to think of my hon. Friend as having been given remission. It is very nice to have him back with us.

The point about civil service dispersal has been made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The Department for International Development has an excellent record of dispersing jobs to East Kilbride, and I have no doubt that that will continue to happen on a case-by-case basis where appropriate. Every interest must be considered: the interests of East Kilbride must be considered, as must the interests of those involved in dispersal.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): May I take up the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne)? Will the Minister please confirm the position relating to the Scottish civil service? The Prime Minister told me in a written answer on 6 November that it was part of the home civil service. Does that mean that responsibility for adherenee to the civil service code rests with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, rather than with the First Minister? May we have that clarified now?

Mr. Wilson: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to tell us that his grandfather owned a sweetie shop in Friockheim. But, as he says, the Scottish Executive civil service is part of the home civil service, and responsibility for it lies with the head of it, the Cabinet Secretary. The Cabinet Secretary has made it clear, in the most unequivocal terms, that there was no intention and no attempt to politicise the service—and nor will there be in the future, on the part of any section of this Government.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) that it is right and proper in many cases for briefings to be given not only to supporters of the Government on these or any other Benches, but to Opposition parties, where appropriate. I have certainly pursued that policy, and will continue to do so.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister for that assurance, but may we now have an assurance that the next time the First Minister starts making a fool of himself in the way he did just before taking office, it will be the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister who point out to him that the civil service code is the responsibility of this House, and that ultimately, if decisions in favour of changes are made, they will be made through the Cabinet Secretary, the Prime Minister and, if necessary, the Secretary of State?

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend the First Minister took over that position in circumstances that none of us wanted. He is doing an extremely good job in a statesman-like manner.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

Devolution Issues

26. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): Pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 888, how many cases, in which she has intervened, have been referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. [136346]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): Five of the cases in which I have intervened have been referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

Dr. Godman: Is not there likely to be a build-up in the number of cases referred to the Judicial Committee, largely as a result of the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into Scottish—and United Kingdom—law, and the establishment of a human rights commission for Scotland? Is the Judicial Committee the best means of resolving such cases, or should we reconsider setting up a constitutional court to deal with such matters?

The Advocate-General: That matter and others were fully discussed recently in our long debates on the Scotland Act 1998. I agree that in the foreseeable future there is likely to be an increase in the number of cases. Indeed, in view of the fact that a new jurisdiction is involved, that is inevitable. One reason for referring such cases to the Privy Council is to help to clarify some difficult issues—I hope that that will happen.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

27. **Mr. Jimmy Hood** (Clydesdale): When she last met the chairman of the Scottish Criminal Injuries Compensation Board to discuss the impact of human rights legislation on its work; and if she will make a statement. [136347]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): I have not met the chairman of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board. The board was responsible for applications made before 1 April 1996. Applications made on or after 1 April 1996 are determined by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. The board was wound up on 31 March 2000, at which point the remaining board cases were transferred to the authority. I have not met the chief executive of the authority.

Mr. Hood: I am sorry to hear that my hon. and learned Friend has not met the chairman of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. I would like to meet him myself to discuss a problem involving one of my constituents, who was sexually abused for 12 years. The paedophile was convicted in court but did not receive a custodial sentence. My constituent went to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board to obtain proper compensation, but she was denied that and given a pittance. The Scottish Criminal Injuries Compensation Board denied my constituent her human rights. Will my hon. and learned Friend pass my concerns to the chairman of the compensation authority, whom I would like to meet to discuss the case?

The Advocate-General: I appreciate my hon. Friend's work on behalf of his constituent. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on an individual case. An appeals structure is, of course, associated with the

Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, and my hon. Friend will doubtless advise his constituent of that. I am sure that his remarks will be noted by the chairman.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not part of the problem that was raised in the question that the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) put to the Advocate-General related to the fact that a rigid application of the tariff structure is made in relation to the assessment of compensation for criminal injury? Is it not time to return to the situation that existed before the previous Government changed the system, which allowed those responsible for assessing compensation to do so at large, not according to rigid structures involving tariffs?

The Advocate-General: The right hon. and learned Gentleman—or my friend, as I like to call him—is well aware that policy issues in that context are, of course, a matter for the Home Secretary and Ministers of the Scottish Executive.

Human Rights Act 1998

28. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): How many actions under the Human Rights Act 1998 have been brought before the Scottish courts; and if she will make a statement. [136348]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): Unlike the situation involving devolution issues under the Scotland Act 1998, not all actions under the Human Rights Act 1998 are required to be intimated to me. I am therefore not in a position to give a figure for the number of cases brought in the first six weeks after the Human Rights Act 1998 fully came into force. However, my experience of the Scotland Act suggests that it is likely that people will not be slow to bring human rights issues to the courts.

Miss McIntosh: Can the hon. and learned Lady tell the House whether any actions, such as road traffic cases, have been delayed by the introduction of the measure into Scots law?

The Advocate-General: As the hon. Lady may know, the road traffic case was before the Privy Council last week. Indeed, I appeared personally in that case for a number of days. We are waiting for a decision from the Privy Council. The matter has come to the highest court, through the Scottish court system, relatively quickly.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Office of Supervision of Solicitors

30. **Mr. James Plaskitt** (Warwick and Leamington): What progress is being made to improve the services of the Office of Supervision of Solicitors. [136350]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The number of complaints has come down from 17,074 to 7,728 and the OSS may be on target to hit the numerical figure of 6,000 by December this year. However, the Government continue to have very serious concerns about the quality of the complaints process. The only way to improve complaints handling is to resolve clients' problems at source, by instilling an ethos of client care throughout the legal profession.

Mr. Plaskitt: My hon. Friend will know that the OSS is based in my constituency, and I hope that he will agree that many of its staff are making valiant efforts to reach the targets that are set, but is he considering other reforms that may help to make further progress—for example, restructuring the funding and possibly using a polluter pays principle in relation to the fees paid by solicitors?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion. He has been diligent in supporting the staff who work at the OSS, which, as he says, is in his constituency. It is right to say that the OSS and its predecessor were underfunded in the past and that clients suffered from a second-rate service as a result. I agree that there is a strong case for looking at the funding and the resources needed to operate the complaints and regulation arm of the Law Society. Perhaps those matters should be fixed by the OSS itself, then levied on the professions, rather than those who are regulated setting the resources available to the regulator, as is the current position.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will the Minister consider the case of a solicitor in private practice who has intervened in good faith in another failing practice to try to rescue the situation? In such a case, would his advice to the OSS be that it should continue to support that solicitor in trying to rescue the firm in difficulty?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Where a solicitor's practice has to be intervened upon, by definition the public have been let down by the legal profession and the duty that the legal profession as a whole has to the clients who have been let down does not stop when the new solicitor is brought in. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the new solicitor has a duty to do his best for the clients he inherits, but the profession as a whole, through the OSS, must take all reasonable steps to support that solicitor and to provide him with the assistance necessary to make up for the damage that has been done previously.

Immigration Appeals

31. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What further steps she proposes to take to reduce the time taken by her Department in dealing with immigration case appeals. [136353]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): May I take this opportunity—the first that has been presented to me—to welcome you to your new role, Mr. Speaker, and to congratulate you on your election as Speaker?

Since the spring, we have increased the number of courtrooms available to hear appeals to 103. Over the next few months, we will appoint an additional 40 full-time adjudicators, but further, to ensure that the courtrooms

are used efficiently, in July I opened a centralised administration office in Loughborough. We are also conducting a full review of the case listing procedures.

Mr. Pike: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she recognise that we inherited a real mess when we took over government in May 1997, and that it is absolutely essential that we take such steps if justice is not to be denied? Although I recognise that not all the delays are in her Department, what will be its target for dealing with such immigration case appeals to show that we are delivering the justice that she would like to see?

Jane Kennedy: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The aim of the one-stop appeal process, which we introduced in October, is to streamline appeals to provide exactly that faster, more efficient service to genuine applicants, while reducing the opportunity for spurious appeals. It is worth reminding the House that applicants must now disclose all their grounds for appeal at the beginning of the appeal process, which allows for only one appeal decision to be taken and all the issues to be considered at one hearing. Only if circumstances have changed will the possibility of delay be reintroduced and a further appeal be heard. It is my belief that that new system will significantly reduce any unnecessary delay.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): How many representations has the Lord Chancellor received about the new regulation, which will cost poor families seeking a visa visit to see a family friend £500? As that will cause much hardship to poor families in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, is it not an outrage that the regulation has been put through by the negative resolution procedure, without any debate whatever in the House of Commons?

Jane Kennedy: The simple answer to the hon. Gentleman's last question is no. I do not believe that the way in which the House has handled the regulation is an outrage. However, I recognise his concern. I have received a number of representations. I do not have the exact figure immediately to hand, but I will try to get it to him as soon as I can.

Legal Aid

32. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What plans the Lord Chancellor has to review the house equity limits in determining eligibility for legal aid. [136354]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The Government have no plans to do so. On 31 July, we published proposals that may affect the contributions that a funded client has to pay towards his legal costs once eligibility has been assessed. Consultation on those proposals closed on 20 October. No decisions have yet been made.

Dr. Cable: Is the Minister aware that my constituents—and, I am sure, many others—are being told that because their house is worth more than £100,000, which applies to almost all of them now, they cannot expect entitlement to legal aid? Is he aware in particular of the Holmes case, which figured prominently in *The Mail on Sunday* a couple of weeks ago—an emotional and difficult adoption fostering case, in which a family are having to pursue a dispute with the local authority through the national press because they cannot obtain the specialist legal advice that they need to pursue it through the courts, which is where it properly belongs?

Mr. Lock: The rule that equity of more than £100,000 bars one from legal aid has been in place for a number of years. The important figure for legal aid is the value of equity, not the value of a property. Only 6 per cent. of applicants for legal aid own their own houses outright, and the vast majority have equity of less than £100,000, so that particular rule does not bar individuals from getting funding in many cases.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): How on earth can the Legal Aid Board justify handing out large sums of taxpayers' money to City slickers who make a fortune? They have big houses all over the place and somehow manage to get the large endowment, while constituents of mine who have not got two ha'pennies to rub together work for an employer who is not insuring any of his employees. The result is that when they have an accident, the Legal Aid Board says that it cannot give them any help because the employer has no collateral, so it is not worth pursuing him. It is time that that was sorted out.

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend, as always, eloquently explains why there should be a cut-off limit for legal aid, and why it is entirely justifiable for people who have equity of more than £100,000 in their houses not to receive a share of scarce public resources, which can be put to much better use to help people who genuinely cannot fund their own cases.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the Parliamentary Secretary's reply to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) was couched in the soothing terms for which he is renowned, will he take the opportunity to confirm that the proposal that has been issued for consultation is that the client in receipt of assistance should henceforth make a greater, not a lesser, contribution?

Mr. Lock: I will attempt to soothe the hon. Gentleman, as he assumes I soothe others. I assure him that that is correct. The proposal is that those who have considerable equity in their properties should make some contribution to the cost of the legal funding provided by the taxpayer. A number of representations have been made to us. We accept that the move will create a more level playing field between publicly funded clients and those on middle incomes, but the Lord Chancellor and I are listening to those who are objecting. We are listening positively and sympathetically to the arguments advanced in response to the consultation paper. I am due to make our announcements next month.

Community Legal Service Partnerships

33. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): What progress his Department is making in developing Community Legal Service partnerships. [136355]

35. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If he will make a statement regarding progress on the introduction of the Community Legal Service. [136357]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): Following the launch of the Community Legal Service in April, the number of Community Legal Service partnerships has increased from 70 to 143, and is continuing to grow. The 143 partnerships involve 270 local authorities and cover 66 per cent. of the population of England and Wales. The CLS partnerships are working—with other key elements of the Community Legal Service, which are also making good progress—to improve the way in which legal services are delivered.

Mr. McCabe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. I have a simple question: when can my constituents in Hall Green, and people in Birmingham generally, hope to realise some benefit from this promising Government initiative?

Mr. Lock: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that, although his constituency is not yet in a CLS partnership area, the Legal Services Commission is in discussions with Birmingham city council and other potential local partners on the formation of a Birmingham CLS partnership. I very much hope that, with my hon. Friend's support, a partnership will be formed very soon.

Mr. Chapman: In the context of Community Legal Service partnerships, will my hon. Friend tell me what would happen if local authorities were to cut their funding to citizens advice bureaux, such as those in Bebington and Heswall in my constituency, whose work I greatly admire?

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend is right. Citizens advice bureaux and other not-for-profit agencies provide not only high-quality legal services in important spheres such as employment and welfare benefits, but many other services that are needed by people on modest incomes or on benefits. We must be frank, however, and admit that for many years, citizens advice bureaux and other advice centres have had a precarious existence and been uncertain of the source of future funding. The formation of CLS partnerships, examination of different areas' priorities, and local authorities working with the Legal Services Commission should provide a framework to ensure much more secure funding in the future. Ultimately, however, funding decisions on not-for-profit agencies such as CABs rest with local authorities. Partnerships can influence, but local authorities will decide.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): But are the Government not seeking to impose on all local authorities, regardless of political control, an extra funding obligation without providing them with any more taxpayers' money? The Minister knows that I have raised this issue in a debate in Westminster Hall, but he may not know that since that debate, very many Labour-controlled and Liberal Democrat-controlled authorities have made the same protest as that made by Conservative-controlled authorities. Even Labour supporters are upset that they are being forced to fund the partnerships without the Government properly supporting local authorities with extra funding to enable them to do so.

Mr. Lock: As I have explained before to the hon. Gentleman—obviously it needs explaining again—local authorities are under no obligation to participate in CLS partnerships. Although the Legal Services Commission is obliged to join in partnerships, local authorities are volunteers. Local authorities decide how they control the money to purchase legal services in their areas.

Lay Magistracy

34. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If she will make a statement on the future role of the lay magistracy. [136356]

39. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What changes she plans in the role of the lay magistracy. [136361]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The Government remain committed to the principle of the lay magistracy continuing to play a significant part in our system of justice. Sir Robin Auld is conducting a review of the criminal courts and has reached the provisional conclusion that the current jurisdiction of the lay magistracy should be preserved.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will she take this opportunity to confirm that the Government's view is that the lay magistracy is rooted in the communities from which it is drawn, that it is, and has been for centuries, an essential part of the English justice system, and that it is absolutely essential that the lay magistracy's role should not be downgraded by the current or any future Government?

Jane Kennedy: I think I answered that in the first part of my response, but I am happy to repeat my answer. Also, I believe that the lay magistracy now reflects a broader cross-section of society than before. The Department has achieved that by strenuous efforts, including advertising vacancies in minority newspapers and magazines. The magistrates also benefit from an extensive training programme. All those factors demonstrate the Government's continuing commitment to the magistrates and their future.

Mr. Taylor: I declare an interest, as a member of the Magistrates Association. May I draw to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister early-day motion 1097 in my name, which has been signed by 135 Members, of all parties? Does she agree with the sentiments in the motion, which expresses the congratulations of the signatories on the valuable role that magistrates play in delivering local justice in local communities? Would she care to lay to rest for ever the strong suspicion among magistrates that, in the Home Office at least, there is a secret agenda to transform the lay magistracy, to remove the role of JPs and to give us more of a European model?

Jane Kennedy: My hon. Friend should be reassured with regard to any future Government agenda for

magistrates. We are having the Auld review, and it is sensible to wait and see the results of it. The recommendations need to be considered together, and we will do that when we receive the report. It is not for me to rule out or to guarantee any option for the future. However, I take every opportunity to restate our high regard for the work of magistrates. They are volunteers, and they deal with 97 per cent. of criminal cases in their courts. We applaud their work.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Regional Standing Committee

42. **Mr. Paul Clark** (Gillingham): When the regional Standing Committee will hold its first meeting. [136366]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I expect the regional Standing Committee to be established and I hope it will meet before the end of the Session.

Mr. Clark: Bearing in mind the wide-ranging performances within our regions—I know that mine, in the south-east, is doing good work—will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Committee will have a free hand to look into issues; particularly local economic regeneration issues, which are so important in a number of parts of the south-east?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend may recall that it is intended that the Committee will take business on a motion proposed by a Minister, but he is right to identify issues such as economic development in the regions as being among those that we anticipate the Committee will want to consider, along with issues such as transport strategies, tourism, sport and culture.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the President of the Council confirm that the Government do not see the Committee as in any way a substitute for genuine devolution to the regions? The Committee may be helpful in allowing Members of Parliament to assess what is going on in the regions, but given the lack of progress in accountable regional government and accountable democracy in the regions—as opposed to simply regionalising Government agencies—will she confirm the Government's intentions?

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have always made it plain that we recognise the importance of the development of regional strategies. The hon. Gentleman says—perhaps a little unfairly—that there has been a lack of progress. However, this Government set up the regional development agencies, which I understand the Conservative party proposes to abolish. The hon. Gentleman will know that representatives of local authorities work alongside people from the business community and the wider community. He will also know that there are many ideas floating around about how else regional strategies can be pursued, and how there could be other regional representation. However, he will also know that the Government are anxious that any further move in this direction be taken at the wish of the people of a particular region, rather than as a top-down move.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Is the inadequate regional Standing Committee the Government's response to the West Lothian question? How will it be constituted?

Mrs. Beckett: No, it is not the response to the West Lothian question. We have long argued, as did the Conservatives in the days when they were in favour of devolution, that there is no need for a different settlement in this place, and that those who are returned as MPs to Westminster should operate as MPs in Westminster.

It is intended that 13 people will make up the core group of the Committee's membership, and, we hope, will build up expertise on regional affairs in general—but it would of course be possible for any Member who represents an English constituency to attend.

Modernisation Committee

43. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What proposals she plans to bring before the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons; and if she will make a statement. [136368]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Modernisation Committee has produced radical changes to our business. I anticipate that in the near future it will be chiefly concerned with monitoring those changes. Some other suggestions, including electronic voting in the Lobby, are being considered.

Mr. Baker: I intend no discourtesy to you, Mr. Speaker, or to your colleagues, but is it not appropriate for the Modernisation Committee to consider the method of election of the Speaker—and, perhaps more importantly, of the Deputy Speakers? Yesterday a Deputy Speaker emerged—Vatican-style, with white smoke—into the Chair. I make no comment on her appropriateness, but I think that hon. Members should have an opportunity to vote on such matters.

Mr. Tipping: As always, Mr. Speaker, Vatican-style elections yield the correct result. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Procedure Committee is currently considering the matter and taking evidence. The proposal is for a joint meeting of the Procedure Committee and the Modernisation Committee.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): Is my hon. Friend aware that of the six hours that it took to elect you, Mr. Speaker, two were taken up with traipsing through the Lobbies? Is he also aware that our decision last week to take on a Wednesday afternoon votes that would have taken place after 10 o'clock means that we could spend considerable time—wasted time, in my view—traipsing through the Lobbies on a Wednesday? Is it not urgent that the Modernisation Committee should consider electronic voting and introduce it as soon as possible?

Mr. Tipping: I hope that not only the Modernisation Committee but all hon. Members will have the

opportunity to consider electronic voting. An initiative that I anticipate will come to fruition very soon is an exhibition upstairs in the Upper Waiting Hall, which will allow hon. Members to look at the technology and discuss it.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Whatever the merits or demerits of these so-called radical reforms in our procedures, do the Government intend to reverse the situation that exists on a Thursday afternoon, whereby this House meets in two different places at the same time? Is that not an absurd anomaly?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman, and all hon. Members, will have an opportunity to discuss those issues. There are different views. I believe that Westminster Hall, and earlier starts on a Thursday, are for the benefit of the House, but the House will have the benefit of that discussion, and a vote, on Monday.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Does the Minister understand the concern felt, especially among Conservative Members, that we need to do more than simply monitor the Modernisation Committee's proposals, and that there is serious unfinished business? For a start, the House has yet to vote on the question of Select Committees. I hope that he will assure the House that we will have an opportunity to vote on Select Committees, on the Floor of the House, before he starts his monitoring.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Lady took part in the debate last Thursday on the Liaison Committee's report. In my winding-up speech I said that when the dust had settled and people had had an opportunity to consider the arguments, and when the Government had had the opportunity to listen, we would review the way forward.

44. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): If she will make a statement on the Government's response to proposals from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. [136369]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Government usually respond to reports from the Modernisation Committee by inviting the House to agree to changes in procedure. Sessional Orders implementing the most recent proposals were agreed by the House last week. To date, the overwhelming majority of the Committee's proposals have been implemented.

Mr. McCabe: Does my hon. Friend agree that pre-legislative scrutiny is one measure that can lead to more considered and better quality legislation, and perhaps remove some of the more petty elements from our scrutiny system? Will he do everything he can to extend such scrutiny where appropriate?

Mr. Tipping: Like my hon. Friend, I am very clear that pre-legislative scrutiny has been valuable. I hope that the House will have opportunities in the not too distant future to do much more of it. I hope that in the course of time, a vast amount of pre-legislative scrutiny can take place.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): How many times in the past have major changes to the procedures of the House been introduced which have not been reached through consensus?

Mr. Tipping: Major changes are agreed by hon. Members themselves, on a free vote. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not proposing that a small group of Members, including some of his colleagues, should be able to veto proposals that find consent among the majority of the House.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Millennium Date Change

45. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What assessment she has made of the efficacy of the arrangements made for the millennium date change. [136370]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer that I gave on 19 April, which appears in the *Official Report* at column 425W. The arrangements that were put in place to handle the millennium date change were successful, with the UK almost untouched by the bug. That did not happen by accident.

The work has delivered far-reaching benefits which were drawn out in a command paper entitled "Modernising Government in Action: Realising the Benefits of Y2K", which I published on the same date.

Mr. Chapman: I pay tribute to the work done by my right hon. Friend and her colleagues in making sure that the preparations for dealing with the millennium bug were a success. Will she confirm that to a degree, those preparations and that contingency planning have proved relevant to dealing with the fuel issue? Does she agree that the lessons learned from the millennium bug planning could be read across, and thereby helped large companies with the contingency planning needed to lessen disruption for their customers?

Mrs. Beckett: On behalf of all those who did so much work on the matter, I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is entirely right: during the recent fuel supply difficulties a considerable number of companies were able to draw on the continuity plans assembled over the millennium period, not least those drawn up by the health service and various large fuel supply companies. Those involved in the work of Action 2000 have been contacted by a number of people thanking them for the work that they had done, and saying what a help it had proved to be.

Business-Government Links

47. **Mr. Anthony D. Wright** (Great Yarmouth): What response she has had on her initiative to improve links between the Government and business. [136372]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I informed the House on Thursday 11 May of the decision to establish the business co-ordination unit in my Department—my answer appears in the *Official Report* at column 433W. I am pleased to report that the unit is now fully staffed and operational, and is making a significant contribution to improving Government contact with all sectors of business across the UK. The responses to the establishment of the BCU of which I am aware have been uniformly positive.

Mr. Wright: Will my right hon. Friend say whether the BCU will be of positive benefit to the chamber of commerce in Great Yarmouth? What will the new initiative target for the business community be?

Mrs. Beckett: I recently had the pleasure of meeting the presidents of the British Chambers of Commerce, and I can tell my hon. Friend that that organisation has very much welcomed the establishment of the BCU. Part of the unit's purpose is to ensure that a better system is devised for the many groups and bodies who want to have contact with Ministers. The aim is to establish such contacts across Government, not merely in Departments that customarily deal with the business community in their daily work.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the right hon. Lady has set herself the admirable objective of improving links with business, will she say when she intends to study the speech made by Mr. Chris Humphries, the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, on 20 January this year? He said that despite their rhetoric, the Government had dramatically increased the regulatory burdens that threaten small business competitiveness.

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware of that speech, and have discussed the issue with Mr. Humphries. However, I am sorry and surprised that the hon. Lady—*[Laughter.]*—I beg his pardon, I meant the hon. Gentleman. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not quoted some of the more recent speeches made by Mr. Humphries, which have welcomed many of the steps that the Government have taken in their partnership with business.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Modernisation Committee

48. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What response the Government have made to proposals of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to improve the efficient working of the House. [136373]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The Modernisation Committee was set up to propose changes to improve the efficient working of the House of Commons, which has already accepted Government motions to implement the programming of legislation and to defer voting. I anticipate that the House will shortly be invited to approve the continuation of the experiment with Thursday sittings and sittings in Westminster Hall.

Helen Jackson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the amount of work that she has done, through the Modernisation Committee, to improve the efficiency of the House and its workings. Does she agree that there is room for further improvement, as the years go by in this century, to see how best the new availability of information technology and communications systems can be brought into all our working practices, even in Committees?

Mrs. Beckett: I, in turn, am grateful to my hon. Friend, not least for her work on the Modernisation Committee, as well as for her remarks. She is right that the issue has been raised across the House, and I believe that the House will need to consider it. We cannot and should not turn our backs on the opportunities opened up by new technology, but should consider how it can most effectively supplement and make more efficient the work that Members carry out.

NHS

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the resources being made available to local health services in all parts of England, and the priorities for reform in the NHS.

In the past three years the NHS has treated 2.3 million more patients. It now employs 10,000 more nurses and more than 5,000 more doctors. Waiting lists for in-patient treatment have fallen by 126,000. For the first time since records began, last year saw the number of patients waiting for out-patient appointments and in-patient treatments falling simultaneously. Every accident and emergency department that needs it, and 1,000 general practitioners' surgeries, are being modernised. The biggest hospital-building programme in the history of the NHS is under way.

After decades of neglect, the NHS is now expanding its services to patients. For two decades or more, the NHS budget rose by an average of just 3 per cent. a year. In the previous Parliament it rose by rather less than that—by just 2.6 per cent. In this Government's first two years in office, spending on the NHS did not rise as quickly as many had hoped. However, the tough choices that we took then are paying off for the NHS now. Interest rates and inflation are at historic lows. Unemployment is down, employment is up. The public finances are back in balance. A strong and growing economy is providing the foundation for strong and growing public services.

Over the five years from 1999, the NHS budget will grow by one half in cash terms and by one third in real terms. This year, and for the next three years, the real-terms annual increase in NHS funding will be 6.3 per cent—twice the trend growth of the past few decades.

Today I can inform the House of the funding allocations for each health authority in England. The cash is for revenue purposes. I will be making announcements in due course about capital resources. Details of today's allocations for the local health authorities in right hon. and hon. Members' constituencies are available in the Vote Office. I have also written today to all right hon. and hon. Members with details.

For the first time in the history of the NHS, I am making outline revenue allocations for the next three years rather than just for a single year ahead. This will allow every local health service to plan with confidence for the medium term rather than just for the short term. As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, there has been too much boom and bust in NHS funding in the past. Today we bring that to an end. *[Interruption.]* I knew that would excite them, Mr. Speaker. From April next year, health authorities will receive an average cash increase of 8.5 per cent. No health authority will receive less than 7.8 per cent. The average rise in cash terms for a health authority next year will be £29 million.

I can also announce today that every health authority will benefit from a further rise of at least 6 per cent. in 2002–03 and a further increase of at least 6 per cent. in 2003–04. Those increases are the minimum that all health authorities can expect to receive, with final allocations to be made in the autumn of next year and the year after. I know that the House will want to compare the increase in investment for next year and the following years with allocations in previous years. For the benefit of right hon. and hon Members on both sides of the House, let me explain that in the last year of the last Parliament the NHS budget actually fell in real terms. I am pleased to tell the House that, after years of under-investment, the NHS is now growing again.

Of course, different parts of the country have different health needs. The Government are currently reviewing the formula according to which we distribute NHS cash to ensure that it is better focused on addressing those needs properly and fairly. In the meantime, I will make a number of important changes for next year. First, I am more than doubling, to £130 million, the resources available within health authority allocations to help address some of the appalling health inequalities that scar our nation. Life expectancy for a baby boy born in Manchester is six and a half years less than that for a baby born in east Surrey. The existing funding formula does not take full account of the excess morbidity and mortality from cancer, coronary heart disease and other causes in those areas, as expressed through rates of years of lost life. The extra funding will help places in the north and midlands such as Bury, Rochdale, Calderdale, Kirklees, Dudley, Leeds, Leicestershire, Manchester, Newcastle, north-west Lancashire, Nottingham, Sandwell, Tees and Wakefield. It will also help areas in the south such as Bedfordshire, Brent, Cornwall, east Kent, Herefordshire, Lambeth and south and west Devon. Those extra resources will help to narrow the health gap between the better-off and the worst-off.

Secondly, I am making available a further £65 million to pay a new cost of living supplement for 100,000 qualified nurses, midwives, health visitors and those in professions allied to medicine, such as physiotherapists and radiographers, who work in the highest-cost parts of England. From next April, there will be a minimum of £600 extra for every one of these staff working in London, over and above current London weighting, and up to £1,000 for ward sisters and senior nurses in the capital. Staff in those groups who are working in the highest-cost areas outside London such as Avon, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire, Surrey, Sussex and Wiltshire will receive between £400 and £600 each. Those extra resources will help in our efforts to recruit an extra 20,000 nurses and 6,500 therapists to the NHS over the next four years.

There is a one further change that I am making to the way the local health service is funded. In the past, there have been too few means to drive up performance and tackle unacceptable variations between local health services. If the NHS is to make progress, it must move from a position in which it bails out failure to one in which it rewards success. The best NHS organisations should have more freedom and more resources to expand their services to more patients, and the worst should have more help to enable them to improve. For next year, I am making available a new £100 million performance fund to provide a clear financial incentive to all parts of the NHS to improve local services. The fund will rise to £500 million by 2003–04. The best local services will be free to spend their share of the fund on equipment, facilities or cash bonuses for staff. The worst will still get a fair share of the fund, but it will be held by the new modernisation agency to use for targeted external assistance to help turn round performance. We will no

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

longer tolerate second-rate services in any part of the NHS. The lottery in patient care must now come to an end.

The extra investment that we are making will bring about the major reforms that the NHS needs. At present, services are too slow, standards too variable and staff too often run off their feet. In July, the Government published the NHS plan, which describes the radical reforms necessary to redesign the service around the needs of its patients. The money that I am allocating today will raise the pace of implementation. Next month, I will publish a detailed NHS plan implementation programme for the health service and for social services. It will detail the investment and the progress that will have to be made over the next year—for example, in improvements in hospital standards, and in services for elderly people, children in care and patients with mental illness.

The next year will see a major expansion in beds, staff and services. Improved co-operation between health and social services, for example, will deliver more packages of intermediate care support to benefit 60,000 elderly people, so that in every council area in every part of the country more older people can live independently at home. The result will be lower rates of delayed discharges from hospitals in all parts of the country. It is crucial that the resources now available to the health service should allow a proper focus on how we can bring about improvements in health, not just an increase in the scale of investment in health services.

The allocations to health authorities will fund a further £450 million to help tackle our country's biggest killers—cancer and coronary heart disease. Our rates of both diseases are too high, and both are largely preventable. The extra resources will mean more drugs to combat cancer and heart disease, more help for people to give up smoking—a major cause of cancer and heart disease—and more operations provided more quickly for more people with cancer and heart disease. By December next year, for example, there will be a new maximum one-month wait from urgent general practitioner referral to treatment in hospital for men with testicular cancer, for children with cancer and for patients of all ages with acute leukaemia. Similarly, by March 2002, three in four eligible heart attack victims will receive life-saving, clot-busting drugs—thrombolysis—within 30 minutes of arrival at hospital. At present, many people wait twice as long.

Waiting is the public's number one concern about the health service. That is why the Government have placed such strong emphasis on winning the war on waiting in the NHS. The NHS plan set out how waiting times will reduce by 2005. The waiting time for seeing a GP will fall to 48 hours, for being seen in accident and emergency departments to an average of 75 minutes, for out-patient appointments to a maximum of three months, and for in-patient treatment to a maximum of six months. By 2008, there will be waits for hospital treatment of weeks rather than months.

The investment that we will make over the next year will deliver real progress towards those shorter waiting times. At present, 126,000 patients wait more than 26 weeks for an out-patient appointment. By March 2002, no one should wait that long, and the number of people waiting for 13 weeks will also have been reduced. Similarly, the maximum waiting time for in-patient treatment is currently 18 months—a target set, but never achieved by the previous Government. We estimate that about 50,000 people wait between 12 and 18 months for a hospital operation. By spring 2002, the NHS will have reduced the numbers waiting more than 12 months, and the maximum waiting time will have been reduced from 18 to 15 months for all patients.

I recognise that these new maximum waiting times are still too long, but they represent the first instalment on real progress towards the NHS plan objectives. The NHS is in a position to deliver substantial improvements for patients because of the commitments that the Government have made to it. While some in this House say that they have philosophically moved on from the NHS, the Government remain committed to the NHS and its survival and modernisation. We have made our choice. Our choice is an NHS providing care according to need, not ability to pay. Our choice is a tax-funded health service, available to all, and not a privatised system of care available to only a few. Our choice is long-term investment in our key public services, not cuts in those services. Our choice is record levels of investment, alongside a radical programme of reform.

The step change in the resources that we have made available to the NHS must now produce a step change in results. None of what follows will be easy. Much of it will take time. However, the NHS now has the best opportunity that it has ever had to bring about the radical changes needed to give patients better and faster services. The resources that I have committed today will bring about improvements in health and health care in all parts of the country. I commend them to the House.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for his courtesy in making a copy available to the Opposition in advance.

Given the huge potential importance of the NHS plan, I am sorry that the House has not yet held a debate on the full plan in Government time, but as the Leader of the House is sitting on the Treasury Bench, I hope that she might take note of that point and make time available so that the House can discuss the plan in the detail it deserves.

The Secretary of State did not say much that was new; in many cases, he made a series of re-announcements, but we have got used to that. However, we very much welcome parts of the statement. As we have said previously, we welcome the increased funding that the Government are making available. Again, we pledge to match that increase in NHS funding.

I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman's attempts to tackle inequalities in health care. That is most important. But it must be done in such a way as not to rob Peter to pay Paul, and by levelling up services rather than levelling them down.

I welcome the extra resources for staff in high-cost areas; I notice that the Secretary of State has kindly—as might have been expected—included my own. I welcome the fact that cancer and cardiac care are to be made a priority; as I have often pointed out to the House, that would also be the priority under the next Conservative Government. I particularly welcome the specific mention of acute leukaemia. I undertook my junior doctor training in a leukaemia unit in the Glasgow Royal infirmary; that disease should be one of the priorities.

I also welcome three-year budget setting, although there is no use in doing that if there is constant interference from the centre and a constant re-setting of priorities once budgets have been set locally.

The Secretary of State says that the NHS is growing again. This year, however, the Government's figures show that since last winter there has been a reduction in the number of intensive care beds, acute beds and residential care beds. We now have the concept of the funded bed blocker—whereby people who already have a social services funding package block acute beds because there is nowhere to put them. What does the Secretary of State intend to do about that?

Will the Secretary of State give the House answers to the following specific questions? He says that, over the next year, there will be an expansion in the number of beds. Where will they be? How many extra beds does he expect to be provided in the NHS? In which sectors will they be? Will they be in the hospital sector? What is his estimate of the impact on bed numbers of the private finance initiative?

The Secretary of State refers to the allocations to health authorities—funding of a further £450 million to help to tackle cardiac and cancer care. Is that ring-fenced money? Will he clarify that point so as to avoid misinterpretation of his statement?

There is to be more help for those people who want to give up smoking. The Government's cancer tsar says that their anti-smoking strategy is "misdirected" and poorly managed. What is the position on Zyban? In April, the Department of Health promised GPs guidance on who should receive the drug and in what circumstances. That guidance never materialised, and there is now piecemeal provision. Will the Secretary of State clear up that matter?

The Secretary of State tells us that by March 2002, three in four eligible patients will receive thrombolysis treatment, but that means that one in four will not. What conceivable reason could there be for not making that treatment available?

The right hon. Gentleman talks about reducing inequalities, but as he is aware, one of the big problems is not only the provision of services but their uptake. For example, he will know of the problems of uptake in the inner cities for programmes such as those for cervical smears. What specific measures will he introduce to make sure that uptake matches any increased provision?

The Secretary of State talks about redefining the formula for allocating funding. Can he give the House an indication of how he expects that to work, although I do not expect him to provide the details now?

The Secretary of State talks about the lottery in patient care coming to an end. We have all read the spin today about extra money being made available for cancer drugs. Can he tell us the position on that? As the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has been given the criterion of affordability by the Government, what impact will his statement and the funding that he makes available have on affordability of cancer drugs? What does he expect to happen? It is pointless saying that cancer will become a priority and it is pointless even providing more specialists if there is not then access to diagnostics and the treatment is not made available to patients. That is the most important issue of all.

I welcome the recent concordat that the Secretary of State has signed with the private sector. It could allow for the type of public-private partnership that is enjoyed in most European countries. If the Government have genuinely moved ideologically, we welcome that. However, will he confirm that the concordat is not just about NHS doctors treating NHS patients in private facilities, but that it will allow primary care trusts to buy services for patients in the private sector using only NHS funding? That is our understanding from reading it.

The Secretary of State's statement promises much, but he has promised before. The improvements that he claims exist are not borne out by the experience of the public. Only yesterday we heard that the waiting time to get on the waiting list had gone up. Where the Government make improvements, we will welcome them. However, they are now setting targets for hospital waits for 2008—a far cry from the early pledges and "24 hours to save the NHS". The Prime Minister recently said that he did not understand the scale of the problem that he faced in the NHS. Nothing that the Secretary of State has said today reassures us that he does, either.

Mr. Milburn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his grateful acceptance of the cash. Perhaps that is not surprising. I remind him that, in the last year of the previous Government, his health authority received an increase of about 3 per cent. This year, it is receiving an increase of just under 9 per cent.

I am also grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his latter-day conversion to the idea of tackling inequality. In 1992, he was the hon. Member who said:

poverty, poverty, poverty—la, la, la, . . . It is just boring for Conservative Members.—[*Official Report*, 22 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 636.]

On the specific issues of the funding formula that the hon. Gentleman raises, he will know, as well as I do, that there is no perfect means of allocating money to health authorities. Most people in the health service now recognise that the current funding formula simply does not do the trick and does not get the money to where it is most needed. We have therefore set up a review that is being conducted by an expert panel. It is due to report over the next few years. It is a complicated issue, and it is important that we conduct the review in parallel with the local government review of funding allocations. If, as most hon. Members want, we are to move towards closer co-operation between health, housing and social services, it is important to get the funding allocations for local government and the health service much more in tandem than they perhaps are now.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of cancer drugs, and I can confirm that 13 up-to-date cancer drugs have been referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. It is due to report in the summer of 2001, and we have made provision in the health authority allocations. However, that provision will depend on what NICE comes up with. It is true that, when we have previously referred cancer drugs to NICE—most notably, the taxanes, which we referred last year and this year—the result has been a dramatic uptake in the number of patients receiving high-quality cancer drugs. I think that one in four patients with ovarian cancer and three in four patients with breast cancer did not receive taxanes before the NICE recommendation. However, every patient who needs taxanes now receives them, thanks to the decisions of NICE, a body that we established and the Conservatives opposed. We are investing extra money in the health service. The Conservatives opposed that. Those are the results of the choices that we have made.

[Mr. Milburn]

On intensive care beds, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) will find that this winter there are more intensive care beds than there were last winter. We allocated a further £150 million, and I expect there to be substantially more than 300 extra critical care beds.

On bed blocking, the rate of delayed discharges is falling, certainly from the level that we inherited from the previous Government. As for the number of beds, the hon. Gentleman is aware that yesterday I announced the third wave of major hospital redevelopments. Many of those will be built as part of the private finance initiative. I have also stipulated that in the third wave, the 18 major new hospitals should help to increase the number of hospital beds, thereby helping to reverse a 30 or 40-year trend of decline.

The hon. Gentleman knows that the point that he made about Professor Mike Richards, the cancer tsar, is wrong.

On waiting times, the report published yesterday is factually inaccurate. The same company produced a report last summer. It was factually inaccurate then; it is factually inaccurate now.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I still have more inaccuracies to relate to hon. Members.

The hon. Gentleman's most serious factual inaccuracy was at the beginning of his remarks. He said that the Conservatives would match Labour's record levels of health investment, but they cannot. We have made our choice. We chose to invest more in the health service. They have made their choice, too. They chose not to vote with us when we wanted £400 million-worth of extra tobacco revenue to go directly to the national health service. Just today, the hon. Gentleman is choosing to use £500 million which could have gone into the NHS to subsidise people with private health insurance.

The Conservatives cannot match us on health service expenditure. Indeed, their programme of cuts would result in £900 million less for local health services—the equivalent of £9 million less for every health authority in the country. That is the Tory guarantee on health: £9 million-worth of cuts in every local health service in the land.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I want to call as many hon. Members as possible, so I ask for questions to be brief.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): On behalf of the people of Calderdale, who will receive an 8.6 per cent. increase in funds, I thank my right hon. Friend for today's announcement. He will know how we suffered under the previous Government's funding. We are delighted that we have a new hospital and will receive the increase.

Will some of the money that has been allocated be targeted on the elderly who, with the right care package, could be cared for at home instead of taking up hospital beds that they do not need and which add to the problems?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments, and I can give her that assurance. When we publish details next month of the roll-out of the NHS plan, she will see that it includes commitments to improving elderly care services. We need to ensure that we get rid of some of the perverse incentives and end the practice that puts all elderly people in care homes when they want to stay at home. We can do that by ensuring that there is more co-operation between health care and social care services, by taking advantage of the flexibilities under the Health Act 1999 and, most importantly, by providing the extra investment that we are making in the health care and the social care systems.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I welcome the additional money for the health service and the useful innovation of three-year budgeting, but will the Secretary of State confirm whether the new cost of living supplement for key staff is over and above the forthcoming annual pay review? Until we have seen the figures awarded in that review, is it not difficult to assess what the impact will be on each health authority area as it tries to tackle the many targets that the Government set in the national plan and, indeed, again today? Is there a hierarchy of targets?

The Government are committed to providing free nursing care from halfway through the financial year, which is mentioned in today's settlement. How will that money be channelled? Will it go through social services or are we to assume that it is in the budget figures that we have been given today? If so, how can we quantify that?

We have been told that NICE is the solution to postcode prescribing. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the funds to implement all NICE's recommendations over the coming year at local authority level are included in today's figures?

Finally, may I express my regret at hearing that a review of the formula is still some years away? In Scotland, sparsely populated rural areas are already being recognised as having special needs; in Wales, that is coming. I hope that the situation in England will be remedied a great deal sooner than over the next few years.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We will see what we can do on the formula, but believe me, I and previous Secretaries of State who are present in the Chamber have wrestled with the intricacies of the formula. Trying to get the money to the right areas is like a game of three-dimensional chess. We must make sure that, rather than tinkering, as has been the case in the past, we have a fundamental root and branch review of the formula. That is the right thing to do. It is also the right thing to do in conjunction with the local government review that colleagues elsewhere in Government are undertaking.

On the cost of living increases for nurses, PAMs—professions allied to medicine—midwives and others, I can confirm that the cost of living increases are over and above what the review bodies will recommend. That is the right thing to do, and it is plain common sense that some parts of the country, largely in London and the south-east, have a higher cost of living than elsewhere. If we are to do what we need to do to tackle shortages of nurses, therapists and so on, we must provide extra financial incentives for staff through their pay packets. That is what we will do.

On free nursing care, yes, I can confirm that at present the money is in health authority budgets. I can also confirm that it is our intention, subject to Parliament, to introduce free nursing care part way through the next financial year.

Finally, on the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, we must make some provision, of course, for an increase in drugs expenditure. As I have said before in the House, if we can get good, high-quality, cost-effective and clinically effective drugs to more and more patients, I have no problem with drugs expenditure increasing, and increasing above the level of general health authority allocations.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): There will be a noisy welcome across Birmingham and the west midlands for the heavy extra investment in the health service there, not least among the too many people waiting far too long for cardiac care and treatment. Will my right hon. Friend require health authorities to publish the extra allocations to hospitals in their area and the purposes for which that money is given, and also require hospital trusts to report on how they have performed with the money given for those specific purposes, so that we can all monitor, publicly and together, what is going on in the health service?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is one of the deals on offer that in exchange for the extra investment that we are putting into the health service, we must see, in as open and accountable a fashion as possible, improved performance. Of course there will be a lot more measuring. We should measure what is going on in the health service.

We cannot have our cake and eat it. We cannot, as some do, decry the lottery in care and different standards in different areas, yet do nothing about it. It is the right thing to do to make sure that we monitor and account, as a local health service, for the services provided to local communities. I can therefore confirm that we will want much more openness and transparency, not only in the way cash is allocated within a local health authority area, but most importantly of all, the progress and the reforms that we get back for the resources that we are investing.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I welcome the extra money targeted towards Nottingham, which will bring us closer in line with our health needs. I also welcome the Government's reversion to the previous Government's policy of targeting waiting times, as opposed to the numbers on waiting lists, which has done so much damage in recent years.

Is the Secretary of State promising not to return to the bust and boom in health expenditure which characterised the first years of Labour? He knows that the present crisis was caused by his Government forcing on his predecessor as Secretary of State a cancellation of the annual spending reviews, in which we had always raised health spending in line with needs and events. If the last year of the previous Parliament was a bad one, all the more shameful, then, that the present Government cancelled the annual spending increases for the first two years of their term.

Now that the right hon. Gentleman has an increase for next year which matches the increase that I was able to announce as Secretary of State in 1990, is it wise to set it so firmly in stone for three years, expressed in cash terms to make it sound bigger? Is there a let-out clause to allow the matter to be reopened if inflation pressures and the course of events prove that necessary, in order to keep the health service on course and to recover from the neglect of the first three years of Labour?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his comments, particularly his welcome for extra money for Nottingham, which, as I remember, is one of the big gainers from the allocations that we have made today.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): A lot more than when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Secretary of State.

Mr. Milburn: Correct. The right hon. and learned Gentleman touched on his record, but I remind him that, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the increase in net NHS expenditure in 1995–96 was 1.6 per cent. in real terms, and in 1996–97, the final year, it fell by 0.1 per cent. So if the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not mind, we will have fewer lessons from him.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows fine well that there is a direct relationship between the number of people on the waiting list and the length of time that they wait for treatment. I bet that, when he goes to Sainsbury's or Tesco—or he may even be a Co-op man for all I know—he always joins the shortest queue at the checkout.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome news for trusts, particularly in my area. They will heave a great sigh of relief at now being able to recruit in the way that they wish. My right hon. Friend knows that modernisation, not just investment, is the key to our NHS moving forward. With regard to improving treatment for cardiac patients, has my right hon. Friend given any thought to allowing paramedic ambulance crews to give the so-called clot-busting drugs? As my right hon. Friend said, it is so important for those to be given as quickly as possible. Has my right hon. Friend made any movement on that?

Mr. Milburn: Yes, I can confirm that. During the next few months and in the next financial year, we shall start to do precisely that, ensuring that, in future, more and more paramedics are appropriately trained to give those life-saving drugs to people who have had a heart attack. It is far more sensible to do that immediately the ambulance arrives at someone's home rather than having to transport the heart attack victim from home to hospital, with all the delays that can accrue.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): When the Secretary of State talks about real-term increases in funding, he rightly bases that on the retail prices index. But as the right hon. Gentleman will be more than aware, NHS inflation and wage inflation are significantly higher than the RPI. Has he calculated what impact NHS inflation will have on his spending plans during the next three years and how it will affect NHS spending?

Mr. Milburn: Yes, we have done that. I can confirm that, while the cash rise is, on average, 8.5 per cent., the real-terms rise is about 5.9 per cent. The hon. Gentleman

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will be aware that, as when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) held office, it is well in excess of the amount of money made available to the NHS when he, I think, was a Health Minister.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said, particularly with regard to the performance fund, some of which I hope will come to Warrington hospital in due course. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, in his review of funding, the needs of areas such as north Cheshire, which has large pockets of health inequalities among areas of affluence, particularly in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg), are met, so that they can tackle the health inequalities that exist outside big cities?

Mr. Milburn: Yes; I do not know whether it was made clear to my hon. Friend in the letter that she received from me today, but I can confirm that, in the allocation to North Cheshire health authority, there is a health inequalities adjustment of an extra £1.1 million, precisely recognising the real health problems of her area and others.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): It would be churlish not to welcome extra money, and I particularly welcome the cost of living allowance for health professionals, but I represent a Hampshire constituency and I did not hear Hampshire mentioned in the list. Will the Secretary of State please confirm the situation with regard to Hampshire?

Mr. Milburn: The following health authorities, which—helpfully—are not ranked in alphabetical order, gain from the cost of living allowance: Southampton and South West Hampshire, Portsmouth and South East Hampshire and North and Mid Hampshire. It is good to make someone happy.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I thank my right hon. Friend for granting resources for Norfolk, but I especially welcome the fact that the resources are to be spread throughout the country. That is an important political point. I have known my right hon. Friend for many years through our days in the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff. I never imagined that he would become the man with the team that cracked the postcode lottery. Today's announcement means that he has done that. Thank goodness the right party won the election in 1997; it is a shame that we did not win in 1992. Some of us might have enjoyed our jobs in cancer research in the intervening five years much more than we did.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the money is separate from the money for radiotherapy machines and buildings that has always existed? Today is a heyday in the fight against cancer and for the medical world in general.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and for all his work for cancer research and in the battle against cancer. I can confirm that the extra money will be for revenue purposes. I shall make announcements in due course about extra capital. Without letting too many cats out of the bag, we expect further improvements and investment in the modernisation of cancer equipment. That is long overdue; it is desperately needed and, as my hon. Friend rightly said, it should have started many years ago.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): As the Secretary of State knows, I am especially glad that cancer is beginning to get the sort of priority that it deserves. However, he knows that some nursing agencies on which the NHS depends have been recruiting staff in sub-Saharan Africa. Does he believe that robbing the poorest countries in the world to improve our health service constitutes proper use of the money that has been put into the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: No, I do not. Sadly, I do not run the nursing agencies that are responsible for such conduct. However, as the hon. Gentleman knows from the NHS plan commitments, we will recruit some staff from overseas, for example, nurses from Spain. We shall also attempt to recruit some doctors from other parts of Europe. However, we do not believe that we should rob developing nations of the medical and clinical staff that they desperately need.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My right hon. Friend's remarks, especially about Manchester, gave a clear signal of the Government's commitment. One of the biggest blots on the NHS in recent years has been the relationship between poverty and ill health.

Earlier, my right hon. Friend mentioned "la, la", sitting opposite. There were no kindly Tory Teletubbies in previous Governments; instead, there was indifference to and cynicism about health inequality. Every Manchester Labour Member beat a path to successive Tory Health Ministers and were told that inequality did not matter. Today's announcement means that my constituents can look forward to the same quality of health care as those of Conservative Members. That is a genuine sign of proper commitment to a fair and universal national health service.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. I agree with the thrust of his remarks. We all know from our constituencies, regardless of whether we represent a so-called poor area or a so-called rich area, that there is a clear correlation between poverty, deprivation, poor housing, lack of employment opportunities and ill health. Frankly, the position is worse than my hon. Friend suggested. Not only did that lot refuse to recognise inequality: they banned the word in the Department of Health.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): At a time when there have been patients, some with serious conditions, on trolleys and in offices in all three acute hospitals in east Kent, and when many of our roads and our rail system have been disrupted by flooding, is the Secretary of State aware of the dismay with which people continue to face the proposed reorganisation in east Kent? It includes closing the accident and emergency unit in the heart of east Kent, stripping the Kent and Canterbury hospital, to whose coronary and cancer units the Secretary of State is committed, of many of its supporting services, and funding the process by a cut in beds in that overstretched hospital.

Mr. Milburn: I am not particularly surprised by the hon. Gentleman's comments, although I am somewhat disappointed. He should welcome the 8.44 per cent. increase in funding for the health service in his area, because it will help to deal with some of those difficulties. Just because we are putting record levels of investment into the national health service, it does not mean that the health service at a local level will not change. Medical advances, changing technologies and changes in demography are all driving change in the national health service. It has changed over the past 52 years, and it will continue to change over the next 52. Rather than stand in the face of change, the hon. Gentleman should get on side and support the changes to ensure that his constituents get better care than they have received in the past.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): My right hon. Friend's announcement will be most welcome in the Barnsley health authority area, especially in view of the inequalities in health care in that authority in the past. As my right hon. Friend knows, historically Barnsley is one of the lowest-funded health authorities in the country, yet it has some of the greatest needs in the treatment of cancer, strokes and heart disease. Will my right hon. Friend give me some reassurance that the needs of our health authority will be met by closing the funding gap and bringing us closer to our target funding in future years?

Mr. Milburn: We have increased the funding for Barnsley health authority by 8.7 per cent., which is an increase of just under £15 million. That will help to address some of those very real health problems. As the local constituency MP who is very active on health issues, my hon. Friend will know that some of these problems are pretty intractable and structural, and it will take time to deal with them. That is why it is important that we get an appropriate level of health service expenditure into the local NHS, and that we sustain that funding over a period of years. It is terribly important to do what we have done today, which is not just to make available a one-year allocation, but to give health authorities a sense of where they will be in two or three years' time.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I, too, welcome the extra spending. I want to return to the point made by the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt). I presume that the welcome target that the Secretary of State has announced for administering thrombolytic drugs is within 30 minutes from the point of arrival at accident and emergency units. In my constituency and in much of the west country, it can take twice that long to get from the scene of the event to the accident and emergency unit, partly because of the distances involved and partly because of the overstretched ambulance service and the lack of air cover. Will he consider precisely how drugs and treatment can be administered at the earliest possible point for people who live in rural areas that are not easily reached by ambulance crews?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. It is self-evident that it is far more sensible, especially in rural areas, to take the drug to the patient than to expect the patient to travel to the drug. We need to do both. We need to improve the time that patients have to wait in accident and emergency departments to be given thrombolysis, and we also need to ensure that more and more paramedics are trained so that they can administer the clot-busting agent on the spot.

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and it will be very welcome to my constituents and to people in west London. So as to bring senior nurses back into the health service, has my right hon. Friend considered the senior clinical nurses who were evicted overnight from sites around the country and who went into higher education, which is what nurse education should be in my opinion? We should find ways of using their clinical expertise and knowledge, and perhaps give them joint roles in the health service. Many of those clinical leaders are now stuck in higher education and do not have the same right to enter hospital sites and hospital trusts.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is extremely knowledgable about these issues. I agree with her that we must provide the right incentives, the right education and training and the right employment opportunities to ensure that we not only recruit more nurses back into the NHS, but retain them once they are working for the health service. We cannot have more nurses coming back into the service and an excess of nurses leaving it. We are moving in the right direction. We are turning the corner: there are now more nurses working in the NHS than there were just a year or so ago, but there is a lot more work to do.

With regard to nursing careers becoming more academic, we must get the balance right. We must give nurses who will become nurse consultants and operate at a high clinical level appropriate academic training, but we must not lose the fundamental caring nursing skills that are the backbone of the nursing profession.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I welcome the 8.4 per cent. increase that has been re-announced for east Kent. By January slightly more, not fewer, beds would have been available in east Kent, but they will not be available because they will be blocked. Nothing that the Secretary of State has said this afternoon will change that.

Broomfield Lodge nursing home in my constituency is one of Kent county council's preferred providers for the elderly and senile, but because it is underfunded by about £100 to £150 per week per client, and because it is competing with NHS agencies for nurses in terms of costs, it is likely to close. If it does, the 18 clients who are there now will join the others who are blocking beds in hospitals, and add to the problems caused by the loss of 200 beds in the private nursing sector until April. There is nowhere for those patients to go this winter. What are the right hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State for Social Security going to do about it?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving at least a modicum of welcome to the extra resources provided for his health authority area. As for delayed discharges and the position in the care home sector, it is true that there are problems in some parts of

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the country. That is largely a product—especially in the south-east—of rising property prices, and of people getting out of the business because—

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Because of the Care Standards Act.

Mr. Milburn: It has absolutely nothing to do with the Care Standards Act 2000, as the hon. Gentleman knows fine well. We have given care home owners seven years in which to introduce the new standards. The idea that they are suddenly walking away from their businesses today is ludicrous.

As I have said, there are problems in some parts of the country. That is precisely why social services departments—I hope this applies to the area represented by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale); if it does not, perhaps he will take up the matter with Conservative-controlled Kent county council—have increased the number of intensive home care packages of support in order to provide people with more care at home this winter than was provided last winter. Moreover, social services expenditure, which rose by an average of 0.1 per cent. under the last Government, has been rising by 3.1 per cent. over the past few years.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): The Secretary of State is gradually giving real hope to all who use the health service that intractable problems will now be tackled. One such problem, in regard to which this country has performed very badly, is the huge number of hospital-acquired infections. What will the Secretary of State do to tackle that? It is claimed that up to 5,000 deaths a year arise from hospital-acquired infections. That leads to a huge waste of resources because patients are staying in hospital beds for much longer than would otherwise be necessary. The problem has been tackled with great success in the Netherlands—when can we follow its example?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right. Although we are making a lot of money available to the NHS, and although the NHS has a clear reform programme and a good deal of commitment to making changes, real and intractable problems nevertheless exist.

There is no quick-fix solution to the problems of the NHS. The issue of hospital-acquired infection is very serious: as my hon. Friend says, it affects many patients, and it also costs the taxpayer a pretty penny. That is why the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), recently issued clear guidance to all NHS hospitals saying that they must improve their standards of cleanliness and decontamination.

I can tell my hon. Friend that we intend to publish all the standards reports that we receive from hospitals by April next year, so that the public can see the progress we are beginning to make. It will not be easy, however, and it will take some time.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Will the Secretary of State comment on reports in yesterday's *Evening Standard* that winter pressures now appear to be becoming autumn pressures in Greater London? Already people have been exported from Greater London because no intensive care beds are available, and because there are still not enough intensive care nurses. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure us that we shall have extra nurses this winter, so that we do not experience the same crisis in London that we experienced last year?

Mr. Milburn: To say that the figures that were quoted in yesterday's *Evening Standard* are evidence of a crisis is fundamentally misleading. The number of intensive care transfers is slightly down compared with the same period last year, and the figures have fallen since September this year. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not fall into the same trap as the official Opposition—they are looking for, and are determined to foment, a winter crisis. Indeed, they are determined to declare war on the national health service this winter. I hope that he realises that there are people—and newspapers—in this country, and some Members of Parliament, who are no friend of the NHS.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Tomorrow I will meet primary care staff in my constituency. I am sure that they, like me, welcome the extra cash for the west Kent health area. In tackling some of the inequalities that my right hon. Friend mentioned, especially in respect of mental health and coronary heart disease, does he agree that it is essential for primary care trusts to identify the people at the greatest risk in a community? In his next announcement on capital expenditure, will there be an allocation for investment in information technology? Such preventive measures require primary trusts to have access to good IT in order to carry out that essential work.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. All parts of the primary care system require improvements in IT infrastructure, which has suffered from under-investment. Parts of the health authority allocations are specifically for improved IT in GP surgeries and hospitals.

My hon. Friend will be aware from the NHS plan that we want primary care to involve GP surgeries and health care centres in establishing at-risk registers to identify those patients who have had, or are liable to have, a heart problem. As he knows, some fairly simple, cost-effective treatments can be made available to such patients. They are far more effective and better than people having a heart attack before going to hospital for a serious operation.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Can the Secretary of State explain why, despite Labour's promises, mortality rates—the number of people dying within 30 days of emergency treatment—in four out of five hospitals surrounding my constituency are no lower than during the last year of the previous Conservative Government? Will he also confirm the National Audit Office figures that showed that nearly one in 10 NHS beds is occupied by a person who acquired his infection or complication while in hospital, as the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) suggested? If the right hon. Gentleman could solve that problem, would that not relieve human suffering and release far more resources than he announced today?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful—just about—to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. For the first time, we

have infection control teams in hospitals up and down the country. We established them, not the previous Government. Frankly, is not the idea that hospital-acquired infection suddenly broke out on 1 May 1997 rather laughable?

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement and on yesterday's announcement of £22 million for Addenbrooke's hospital, which will help my constituents. Does he agree that the 32 extra beds that that £22 million will achieve will mean shorter waiting times, and that that would be put at risk if a Tory Government were ever re-elected because they prefer tax perks for those with private medical insurance?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. We are now in a position to reverse a decline in the number of acute and general beds in hospitals, which has been occurring for many—perhaps 30 or 40—years. As I have told the House before, my view is that we must increase the number of hospital beds and beds in the whole care system if we are to provide the quality of care and the speed of response that patients rightly expect nowadays. She rightly said that all that investment would be put at risk thanks to the cuts guarantee that the Conservative party has, in effect, now published. It would take £9 million from every health authority in the land. Conservatives must explain that to their constituents; I am sure that my hon. Friend will explain it to hers.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I should like an assurance from the Secretary of State that all the money in the performance fund will be spent. Are there any moneys outstanding in this year's performance fund allocation? Does he recognise that some health authorities cannot perform because they cannot attract the necessary staff and have to rely on extremely expensive agency locums? That is a tremendous disadvantage to health authorities, such as the Isle of Wight.

Mr. Milburn: The Isle of Wight will do rather well as a consequence of some of the changes that I have made today. The hon. Gentleman lives in hope; I live in hope that he will see the light eventually. The performance fund will be fully spent. It is important to make it clear that the idea is that each and every part of the local health service will get its fair share of the performance fund. However, the poorer performers will inevitably have strings attached—of course they will; that must be right. If they have not come up to scratch, most right hon. and hon. Members would be pretty wary of spewing yet more resources into them without conditions being applied.

There are problems with agency nurses, but the hon. Gentleman knows that, on Friday, the Prime Minister announced our proposals to ensure that the NHS gets to grips better with precisely those problems, so that we improve the quality of care for patients and the value for money for taxpayers.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): How much has been allocated to addressing health inequalities in Liverpool? My constituency has been identified as the second poorest area of the country and the one suffering the worst ill health. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that the money allocated is targeted at the areas of need already identified in Liverpool by the performance indicators published earlier this year, so that it specifically addresses the issues of too few general practitioners, the shortage of staff to undertake cancer screening and the high levels of heart disease and emergency hospital admissions?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments. Liverpool will receive an extra £4.3 million as a health inequality adjustment within its health authority allocation this year, precisely to take account of some of the very real problems that she describes. However, it is not just a matter of getting the money into those areas; we must also ensure that we get the services and the staff into the inner cities. She is aware that because of how we have distributed GPs around the country in the past, we have not always met need in primary care in the way in which we should. That is precisely why we are rolling out a big expansion in the number of personal medical services GPs, and I expect that next year a substantial proportion of those will go into precisely the areas that she describes, where they are most needed.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I welcome the emphasis that the Secretary of State places on the treatment of heart disease and on dealing with waiting times. Is he aware that, in east Kent in July, 108 people had been waiting more than three months for heart surgery—the comparable figure for March 1997, about which he was so scathing, was 63—and that 207 people had been waiting more than 13 weeks to see a cardiologist—the comparable figure for March 1997 being 40? Is he not thoroughly ashamed of those figures? What assurances can he give my constituents that things will not get even worse this winter?

Mr. Milburn: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman is aware, for the first time the Government have made available earmarked funding precisely to tackle some of the problems in heart surgery rates that we inherited. The previous Government did not make a penny piece available for earmarked heart surgery; we have done so. During the next few years, there will be 3,000 extra heart operations, a further 3,000 extra heart operations, and, over time, as we expand the number of heart surgeons, waiting times for treatment will come down not just in his area, but throughout the country.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): My right hon. Friend's statement will be welcomed by people in Salford. It is real evidence of the Government's commitment, and indeed my right hon. Friend's personal commitment, to tackling health inequality. I find the Opposition's last-minute, deathbed conversion to redistribution singularly unconvincing, but we wait to see the evidence of what they have said.

I know that my right hon. Friend recognises that the causes of inequality are complex and that the NHS acting alone cannot resolve all the problems. Will he ensure that the extra investment is worked on with partners in local government and in the voluntary sector to ensure that we get added value from the extra resources that we put in, and that we monitor closely the outcomes that we achieve? The extra money must make a real difference to our communities.

Mr. Milburn: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. As she recalls, a year or so ago I visited parts of her

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constituency where there is deprivation and associated pockets of ill health. She is right that the job of tackling health inequalities and improving life chances for people is not just the job of the NHS—it must be done in concert with local government, local organisations and, most important, local communities. That is precisely what we are seeking to do through the local strategic partnerships that the Government are seeking to create.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will the Secretary of State confirm that there may be many instances when it makes sense for the NHS to contract services to the private health sector, not least because that sector has lower unit costs? If he has come to that conclusion and is prepared to do that, may I congratulate him?

Mr. Milburn: I am not sure about the issue of unit costs; that will have to be hammered out on the ground between the local health service and the local private sector provider.

As I have made clear before in the House, I have no problem with the NHS contracting with private sector providers to ensure that NHS patients receive treatment for free and in as timely a way as possible. However, there are two important caveats: we must be assured that we are getting the highest standards of care for patients and the best value for money for taxpayers.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I thank my right hon. Friend for doing something about all the years of underfunding in the NHS. My constituents will welcome his statement. They will want to see a shift to primary care, and they will want to know that there will be the necessary training for the extra personnel that we need.

The North Stoke primary care trust in north Staffordshire is £4 million away from its target and there are huge health inequalities. Can my right hon. Friend give us some hope that those health inequalities in north Staffordshire are at last being addressed?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. We have a fairly blunt instrument at the moment for distributing cash to local parts of the NHS—the local health authorities—but, from the points that she has made, she is aware that, within a health authority, there will be pockets of deprivation alongside pockets of prosperity. That is why we will suggest to health authorities that, for the next financial year, they get the appropriate pace of change in place to ensure that the resources are in place at a very localised level, as we have sought to do in distributing cash from national to health authority level.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Is the Secretary of State aware that last week an orthopaedic surgeon at the general hospital in Banbury told me that he does not expect to carry out any elective surgery until February at the earliest because of a shortage of nurses and beds, because surgical beds are being taken up by medical cases, and because beds are being blocked by people who need to move back into the community, but for whom community care is not available? We will not reduce either waiting times or waiting lists until surgical beds and surgical services are in some way protected.

Mr. Milburn: It is true that the previous Government closed a lot of those beds, but it is also true that the hon. Gentleman has a good point. There are problems in Oxfordshire precisely because of the cost of living difficulties of which he is all too painfully aware, which sometimes make it difficult to recruit staff. That is precisely why, within Oxfordshire's health authority allocation, we have made extra money specifically available for his area to allow it to recruit the nurses and PAMs that are so important in a clinical team working alongside the doctors.

There is another trick that we must perform. The hon. Gentleman is right that, this winter, the national health service will do what it should sensibly do: prioritise emergency cases. Obviously, the emergencies must come first, but that will mean that we will free up some elective capacity, particularly in the form of surgeons—ear, nose and throat surgeons, for example. Frankly, if we can get those people working in private sector hospitals to provide care for free to NHS patients, it would be making the best use of available staff and capacity. I am sure that that is what the hon. Gentleman will see in his area and what we will see in other parts of the country.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): I welcome the statement, particularly the announcement of extra cash and the three-year plan, which will be very important for health authorities to plan properly. My right hon. Friend knows from representations made by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) that the situation in Halton in relation to all types of cancer and coronary disease is the worst in the country. I therefore welcome his announcement that £1.1 million is being earmarked to deal with the special problems in north Cheshire. It is also about time—I am pleased that my right hon. Friend is doing it—to review the NHS funding formula which has discriminated against my constituents, who deserve more resources. I welcome the review, and I hope that it is conducted very quickly.

Mr. Milburn: As I said, extra money is available specifically for tackling the problems in my hon. Friend's own area as part of the fairly large 8.6 per cent. funding increase for the North Cheshire health authority. It is very important that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House understand that it will take time to achieve all the objectives. Although we are dealing with very large numbers—historically, the increases are very large indeed—we are also dealing with some very large problems and a very large inheritance of under-investment and neglect over many decades.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): The Secretary of State has to determine the average funding increase for mental health services arising from the allocations that he has announced today. Does he recall that, two years ago, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) and others came to see him about the case for a single-site hospital in west Kent?

Mr. Milburn: I am very aware of the case for a single-site hospital. As the hon. Gentleman knows,

the hospital and the regional office will be able to submit their proposals again in the third wave of the major hospital building programme that I announced yesterday. I expect to make decisions on that early next year, and to be able to make some announcements on it in the spring.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have allowed the statement to continue for more than one hour and 10 minutes, and we must move on. I regret that some hon. Members have not been called, but I shall take a note of their names.

Points of Order

4.42 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Last week, I was approached by a constituent who is a prison officer at the local prison in my constituency, who said that he wanted to come to see me to discuss an employment matter, and I gave him a note of my constituency surgeries last weekend. Subsequently, he telephoned me to say that he had been told by the prison authorities that if he got in touch with me it would be a disciplinary matter.

Could you please confirm, Mr. Speaker, that although it may well be wise for people in an organisation such as the Prison Service to seek to resolve matters through internal employment services, that does not excuse anyone threatening a sanction—a disciplinary employment sanction or any other sanction—against a constituent who wishes to approach his or her Member of Parliament? Would not such a threat be a breach of the privileges of the House?

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. I tell him, however, that no question of the House's privileges arises. Nevertheless, without commenting on the particular case, I am strongly of the view that constituents should not be prevented by their employer from taking matters of concern, whether private or public, to their Member of Parliament. We are all elected to this place to represent the people, and we cannot do that if individuals are prevented from approaching us with their grievances. I would certainly expect employers in the public sector to understand that.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In the light of the announcement by the Criminal Cases Review Commission to refer the Stephen Downing case to the Court of Appeal, I wonder whether you have had any indication from the Home Secretary that he is to come to the House today to make a statement? Stephen Downing has been in jail for 27 years, but his case has now been referred. It really should be possible for the Home Secretary to use his powers to ensure that Stephen Downing is immediately released while his case is pending appeal.

Mr. Speaker: I have had no such notification and therefore it is not a matter for the Chair.

Parliamentary Oath (Amendment)

4.44 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the parliamentary oath; and for connected purposes.

I proposed a similar Bill in July 1998 and lost by 14 votes. Whether or not this Bill is successful, I shall return to the issue, because I regard the principle contained herein as being very important.

In proposing my previous Bill, I said that

the taking of an oath and the act of its swearing or affirmation is a matter of great moment in the life of a person or of a nation. No democratic institution would demand that its participants take an oath without reason. No person seeking election to perform a public service would take an oath without understanding the significance of such an act.

I also quoted the universal declaration of human rights:

Everyone has the right to take part in the Government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

Later, I said:

We recognise that the law must, without discrimination, respect the rights of citizens to seek political or public office, individually or as representatives of political parties or organisations, to ensure that the will of the people serves as the authority for government. We also recognise that parliamentary privilege is not for the benefit of Members, but protects the rights of the electorate, who depend on those whom they have elected to uphold their rights and interests in Parliament.

These are the general principles of representative government and parliamentary democracy as we understand it.

The taking of an oath is a serious matter. Those who are believers take it before God; others according to their ethical codes. However, it is also a public matter. We take the oath before this House and, because of television, we take it nowadays before the nation and before the world. The oath is not something to be ridiculed or demeaned; taken with crossed fingers, or under protest, or rushed and said as gibberish, or with added qualifications or mental reservations. It should be sacred; it is important.

In speaking against my Bill on that occasion, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) gave me my case. He said:

If a man or woman seeks to sit in the House, the oath of allegiance is essentially the password to entry.

It is a PIN number. It is an "Open Sesame" to a new and fresh Aladdin's cave full of points of order, private notice questions—hopefully, Mr. Speaker—statutory instruments and all those rich joys of Parliament.

To me, the oath is more important than a gold key, a password or a means to an end. It is a solemn affirmation, or the swearing or accepting the responsibilities of representing people. For the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, it may be a mere ritual. For me, it is more than that. He went on to say:

Once the password has been uttered, it does not prevent an hon. Member from seeking to change the arrangements of our constitution.—[*Official Report*, 29 July 1998; Vol. 317, c. 377-81.]

What a charade that is; what hypocrisy. I suggest that we want more than that. Could a republican deny everything he believes in and then, the following day, propose a ten-minute Bill to abolish the monarchy? That is what the right hon. Gentleman said and that is quite wrong.

The present oath of allegiance has no reference whatever to the people who send us here and no reference to our duties and obligations to the majority of people in our constituencies—and indeed to all our constituents whom we represent in this House, whether they voted for us or not. The password, the key to our being here, is the words of the returning officer, not the oath of allegiance that we take.

There is a general spirit of modernisation among Labour Members and throughout the House, not only in terms of the hours that we sit or the powers that we want Select Committees to have but in our general attitude to our relationship with society as a whole. If we are to establish the respect that we are told we are losing in society, we have to be seen to be serious people doing a serious thing—and taking the oath is a very serious thing indeed.

I have not mentioned Northern Ireland, although others will say that that is the secret agenda. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster spoke about the strategic purpose and the tactical purpose of my earlier Bill. I honestly do not know whether the two Sinn Fein Members would take their seats if the Bill were enacted. To me, that is irrelevant. If there were a united Ireland, it would not be a question, but the principle for membership of the House would still be the same.

We should look for inclusivity and ensure that there is no bar to membership of the House for those who want to be elected and are lawfully elected by their constituents. I believe that people can carry out their duties not necessarily by taking or affirming an oath of allegiance but, if they wish, by swearing, in the phraseology suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), that they will

to the best of my ability, discharge the responsibilities required of me by virtue of my membership of the House of Commons and faithfully serve those whom I represent here.

I commend the Bill to the House.

4.52 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) rightly drew to our attention the fact that this is his second bite of the cherry, as he had a go on 29 July 1998, when he said that he spoke "with some trepidation". Obviously, in the intervening time he has been able to overcome that trepidation, and he has entertained us with another case for changing the practices of the House. He is nothing if not persistent. As he also pointed out, he was defeated last time by 151 votes to 137. I am pleased to say that those who opposed him last time came from many different parties. Many Liberal Democrat Members, as well as Ulster Unionists, were against him.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman on one point: it is a solemn matter. I suspect that the vast majority in the House take that view. When they queue up at the beginning of the new Session to take the oath of allegiance, they do so with some solemnity. Most of us regard it as the most wonderful privilege to come here on behalf of those who elected us and take part in ordering the destiny of this great nation. The act of signing the register and affirming the oath is one of the privileges that

most of us enjoy. There may be some who dislike it and would ridicule it, but I suspect that they are in a very small minority.

The oath is part of our traditions, going back centuries. It is true that in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was in large measure—

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): It goes back to the Stuarts.

Mr. Howarth: Yes, and in the 17th and 18th centuries it was to renounce the Stuart claim to the throne. It was also one of the bulwarks against Catholicism, which at that time represented a challenge to the sovereignty of these islands—which of course it does not today. Indeed, this House and the country are privileged to have so many adherents to the Catholic faith among us. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) fights vigorously for the continued independence of these islands, which shows that Catholicism and the defence of sovereignty go hand in hand today—as perhaps they did not in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The oath has been changed since then, but it has stood the test of time since about 1868. For the benefit of the House, I shall rehearse some of it, to remind those hon. Members who have forgotten what it says. It states:

> I . . . swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God.

Most of hon. Members are entirely happy to swear that oath.

However, we are not alone. It is not as though Members of the House of Commons are unique in having to swear an oath of allegiance before taking their seats. Judges, magistrates and members of the armed forces do so as well—and members of the Privy Council swear a much more sophisticated oath than Members of Parliament, as the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) will know. I shall not embarrass the right hon. Gentleman by reading it out, as it might embarrass some other Labour Members—[HON. MEMBERS: "Go on, read it out."] I am being tempted by my hon. Friends, so perhaps I will.

The text of the Privy Council oath, as reported to the House by the Leader of the House on 28 July 1998, is:

> You do swear by Almighty God to be a true and faithful Servant unto the Queen's Majesty, as one of Her Majesty's Privy Council. You will not know or understand of any manner of thing to be attempted, done, or spoken against Her Majesty's Person, Honour, Crown, or Dignity Royal, but you will lett and withstand the same to the uttermost of your Power, and either cause it to be revealed to Her Majesty Herself, or to such of her Privy Council as shall advertise Her Majesty of the same. You will, in all things to be moved, treated, and debated in Council, faithfully and truly declare your Mind and Opinion, according to your Heart and Conscience; and will keep secret all Matters committed and revealed unto you, or that shall be treated of secretly in Council. And if any of the said Treaties or Counsels shall touch any of the Counsellors, you will not reveal it unto him, but will keep the same until such time as, by the Consent of Her Majesty, or of the Council, Publication shall be made thereof. You will to your uttermost bear Faith and Allegiance unto the Queen's Majesty; and will assist and defend all Jurisdictions, Pre-eminences, and Authorities, granted to Her Majesty, and annexed to the Crown by Acts of Parliament, or otherwise, against all Foreign Princes, Persons, Prelates, States, or Potentates. And generally in all things you will do as a faithful and true Servant ought to do to Her Majesty. So help you God.

In swearing the oath of allegiance, we, like judges, magistrates and other persons appointed to other positions, acknowledge that the Crown—not the person of the Queen, but the Crown—is the fount of all justice in this country. It is significant that the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have drawn up the same sort of provisions for the swearing of an oath of allegiance as we require in this House.

Therefore, the hon. Member for Hull, North should look at those legislatures before he proposes modernising the oath. Neither of those bodies has seen the need to modernise, but both have accepted the desirability of having the oath. It is right that Members of Parliament should swear an oath of allegiance to our country, as Her Majesty the Queen is the head of state. That is the system of government that the people of this country wish—it is the democratically expressed wish of the people. Therefore, it seems entirely consistent that we should take the oath of allegiance. Recent events in the United States have shown the merit of having the Head of State and the day-to-day government of the country resting in different hands.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of inclusivity. I do not believe that we should extend inclusivity to fifth columnists and traitors. Those who wish to be Members of this House and represent the people of this country should swear an oath of allegiance to the Head of State and have the interests of the country at heart.

I believe that the hon. Gentleman's real agenda is to obtain consent for the admission into this Parliament of those who have been elected to it but have chosen not to take the oath of allegiance and—some of us would argue—have done a great deal to undermine all that this country stands for. It is their decision whether they come here or not—no one is forcing them to stay away. They have simply to swear the oath of allegiance and they can take their seats in the House. They challenged it in the High Court in Northern Ireland and in the European Court of Human Rights, and they lost both cases. They lost in the European Court of Human Rights because it was deemed to be a matter for you, Mr. Speaker, and for this House, and not for anybody else.

I hope that I have made a case for the House to reject the hon. Gentleman's entreaties for the second time around and give him such a decisive view of our decision on the matter that he will spare us a third attempt.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 129, Noes 148.

Division No. 330] **[5.1 pm**

AYES

Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*

Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davidson, Ian
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Drown, Ms Julia
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Grogan, John
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Laxton, Bob
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McFall, John
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Hara, Eddie
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pickthall, Colin
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Rendel, David
Roy, Frank
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stunell, Andrew
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Tyler, Paul
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John McDonnell and
Mr. Paul Flynn.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Merron, Gillian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woolas, Phil
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Gerald Howarth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Orders of the Day

Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I draw the House's attention to the fact that privilege is involved in Lords amendment No. 180. If the House agrees the amendment, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

Clause 2

AIMS OF THE SERVICE

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 2, line 3, after first ("local") insert ("probation")

5.13 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2, 5 to 10, 12, 16 to 24, 26 to 28, 30, 40, 83 to 86, 96, 97, 119, 120, 126 to 129, 131 to 134, 136 and 139 to 151.

Mr. Boateng: The amendments are modest and inoffensive. They change the names of "local boards" to "local probation boards". In so far as it clarifies the functions and purposes of the boards, the change is welcome.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In my characteristically generous and eager spirit, I congratulate the Minister on what appears to be the latest in a series of U-turns. The right hon. Gentleman has developed a habit of inveighing violently against views that are critical of Government policy. When such views are expressed to him, he indicates that he has no intention whatever of changing his mind; but then he returns to the inner recesses of his ministerial office at Queen Anne's Gate and thereafter trogs back to the House to confirm that he has taken on board the sensible representations made to him and that he intends to alter Government policy accordingly.

The right hon. Gentleman should not, however, be criticised for that; such a sign of flexibility is welcome. He will be aware—as, shortly, will the House—that the issue of the title of local probation boards was aired by my noble Friend Baroness Seccombe during the Bill's Committee stage in the other place on 2 October. That was precisely three weeks before this House returned to business.

My noble Friend was quizzical about the Government's decision to refer to local probation boards simply as "local boards". She has been well known to me since 1985; she is of good Birmingham stock and is a most sensible individual. She found it extraordinary that the Government did not seem to want to designate the boards with a title that accurately described what their purpose and functions were to be. She thought it curious that the word "probation" was not included in the title, and suggested that something should be done about it.

My noble Friend said that

> that phrase should be amended to read "probation board". The use of the phrase "local board" is not only confusing and meaningless, but could cause problems when contracting with other boards. In house—

that is, among our own number—

> it may be understood, but to those outside, it would be ambiguous.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I realise that the hon. Gentleman is keen to celebrate his promotion to the Front Bench, on which I congratulate him, but why is he taking such a long time on amendments that the Government have accepted?

Mr. Bercow: It is important that the House is aware of the purport of the arguments. I thought that Liberal Democrats were in favour of the proper exchange of views. I have already generously and in terms congratulated the Minister—for whose ability, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, I have the highest regard—but that does not, in any sense, disqualify me from speaking about the merits of the amendments. Indeed, I have not merely an entitlement but an obligation to say something about this matter—not least because it represents a climbdown. I shall not be so unkind—although others might be—as to suggest that it is a humiliating climbdown, but it is a climbdown none the less. I find it disappointing that the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), who is a notably independent-minded specimen in the House, should nevertheless choose to gang up with the Government in that way—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I am a stickler, but I think that "specimen" is not a very attractive word to use.

Mr. Bercow: I readily withdraw, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My affection for the hon. Member for Lewes is boundless, so I readily concede. I shall not be guilty of that sin again.

My noble Friend Baroness Seccombe concluded her remarks about local boards by saying:

> Many local boards exist, such as those of companies, banks and even the gas board.

It is important to emphasise that the concerns that my noble Friend expressed on behalf of the official Opposition in the other House were shared by several noble Lords. I hope that the hon. Member for Lewes is aware that his noble Friend Lord Phillips came to the aid of my noble Friend on that occasion. He said:

> To refer simply to "local boards" without adding a qualifying adjective provides a recipe for confusion.

He said—I cannot put it better myself—that the name "local boards" was

> totally unmemorable, forgettable and neutral.

With a flourish, he added that some might say that it was

> even a little "Kafkaesque". The present name "local board" suggests nothing more and nothing less.

During the debate, Lord Bassam, speaking for the Government, said that the amendment was

> unnecessary for a simple reason: calling the boards "local" boards emphasises their close relationship with the communities that they will cover.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 October 2000; Vol. 616, c. 1149-51.]

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants to gloat, but is he not overdoing it by concentrating on one word on which we all agree? Would not his time be better spent considering the issues on which there is profound and important disagreement?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is right to want to get on to discuss important matters. However, I want to emphasise that the Government made the mistake in the other place of focusing exclusively on the importance of the word "local", to the detriment of consideration of the appropriateness of the inclusion in the title of the word "probation".

Mr. McWalter *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman implies that there is no need for further debate on the matter. Conservative Members do not understand why the Government thought it so important to retain the word "local"—a proposition from which we do not dissent—but could not see the argument for the inclusion of the word "probation". After all, it is with probation that the bodies are concerned. That is why we were so insistent. We were told by the Government that each local board would include the word "probation" in its title and the geographical area that it was deputed to cover, but Lord Bassam did not think that it was necessary to include the word "probation" on the face of the Bill.

We argued to the contrary and I think that the Minister now recognises that we were justified. I have already graciously welcomed his about-turn and, at the risk of embarrassing him further, I do so again. However, I emphasise to the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) the merit of arguing the points in this House and the other place. When we did that—this is the conclusive rejoinder to the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that this issue merits no discussion—we were told that the change to the title was not necessary. The change is necessary; it is practicable; it has been accepted; and I applaud that state of affairs.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on, I think, his first outing on the Opposition Front Bench. I know from when he and I first crossed swords in a television studio in 1992—when we both failed to get elected to this place—that criticism only encourages him. Therefore, I shall not comment on his speech.

I do not recall much debate on this issue in Committee in this place, which shows that there are occasions when the revising role of the other House is worth while. No one in this House picked up this point. I very much welcome the flexibility that the Minister has shown and I promise him that, if he continues to be flexible, I shall continue to make short speeches.

Mr. Boateng: I congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on his well-deserved promotion to his current responsibilities. He characterised himself as being eager, but he also has a tendency to over-egg the pudding. That is the hon. Gentleman, and we would not have him any other way.

I am glad that the House has found the amendments acceptable. I do not think that there is much more to be said.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 2 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 3, in page 2, line 10, at end insert—

("( ) ensuring offenders' awareness of the effects of crime on the victims of crime and the public")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 4.

Mr. Boateng: The amendments advance the debate that we had in Committee. Hon. Members will recall a discussion of a semantic nature. We have taken into account the debate in the other place. Victims have always been at the heart of the Bill, and it seeks to ensure that the probation service, as a law enforcement agency, is bound to consider them. Victims' interests, needs and concerns are met day in and day out by probation officers as they carry out their important work, especially in the matter of public protection. Having heard the arguments and reflected on them, we are only too happy to accede to the amendments.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Even the Minister of State did not manage to keep a straight face when he made his extraordinary defence of an indefensible position.

Of course we are grateful to the Government for finally accepting the amendment, but it is a little incomprehensible that they should have resisted it right up to the wire and had to undergo a defeat in the other place. They were not at all willing to side with the victims in the way that the right hon. Gentleman suggests.

It is difficult to believe the right hon. Gentleman when he says that the interests of victims are at the heart of the Bill because the Government resisted the proposition that the service should aim to ensure that offenders understand the consequences of their crimes and that they are rehabilitated, both of which would work overwhelmingly in the interests of victims. The penal system, of which the probation service is a part, has always recognised that retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation are the aims of punishment, but rehabilitation plays no part at all in the aims of the service as set out in the Bill, for which the Government fought right up until the last ditch in the other place.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that addressing offending behaviour is a key requirement of people who seek parole. How much more important is it that those who remain in the community, moving among potential victims and generally at large and free to do as they please, should understand the effects of their offending on those who have suffered from it? How much more important must it be at that stage to rehabilitate rather than allow the offender to slide down the slippery slope to prison? It is not enough to say that such aims are generally understood.

We should remember that the aim of the Prison Service is clearly stated at every prison gate—to help prisoners to lead useful and law-abiding lives. If the imperative is so great in the Prison Service that it has to be stated clearly at the gate of every prison, why is it so much less a consideration in the probation service that it should not be explicitly stated in the Bill? It is wrong to exclude from the Bill explicit recognition of victims and of redemption. I am glad that, late in the day, the right hon. Gentleman has accepted the need for that recognition, but he has offered no explanation of why the Government fought that to the last ditch in the other place. Why were they so bent on excluding the aims that offenders should understand the consequences of their crimes and should be rehabilitated?

The right hon. Gentleman is still just about managing to keep a straight face. I suggest that he comes to the Dispatch Box and says that the Government are not interested in making those aims primary aims. Rather than pretending that those were the Government's aims all along, he should admit that they lost in the other place and have given the fight up as a bad job.

5.30 pm

Jackie Ballard: As I recall, the long debates that we had on this topic hinged on the difference between aims and functions. At one point, we had a rather Alice in Wonderland argument about which was primary—a function or an aim.

I was never convinced that the Minister believed what he was saying about the difference between aims and functions. *[Interruption.]* I hope that that was not unparliamentary—I was not accusing the right hon. Gentleman of telling lies. I think that he knows what I mean. I was convinced, however, that he believes that one of the functions of the probation service is the rehabilitation of offenders, and that victims also have an important place in the system.

I continue to argue—I am glad that at the end of the day we have won the argument—that it is important to put that up in the top line as an aim of the probation service. I welcome the conversion that has occurred in relation to the amendment.

Mr. Boateng: I have heard what the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) said.

The right hon. Lady might have been a little more gracious and generous in her remarks, but perhaps that is asking too much. She will have read the discussions that we had in Committee. She will know that rehabilitation has always been in the forefront of the work of the probation service. Probation officers work in this area day in and day out. She does them no service by saying that they need reminding of the importance of rehabilitation and victims. They do not need reminding; we do not need reminding. We are happy to accept the amendment. I commend it to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 4 to 10 agreed to.

Clause 5

FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL BOARDS

Lords amendment: No. 11, in page 3, leave out line 5 and insert

("in respect of its area for the purposes mentioned in section 1 and for ensuring the performance of any other functions conferred by virtue of this Act or any other enactment on the board.")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 13, 95, 99 and 102 to 105.

Mr. Boateng: With the leave of the House, I shall take a little time to explain the background to the measures that we propose, which build on existing arrangements to protect the public.

In introducing these measures relatively late in the day, we acknowledge the important public debate that took place following the tragic murder of Sarah Payne. All of us would want to pay tribute to Sarah's parents. Through this amendment and amendments Nos. 101 and 154, we have an opportunity to create a memorial for Sarah. This is a package of measures that can properly bear the name "Sarah's law".

The amendments build on and strengthen arrangements for risk assessment and management of sexual and violent offenders by putting those arrangements on a statutory footing. They require the relevant agencies to inform the public about their arrangements and they provide for the Secretary of State to issue guidance about the exercise of the new statutory duty, including the content of information to the public. They also put on a statutory footing and extend a duty to consult and inform victims, where it is their wish, about the release arrangements for the relevant offender.

We seek to build on the arrangements put in place by police, probation and other services. I pay tribute to the work that they do to protect the public against such offenders, who might be some of the most dangerous in the community.

In proposing the measures today, we seek to act as quickly as possible to improve the range of measures available to the police and other services to deal with serious sexual offences. Earlier in the summer we set up a major review of the Sex Offenders Act 1997; it is in progress and it should be completed at the end of the year. Some of the aspects of the Act under consideration are complex and need proper consideration, but we believe that we should deal now with those measures that can be tightened quickly and effectively without waiting for the full review to be completed.

The harm that sex offenders cause victims is at the heart of the new measures. As further evidence of our intention to extend provision for victims, we are placing a new duty on the local probation board that builds on existing good practice and extends it to a greater number of victims. It will be a requirement that the victims of sex and violent offenders be consulted about whether they want to comment on the terms of the offender's release and, if so, whether they wish to be informed of or propose themselves any conditions that relate specifically to them.

[Mr. Boateng]

Other measures, such as the proposed sex offender restraining order, will, although new, build on concepts in existing legislation. We ask the House to amend the Bill to include those new measures in memory of Sarah Payne, whose tragic death moved so many of us throughout Britain. It is important that we take this opportunity today to improve the protections available to the public, and we have done so. I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I associate the official Opposition with the tributes that the Minister has rightly paid. The Minister will know that the Payne family's home is in a neighbouring constituency to mine and in my county. Everyone in the area and, as the Minister said, throughout Britain, was appalled by the crime, and it is only right that the Government should take the opportunity to make certain changes.

The Minister will appreciate that many later groups of amendments deal with related matters, so it might be more appropriate for me to deal in detail with the Opposition's response when we reach them. We recognise, however, that the Government see this group of amendments as part of a complementary series of amendments to address the issues raised by the Sarah Payne case and other earlier tragedies. The Opposition hope to build on the work done in Committee and in the other place.

In dealing with such serious issues, both Houses of Parliament are often at their best. I am sure that when the Minister replies he will recognise that the matters were addressed seriously by all members of the Committee and by their Lordships.

I do not wish to detain the House on this group of amendments because it would be more appropriate to discuss at length later amendments that deal in detail with sex offenders. There might be points of detail on which we disagree, particularly in the next group of amendments and in some later groups, but we hope that there will be a workable regime that will help to prevent any similar appalling crimes.

We recognise that this is a matter that no Parliament can ever get completely right. Sadly, there are wicked and evil offenders out there. We must do our best to try to create a framework in which the innocent, particularly children, are protected. I hope that the Bill, as amended, will go some way to doing that.

The Minister and his colleagues on the Treasury Bench were right to recognise the way in which the Bill could be used to make some helpful changes. We reserve judgment on whether more will be needed in this difficult area, on which I will say more later.

Jackie Ballard: We, too, welcome the amendments. As the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said, the Government are right to take the opportunity to amend the law. However, they were also right to wait for an appropriate opportunity instead of making the wrong decision by overreacting in a knee-jerk response to a heated newspaper campaign and obvious public anxiety earlier this year.

Some of the most important words in the clause are "risk assessment". Nothing can be risk free. We cannot give anyone a guarantee that there is no risk, but it is important to assess and manage the risk properly, monitor it and ensure that lessons are learned if anything sadly goes wrong.

It is unfortunate that a long debate between the parties about the amendments now would hit the headlines, but because they have cross-party support and our debate has been brief, the press will not notice what we have done today.

Mr. Boateng: The contributions of the hon. Members for Taunton and for Surrey Heath are characteristic of the calm and appropriately serious approach of the House and of the other place to the matter.

It is vital that difficult and complex decisions about the nature of the information to be disclosed on sex offenders be considered on a case-by-case basis by the police and the probation service. It is equally true that parents and the public have the right to more information. We are providing information about the way in which sex offenders are managed in the community, the safeguards that are in place to protect them and the part that they can play in enforcing those safeguards. That is why we are creating a statutory duty for the police and probation services to establish arrangements for assessing and managing the risks that sex and violent offenders present.

I welcome the fact that, in the contributions that we have heard, the House has expressed its approval of our approach.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 12 and 13 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 14, in page 3, line 24, leave out ("accommodation") and insert ("supervision").

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 15 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, and Lords amendments Nos. 29, 53 and 54.

Mr. Boateng: The Government amendments would create a generic category of approved accommodation, which include those hostels that are currently designated approved bail and probation hostels. That would remove distinctions between categories of hostels and enable all approved hostels to accommodate, when appropriate, offenders who are subject to drug treatment and testing orders, or licensed conditions, or offenders who, while not subject to statutory supervision, require enhanced supervision in residential accommodation to assist their rehabilitation.

The Opposition amendments, would—doubtless inadvertently but nevertheless certainly—wreck the ability of the service to provide accommodation in hostels. They would prevent accommodation of a smaller number of dangerous offenders, who are no longer on licence, but whose accommodation in approved hostels is clearly in the interests of public protection.

Greater flexibility, which the Government amendments would provide, is necessary in accommodating those on DTTOs by enabling them to be housed in any approved accommodation while undergoing treatment directed by the courts. The supportive regime in approved hostels increases the likelihood of such unstable offenders

completing the treatment element of their orders. That increases the effectiveness of sentencing and improves public protection.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and I have debated hostels late at night. I appreciate the seriousness with which she takes their contribution to public protection. They have an excellent record of dealing with difficult and dangerous offenders. We want to build on that success by increasing the flexibility and usage of approved hostels. We thus aim to provide for increased public protection and a reduction in reoffending, especially among those on whom the court has imposed DTTOs or who are on licence.

The amendments to clause 24 are consequential on the creation, in clause 9 as amended, of a generic category of hostel. However, the Opposition amendments would destroy the ability of the service to undertake such work. Amendment No. 14 would remove the word "accommodation". That would call into question the ability of the service to provide accommodation in hostels. That cannot have been their intention, but that is the effect of their amendment.

Amendment No. 15 would restrict the use of hostels to those currently on bail, on licence or serving a community sentence. The vast majority of residents will be in one of those categories, but a small number of dangerous offenders, who have been released from prison but not on licence, are currently accommodated in hostels, and rightly so. The supervision provided in hostels, including the operation of a curfew, is such that the public are much better protected than they would be if offenders were left to their own devices in the community. It is essential that we retain the ability to put dangerous offenders in such accommodation.

I urge the House to accept the Government amendments made in the other place, and to reject amendments Nos. 14 and 15.

5.45 pm

Mr. Hawkins: I make no apology for spending a little time on this matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) have made it clear that on a number of occasions during the consideration of the Bill in the other place the Government suffered what can only be described as humiliating defeats, and this matter was one such occasion. When the other place divided, 180 noble Lords and noble Ladies voted for the Opposition amendment, which was ably moved by my noble Friend Baroness Blatch, and only 126 of their Lordships were prepared to support the Government. That was but one of a series of substantial defeats on the Bill in the other place.

Their Lordships felt so strongly about the Bill because they believed that the Government had not paid sufficient attention to the serious concerns about supervision in hostels. I hear what the Minister says about the unintended consequences of the amendment of my noble Friend Baroness Blatch, but we feel strongly that their Lordships were right to press this matter. The Minister's noble Friend the Lord Bassam of Brighton got very confused—to put it at its best—in his attempt to respond to the serious concerns of my noble Friend. He talked about resolving practical matters in a practical way, and said:

> That should be done in a fair-handed way.

I am not sure whether he intended to say "fair-minded" or "even-handed", but it showed how confused he was in response to these serious matters. He has sadly been nicknamed Lord Climbdown.

Just before the vote in the other place, my noble Friend asked:

> What in my amendment would legally preclude the most dangerous people from being supervised in the accommodation? The noble Lord has not answered the question. I am pressing this point because the noble Lord's response has been based on that premise; namely, that my amendment would be dangerous . . . I am not satisfied with the response that I have received from the noble Lord.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 828-30.]

I am afraid that that was all too typical of the reasons why Members in the other place made so many changes to the Bill. As we said repeatedly in Committee—the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) joined us in making this point—this is a bad Bill drafted in much haste with many matters needing amendment.

We pressed amendments in Committee, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald have made clear, in the other place the Government were dragged kicking and screaming into conceding some of the sensible points that we had made, some of which were supported by the Liberal Democrats. The Government have finally accepted the importance of our points.

I remind the Minister that many hon. Members, including some Labour Members, expressed concerns in what was a detailed debate on issues to do with bail and probation hostels. Many hon. Members—some in Committee—raised constituency cases in which serious problems had arisen in relation to bail and probation service hostels. I especially remember powerful points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who spoke from experience of a hostel in his constituency. I have experience of a hostel in my own constituency that caused a number of problems, and similar concerns were raised in another place.

We think that Lady Blatch was right to press the issue of supervision, and we hope that the Government will address the point. We shall not ask the House to divide, because we do not want the Government even to seek to allege that we are doing any damage to the provision of accommodation; but we do think that the issue is serious. We want the Minister finally to concede, when he replies, that the Government recognise—and will place firmly in regulations, even if they are not prepared to include it in the Bill—the need for those who will run bail and probation hostels to be required to ensure that, at every stage, dangerous and potentially dangerous residents are supervised. It should not be simply a matter of accommodating them.

Labour Members who have had practical, sharp-end experience of such hostels—which they mentioned in Committee—know very well that supervision is a vital element in any hostel. All our law-abiding constituents want to be given the comfort of knowing that anyone sent to such a hostel will be supervised morning, noon and night. If the Minister is not prepared to say that the Government will find a way of ensuring that supervision is clearly written into the obligations of those running hostels, the next time an outrage, crime or tragedy is

[Mr. Hawkins]

perpetrated by someone who is resident in a hostel but has not been properly supervised, the Government will have to take the blame.

I do not want to be a Cassandra crying in the wilderness, but these are serious issues. As the Minister said, they were addressed seriously in Committee, and we want to hear that the Government will address them seriously. As I have said, we shall not divide the House, but we hope that the Government will take what we have said, and what I expect the Minister to say shortly, in the spirit in which I have made these serious points.

Mr. Boateng: I did not think the spirit in which the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) presented his arguments did justice to the serious and important debate in which we engaged in Committee—to which the hon. Gentleman made a valuable contribution—and the attack on my noble Friend Lord Bassam was utterly unwarranted.

Miss Widdecombe: Oh no it wasn't.

Mr. Boateng: Oh yes it was.

"Even-handed" and "fair-minded" are not terms that spring to mind in characterisation of the hon. Gentleman's contributions, so he really ought to take care before casting aspersions on my noble Friend—who, as the hon. Gentleman will discover if he reads *Hansard*, valiantly tried to put Lady Blatch right when she was insisting on moving immediately to a vote on an amendment that included the phrase "any time", because it would have prevented the accommodation of dangerous offenders not on licence. All Opposition Members know the importance of ensuring that we can accommodate that small but dangerous group, regardless of whether they are on licence. The hon. Gentleman rightly does not push Lady Blatch's proposal to a vote, because to do so would undermine the purposes of public protection. He knows that, and he ought to have had the generosity of spirit to admit it.

Clause 9 ensures that all who are accommodated in hostels are there for supervision or rehabilitation. Supervision, in relation to dangerous offenders or ex-offenders, lies at the heart of all that the probation service does in such hostels. We need to do more to give more recognition to the important work that hostels do.

I am glad that the amendment will not be pressed to a Division, and urge our amendments on the House.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 15 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 16 to 24 agreed to.

Clause 7

FUNCTIONS OF INSPECTORATE

Lords amendment: No. 25, in page 4, line 30, at end insert

(", provided that no such direction shall merge the functions of the Chief Inspector with those of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons").

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

This is the first opportunity I have had to join my right hon. Friend the Minister of State in congratulating the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on his appointment.

Let me deal with the drafting—the technical reasons why the amendment should not be accepted—before dealing with the substantive issue. Technically, it is very defective. As the words in brackets suggest, it would lay down in law the impossibility of merging

the functions of the Chief Inspector with those of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

As drafted, it would not achieve that.

Let me now turn to the substantive issue, on which I hope to reassure the House. The power of direction for which clause 7 provides enables the Secretary of State to give directions to the probation service. It has nothing to do with the Prison Service, and it would therefore have no effect.

I have spent rather more years in opposition than any Opposition Member—

Mr. Hawkins: Not long enough.

Mr. Straw: Too long—although I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 18 years provides good training.

Anyway, having spent some time in opposition, I do not criticise the Opposition for the fact that their amendment is technically defective. Nevertheless, I hope they will accept that it is.

Let me proceed to the substantive issue: whether it would be appropriate to merge the inspecting functions of the chief inspector of prisons with those of the chief inspector of probation.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): May I return to the question of the drafting?

I understand that the amendment may have technical deficiencies, but I think the Home Secretary's argument was that because clauses 6 and 7 deal with the inspectorate of the probation service, the formulation allowing the option of a merger would not work. That is at best arguable, and, as the Government have not—I think—offered any drafting alternative, I hope the right hon. Gentleman does not consider his technical objections to be related to the substance even of the drafting. There may be a technical problem, but according to my reading, it is not a substantive technical problem—although there is a debate about that.

6 pm

Mr. Straw: I shall come to the substantive issue, which is the important part of this point. I hope to provide reassurance to the House, not least by reference to a written answer to a question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) which I gave earlier today. The Lords amendment, which relates only to the functions

of local probation boards, would not achieve the desired effect. The Secretary of State would not be prohibited from using the existing statutory provisions—the Prison Act 1952, as amended. They relate to the inspector of probation and therefore allow a single person to combine the functions of both posts.

I come to the substance of the matter. On 9 June in a written answer, I told the House that I was delighted that Her Majesty had consented to extend the appointment of the chief inspector of prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, until 2001. I added that Sir David has

made a great contribution to our shared goal of ensuring that prisoners are held securely in safe, decent and healthy establishments. I am pleased that he will continue in his role beyond the expiry date of his original appointment.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation, Sir Graham Smith, also retires close to the end of July 2001.

I added that aligning the dates when both inspectors are to retire, and hence when both posts would become vacant, would give

the Government flexibility in considering how best to ensure that the arrangements for inspection of prisons and the probation service best support closer working between the services as well-ensuring that the individual services continue to be inspected rigorously and independently as they have been. I shall be making a further statement to Parliament on this in due course.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 392-93W.]

On 27 July, I announced to the House that I would publish a consultation paper setting out a choice of options for drawing the work of the two inspectorates together. That document, which is entitled "Inspecting the Work of the Prison and Probation Services: Options for the Future", was published by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State in early August and placed in the Library. It sets out the current arrangements and four options: maintaining current arrangements, establishing terms of reference for the inspection of joint working, sharing inspectors between the two inspectorates, and a joint chief inspector for prisons and probation.

The consultation period ended on 31 October. We told the consultees that their responses would be made public and placed in the Library, unless they objected, and I am making arrangements for that. However, it may help if I summarise those responses, as I have in the written answer that I gave earlier today, and say what decisions have been taken. A majority of consultees favoured some change, including the establishment of terms of reference for the inspection of joint working between the criminal justice agencies and the sharing of inspectors between the inspectorates. By contrast, only small minorities were in favour of either the status quo or the appointment of a single joint chief inspector for prisons and probation.

During the consultation exercise, a helpful scheme was suggested by Her Majesty's chief inspectors of constabulary, the Crown Prosecution Service, the magistrates courts and the probation and prison services to inspect practice across their boundaries systematically. That scheme, which I hope commends itself to the House, has much to recommend it and the consultation exercise also suggests that it will command broad support. It is therefore the option that I propose to pursue, along with the arrangements canvassed in the consultation exercise for bringing the work of the inspectorates much closer together.

As I made clear in my June answer, we shall have an opportunity to establish new arrangements when both inspectors retire next July. For completeness, it may help if I refer to the concluding paragraph of my written answer. Sir David and Sir Graham have plainly made significant contributions to raising standards in the prison and probation services. I am grateful to them for their work, and I am sure that that is reflected by the House as a whole. In view of the retirements in July next year, I shall advertise both chief inspector posts in the new year. My answer does not refer to the terms of reference of the appointments, but plainly they will take account of the new arrangements for joint inspections of the kind proposed by the five inspectorates to which I referred.

In view of my substantive remarks, I understand some of the anxieties raised in the other place about a single joint inspectorate, and it was right to consult both Houses of Parliament as well as those outside who are interested in the future of the inspectorates. We have run a genuine consultation exercise and have reached conclusions based on how best to take the services forward. I hope that they will command wide support and that the House will accept both the spirit in which I have moved the motion to disagree and its consequence.

Miss Widdecombe: I thank the Home Secretary for the tone in which he discussed this important Lords amendment. I see considerable merit in the proposal for a joint inspectorate. Indeed, in the longer term, I see merit in joining the two services. Both serve the aims of criminal justice, but, regrettably, can often pull against each other because, rather than running as a seamless whole, they work as distinct bodies. Furthermore, both provide services that would be better dealt with as part of a seamless whole. For example, our prisons run offending behaviour courses that seek to address drug, alcohol and gambling addictions and temper management. However, the Prison Service often operates in isolation on those courses and people who leave prison have no means of support to implement the strategies that they have been taught. If the services acted more seamlessly, much more aftercare could be provided.

I genuinely see merit in the Home Secretary's proposals and would not want him to think that I lightly dismiss them and his reasons for not accepting the amendment. I can travel quite a long way with him, but I am sure that he accepts that there has been understandable unease in another place and that the consultation suggests that such unease is even more widespread. Therefore, further reassurances are necessary if he is to convince another place that the safeguard that it proposes should not be implemented. For example, the chief inspectors say that only about 25 per cent. of the work is joint and, therefore, the overwhelming majority of that to be inspected would not fall in such a category.

Some of the work carried out between the two services is very different. For example, the Prison Service has a major duty to prevent escapes and security is an important aspect of the inspector's work, as is the provision of a humane regime. Slopping out, time out of cell, visiting facilities, bullying and purposeful regimes are not mirrored in the work of the probation service. Therefore, it is arguable that they deserve separate inspection.

However, there was an underlying suspicion in another place that any merger could simply be a cost-cutting measure designed to save the Chancellor money, rather than to promote excellence in inspection. I shall certainly draw to the attention of my right hon. Friends in another place the Home Secretary's comments about the

[Miss Widdecombe]

deficiency of the safeguard that they have inserted, but they were seeking to ensure that such a measure could not happen by stealth and that if the right hon. Gentleman—or, indeed, any of his successors—decided to go ahead with such a merger in future, he or his successor would have to return to Parliament for approval and, therefore, would be subject to the full rigours of scrutiny in both Houses. That being no bad thing, and given the Government's regrettable tendency sometimes to ignore the House, I find that, on balance, I must disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's disagreement, although I do not want to imply that I would never support—or, indeed, propose—such a merger. I commend the protection of parliamentary scrutiny to the House and, therefore, I agree with their Lordships in the said amendment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I sense a conviction about the conclusion that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) had a little difficulty arriving at.

I thank the Home Secretary for the timetable, by which we have received the written answer in advance of the debate. That is obviously sensible and helpful.

When I started my job for my party, I was entirely neutral about such matters; I had no pre-conceived view about whether there should be one inspectorate or two. Therefore, I undertook the same exercise as the Government have properly done—namely, I looked for myself, listened to people and sought to form a view according to the information that I was given. In that context, I own up to the fact that I now know much more about the prison inspectorate than about the probation inspectorate, both of which are highly respected. Indeed, both chief inspectors are well regarded, and the House will want to pay tribute to both, as the Government have done.

I say that because I am one of the few Members of Parliament who have had the privilege of spending two days with the inspectorate on a recent inspection of Armley prison, Leeds. That inspection was extremely well done and highly regarded by the prison staff, the management and the inmates. I thank those who facilitated my presence: the inspectorate team and their advisers; the prison management; the new governor of Armley, who was very welcoming, as were her staff; and the prisoners, who, at their instigation, allowed me to sit in, for example, on a sex offender treatment session—obviously, entirely respecting confidentiality—so that I could see how such things proceed. From that and the other prison visits that I have taken part in since starting my job, I have no doubt that the regime and methods are extremely effective for routine and ad hoc inspections.

I share the prisons Minister's view on a controversial issue. For example, as a result of the ad hoc inspections at Brixton—a prison which he and I know relatively well from our present and previous roles—he was right to conclude that the regime could not continue without a threat of severe change. That inspection was largely prompted by complaints, which led to the Minister's visit and decision, so the process appears to work, and I pay tribute to the system.

The Home Secretary was absolutely fair in saying that it is logical to extend the appointments of the occupants of both posts so that they end at the same time, providing the flexibility to consider whether there should be a combined post. I do not dissent from that sensible proposal. There is now a process, to which the Home Secretary has alluded, that will allow both posts to be considered complementarily.

I thank the Home Secretary for undertaking the consultation process. We should thank him for his response to that process; it shows that he listened. He and I occasionally have our run-ins—we even had a mini run-in yesterday—but I hope that I have never said that he does not listen and deal with the arguments. He and his colleagues are always fair in that respect. The consultation has been well carried out in this case. On balance, a persuasive case was put to the Home Secretary. Clearly, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was persuaded by it.

6.15 pm

I shall cite some examples—first, the experience of people of great competence and experience across all parties who argued for the separation of the inspectorate. In the other place, Lord Windlesham and Lord Hurd, a former Home Secretary, were clear about their views. Among my colleagues, Lord Dholakia, who has huge experience of the Prison Service and of rehabilitation, was clear about his view. There is much weight of experience to suggest that the inspectorates should be kept separate.

I give considerable weight to someone who has been prayed in aid—namely, the Bishop of Lincoln, who is the bishop to the prisons. I have known him since he was my college chaplain at university and greatly respect him for his common sense and straightforwardness. He concluded that the inspectorates should remain separate. A host of the great and the good, and the competent, has come to the same view.

I shall not repeat the comments of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, but there are clearly issues that are expressly to do with custody. The prison regime suggests that much work needs to be done. There is no doubt that the prisons inspectorate has a huge amount of work to do. The Prison Service needs a lot of work and improvement. No one in any of the parties would doubt that the service needs external assessment to keep people up to the mark. Sir Stephen Tumim and Sir David Ramsbotham have been very good at independently criticising the Prison Service and constructive about how to proceed. However, that exercise is wholly different from inspecting what only sometimes overlaps with the work done by the probation service.

The probation service has much more natural liaison with many other agencies, such as the health service, housing and social services, the youth service, the education service and the voluntary sector dealing with drugs and alcohol rehabilitation and so on. All that is different in style and character from dealing with the in-house management of the Prison Service. Therefore, I reached the same view as that which most peers, the Home Secretary and—for the time being, at least—the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald have reached: the inspectorates should be kept separate.

The amendment, whether or not it is perfectly drafted, would prevent the policy being changed without Parliament taking that decision. The strength of Parliament's view has been—and the clarity of the conclusion reinforced that view—that the amendment is necessary. Clearly, concern

has been expressed in both Houses. The Home Secretary's preferred option clearly has much to commend it, and I accept that it came from the consultation process. It appears that the proposal should be acceptable to the inspector of constabulary, the Crown Prosecution Service, magistrates courts, the probation service and the prisons. Of course, some of their work needs to be done together.

One of the lessons that I learned at Armley the other day was that the procedure for moving people from prison to the outside world still does not work well. That is not a matter of political dispute. I shall not pretend to know many cases, but Armley prison does all sorts of things. It is one of the biggest prisons in the country and acts as a local prison, so prisoners go there on remand and then serve a short period after their conviction. Sometimes the periods are very short—six weeks, or three or six months. I think that the inspection, which was carried out only a couple of months ago, showed that no one who had been a remand prisoner and then served a short period of imprisonment before their release received any pre-release preparation whatever. Some of those people will have broken their drug or alcohol habits inside; others will have had anger problems and been on a course, or have had a history of sex offending, but there was no preparation for their release because they were short-sentence prisoners. As in the films, they walked through the door into the world with their bags in their hands, but without any preparation. That system will not stop reoffending.

Just as, in the health service debate, the link between health and social services is so important, we need to make that link. That means that there needs to be collaboration, but prison and probation, inside and outside, custody and relative freedom are different things. I am glad that the Home Secretary and the Government have said that there will be two separate inspectorates. Our amendment—which, with the right hon. Lady, we will press to the vote—will, I hope, flag up the fact that we want that decision to be changed only by Parliament, not by the Executive without parliamentary authority.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for the way in which they have made their points. I am glad that the decisions on the future of the inspectorate, which I have announced today by way of written answer, appear to have wide support in the House.

I do not disagree with much of what the right hon. Lady said in her opening remarks—certainly her point about the way in which the Prison Service and the probation service pull against each other. We need to get them to operate more as a seamless whole.

I advance an argument not for having a joint inspector, but for recognition of the need for the two services to work much more closely together. Some functions of the probation service are very different from the functions of the Prison Service. There is a substantial difference between the physical incarceration of a category A long-term prisoner and the preparation of a pre-sentence report on a woman who will not face custody, but has severe problems of mental illness—but there is an increasing overlap in the middle. There is an overlap partly because of the need to ensure better connection between that part of the sentence which is served in custody and that part which is served in the community, for all the reasons that the right hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman have mentioned. We need to ensure, say, on drug treatment that there is proper connection. What was once a clear dividing line between punishment in custody and punishment in the community is now much fuzzier at the edges.

For quite a long time, under successive Governments, the Prison Service has allowed people who are in its custody out on temporary release or on licence. It has allowed them, for example, to be in custody, but within open conditions, on trust. The probation service increasingly has a role of enforcement, which in some cases can literally involve the person being confined to a particular area: for example, under home detention curfew or under enforcement provisions of various orders. Therefore, as I say, at the extremes there are differences. In the middle, there is increasing overlap.

Nothing has been done by stealth. I find that part of the argument extraordinary—*[Interruption.]* It has been suggested that we had better accept the proposal to stop things happening by stealth, just in case. I understand, but nothing has been done by stealth.

I understood the unease that was expressed in the other place. I think that we have dealt with that. I understand the reasons why both Opposition parties want to put down a marker on the issue, but, even if the amendment were passed, it would have no effect. The arrangements that I am putting in place would, I imagine, last in any event for some years. Apart from anything else, no one would wish to be appointed to those important posts without some clarity and certainty about that, but I do not imagine for a second that a future Secretary of State would ever seek to make changes without coming to the House and getting its approval one way or another.

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 345, Noes 166.

Division No. 331] **[6.24 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Brinton, Mrs Helen
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Alexander, Douglas	Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*	Browne, Desmond
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Buck, Ms Karen
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary	Burden, Richard
Ashton, Joe	Burgon, Colin
Atherton, Ms Candy	Butler, Mrs Christine
Atkins, Charlotte	Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Banks, Tony	Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Barnes, Harry	Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Barron, Kevin	Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Battle, John	Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Bayley, Hugh	Campbell-Savours, Dale
Beard, Nigel	Cann, Jamie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret	Caplin, Ivor
Begg, Miss Anne	Casale, Roger
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*	Caton, Martin
Bennett, Andrew F	Cawsey, Ian
Benton, Joe	Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Bermingham, Gerald	Chaytor, David
Berry, Roger	Clapham, Michael
Betts, Clive	Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Blackman, Liz	Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Blears, Ms Hazel	Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul	Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Borrow, David	Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*	Clelland, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*	

Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Graham Allen.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 26 to 30 agreed to.

Clause 11

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SERVICE

Lords amendment: No. 31, in page 6, line 8, leave out ("13(1)") and insert ("13(2)")

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 32 to 38, 55 and 56.

Jane Kennedy: The assurances that I sought to give in Committee did not allay the fears of the officers doing the work. However, the issue was debated fully in another place, and the amendments—especially those on clause 15—address the concerns expressed. I shall not, therefore, detain the House by elaborating further. The points raised previously were clear, and the concerns were expressed in measured and thoughtful terms. Anyone reading *Hansard* will be impressed by the detail involved and by the conclusions reached.

Mr. Hawkins: I am sorry to say that I want to spend some time examining this matter. A lot was said in another place, not least by my noble Friend Baroness Hanham, who raised the concerns—to which the Parliamentary Secretary referred—that we had expressed in Committee.

There continue to be many concerns, as the Parliamentary Secretary has fairly conceded, among those at the sharp end of the new service as to what effects the Government's proposed changes will have on them and on the way in which they conduct their business. I am relieved that the Government have at last recognised that not only do the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats have these concerns, but that they are widely shared by those who have to carry out the difficult work involved with family welfare connected to the courts.

Since the Committee, I have had personal discussions with several people working in the guardian ad litem service. At a successful and pioneering magistrates court open day in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), I was approached by people from the court welfare service and the guardian ad litem service. They told me that they were concerned that they would be the subject of ridicule because of the Government's choice of the new name, CAFCASS.

[Mr. Hawkins]

I had not put that thought into their minds. I do not suppose that they were even aware that we had raised that issue both on Second Reading and in Committee. However, that was proof positive, if proof were needed, that the official Opposition's concerns that the new service would be ridiculed as "carcass" had filtered through to those at the sharp end. Nothing to do with the courts should ever be the subject of ridicule, but this was confirmation that those who are doing the job share our concerns. The Parliamentary Secretary finally recognises that there are concerns, and we welcome that as a small concession.

In another place, Baroness Hanham came across another possible interpretation of the rather inelegant and ugly acronym that the Government have chosen. She said on 31 October:

> It is also horribly easy to slip from saying "CAFCASS" into saying "Kafkaesque", a connotation which would be unfortunate in the extreme.

It is extraordinary that the same point that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made was raised in another place in relation to another aspect of the Bill. It may become known as the most Kafkaesque Bill that even this Government have ever introduced.

6.45 pm

Baroness Hanham also said:

> I am told that magistrates and those working in the new service believe that, far from enhancing its stature, the acronym will bring it and them into disrepute. The full title of the new service is also cumbersome, even if it is not abbreviated.

She is absolutely right. She pointed out:

> "Children and family court advisory and support service" is a great mouthful. It is no more descriptive of what is involved than the much simpler "family court child welfare service"—

the alternative which we proposed in another place—

> which is well understood and respected. At least the letters FCCWS cannot be shortened into anything other. There is much in a name—pride, identification, professionalism.

[Interruption.] It is all very well for the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) to be twittering from a sedentary position, but she should recognise that these are serious points, and were regarded as such by her noble Friend Lord Bach. I know from having conducted cases against him at the Bar that he always takes such issues seriously. Lord Bach said that if a name similar to that of one of the three services that the Government were proposing to amalgamate into the new service were chosen, it would send a negative message to the other services. That is nonsense and a minor point compared with the dangers of ridicule.

We find it surprising that Lord Bach said:

> It may be that the noble Lords will feel that to have "welfare" in the title is a mistake.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 849.]

The services are all, by their very nature, welfare services. In family court cases, the welfare of the children is the first and paramount consideration. All Labour Members who have ever dealt with family law cases will know that that is a term of great respect and a hallowed phrase. It is hallowed by precedent and handed down from leading cases, so that everyone who has ever practised family law in the past 20 or 30 years knows that that phrase is the starting point. That is why we feel so strongly about the matter.

We are still very concerned. Baroness Hanham and others who spoke in the debate were right to discuss this matter and several of our concerns were taken further. At this late stage, the Government have started to move in our direction and made concessions, even though they had to be dragged kicking and screaming to do so. We hope that by accepting the Lords amendments or, at least, by accepting the spirit of the argument, the Government will think about promoting other more sensible names for the new service. I hope also that the points raised by the Earl of Listowel in the debate will be taken into account.

It is important to recognise that, whichever party we represent, we are all concerned to ensure that the welfare service supports the courts and works for children and families. That is crucial, and if the Bill promotes that, it will be helpful. However, there is a risk that if these services—and the hard-working, dedicated people working in them—are brought into ridicule and disrepute, it will do harm. That has been our concern at every stage, as I hope the Parliamentary Secretary will have the grace to recognise.

Jane Kennedy: With all due respect, and without wanting to denigrate the sincerity with which the hon. Gentleman holds his views, which he has expressed at every opportunity as we have debated the Bill, I believe that the 1,800 staff who will come together in April from the three different services to form the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service deserve better than to have their important new role reduced to an argument about the name of the service.

As my noble Friend Lord Bach said, the name Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service describes exactly the role of the new service. It will represent the interests of children in family court proceedings. In bringing together the three strands of the service, we expect CAFCASS to reduce delay and institute a more child-focused service that the courts can rely on when they consider the serious and sensitive issues that these officers deal with in supporting the work of the courts in arriving at their conclusions. The courts' decisions affect children and families at some of the most critical points of their lives. It is important to recognise the contribution that these staff already make and the contribution that we expect them to make as they come together to form the new service.

I have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman. I must resist his entreaties to reconsider the title. If, in the future, someone suggests a name that is snappy and cannot be reduced to ridicule in any way, I may be persuaded to consider it, but as matters stand, the name has been widely accepted by those working in the three services and will remain. I have not heard any concerns from those family court practitioners whom I have met.

I hope that the House will join me in welcoming the move made in the other place to recognise the concerns surrounding the definition in clause 15 and to support us in establishing a service that will be widely welcomed in the family courts.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 32 to 38 agreed to.

Clause 18

DEFINITIONS

Lords amendment: No. 39, in page 8, line 28, leave out ("(other than a chief probation officer)")

Mr. Straw: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 44 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Government amendments (a) and (b), Lords amendments Nos. 45 and 46 and the Government motions to disagree thereto, Lords amendments Nos. 47 to 50 and the Government motions to disagree thereto, Government amendments (a) to (f) to the words so restored to the Bill, Lords amendments Nos. 51 and 121 to 124 and the Government motions to disagree thereto, Lords amendment No. 130 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, and Government amendment (a) to the words so restored to the Bill.

7 pm

Mr. Straw: This raft of amendments raises an important issue about the management of the service. It has been a matter of disagreement in the other place, although I think that it was less so here when it was first discussed. It is important to put on record what has been agreed by all parties, which is that we should move from the current position of having 54 local probation services, with the consequent difficulties in national co-ordination and management, to a national service—the National Probation Service is a clear and unambiguous title—organised nationally but delivered locally through 42 different probation areas that are coterminous with the police force areas. In the past three and a half years, we have moved to ensure that each of the criminal justice agencies works within the police force area or, in the case of the Prison Service, within the Government region containing a whole number of those police force areas.

Mr. Simon Hughes: A Welsh colleague has asked me to ask whether the current arrangements will move from having separate services in Dyfed and Powys to having one service for the area of the Dyfed Powys police force. As the Prison Service has both geographical regions and special groupings of prisons, will the Home Secretary say something about how it will not fit tightly into the new structure with an entirely regional probation service?

Mr. Straw: The number of probation services is moving from 54 to one, organised under the separate police force areas. In Wales, there are currently four police force areas: North Wales, Dyfed Powys, South Wales and Gwent. The probation services would be coterminous with those.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the organisation of the Prison Service into regions. There was an interesting exhibition about that at the Prison Service conference two years ago. I was sceptical about whether it could organise itself into regions in line with the Government regions, but it has done so. Thanks to the work of my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor and his departmental colleagues, there has been considerable progress—against what had previously thought to be wholly immutable boundaries—towards reorganising the Crown court circuits from historic boundaries that had more to do with Edward I and the Welsh marches than with anything of contemporary significance to ones that accord with the standard English regions.

Some may think this a prosaic issue, but it is of great importance to those at local level, because in any one area there is only one chief officer of police, one probation officer, one chief Crown prosecutor and so on.

Mr. Hawkins: The Home Secretary seemed very dismissive of the historical origins of some of the circuits regarded as traditional by members of the Bar. Before treating the matter with such levity, he should recognise that what he is proposing to do has been referred to me as a cause of great anger among those at the sharp end of the profession. I hope that he has received similar representations, especially from the Midland and Oxford circuit, because I understand it to be a matter that has caused great anger, and not one to be dismissed with levity, saying that the boundaries date back to Edward I and are unworkable.

Mr. Straw: With respect, there is a difference between treating an issue with levity and having a sense of humour. I hope that the House understood that I was using some humour, but in a spirit of affection towards those circuits and without levity. Just because something is of great antiquity, it does not follow that we should not change it. The whole process of Parliament is about change.

The matter is one for my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor, and not for me. However, as the hon. Gentleman asked whether I had received any representations on it, the answer is no, and that is quite interesting, as I make myself available to members of my old profession as much as I can and still try to be active as a member of my own Inn.

Mr. Bercow: I am sure that the Home Secretary spoke only loosely when he said that the business of Parliament is about change. Will he confirm that we are not engaged in a process of continuous, Maoist revolution? Will he further confirm his awareness of and support for Lord Falkland's valuable dictum? It states:

When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.

Mr. Straw: Of course I subscribe to that entirely prosaic observation, but the history of the House is one of change. It is important that changes imposed by the laws passed by the two Houses of Parliament be considered carefully rather than capriciously, not least because each of us faces death. We live in a changing world, where every day is different—and every day is different in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take my first opportunity to welcome you to the Chair? I am glad to be tempted down that philosophical excursion, but I shall return to the point for fear of your calling me to order.

One of the Bill's primary purposes is to create a National Probation Service for England and Wales. All parties agree with that aim. The National Probation Service will enable us to ensure much greater consistency and to improve performance in protecting the public and reducing reoffending.

[Mr. Straw]

It is important that any such organisation should be able to appoint its senior executives centrally. Chief probation officers hold the key to the service's performance, and it is crucial that the right people be appointed in the right areas. It is accepted implicitly—there is no argument about it—that the current system of local appointment has failed. There are many excellent chief officers, but some are less good.

It has also been very unsatisfactory that the performance of the less good officers has been mirrored by that of the less good area boards, with considerable adverse consequences for the probation service as a whole. The previous Administration sought to wrestle with that problem by the establishment of national standards over a period of years. The Government have continued to take the matter forward over the past three and half years.

However, the performance of probation services with regard to breach varies over a most extraordinary range. The 1999 survey by the Association of Chief Officers of Probation shows that good services achieve in the high 80 per cent. range when it comes to enforcement of breaches, but I regret to say that, in Essex, only 8 per cent. of cases in which orders are breached three times are subject to any enforcement. No one can look at such evidence without being very concerned about the performance of the individual services and about the overall system that allowed such extraordinary variations in performance to happen.

As the House would expect, I have read the debate held in the other place on 31 October. I respect those who hold a view different from mine, but we have already made the step change involved in moving from a series of local services to a National Probation Service. The NPS is different, in kind and function, from those services that are, wholly or mainly, administered and run at a local level such as local authorities or the police service.

We are dealing with the enforcement of orders of the court. In Britain, our court provision is national. Of course, it is administered locally to a degree, but judges and justices of the peace are appointed centrally. One of the important elements in any fair system of criminal justice is that, within the same jurisdiction, there should be consistency between one court and another.

We have two agencies to enforce the orders of the court—the Prison Service, and the probation service. The Prison Service is a national body, run by a director general answerable to me. In turn, I am responsible and answerable for that service to the House. Governors of local prisons are appointed by the director general, and they have arrangements and relationships with local people, not least with those who give up so much of their time and effort to serve on the boards of visitors. However, the Prison Service could not deliver what we hope is a more consistent and effective service if it were not run nationally.

The other agency that must deliver consistency of enforcement under a national court system is the probation service. As I have indicated, one of its major problems has been a lack of consistency. When we weigh up the needs for consistency and for a high degree of local responsiveness, the balance of factors across the spectrum for the probation service is the same as that for the Prison Service. That balance may not necessarily be that required for other services, but I contend that the need for consistency calls for the establishment and enforcement of national standards. I am very clear about that.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) does not think me patronising, but I thought that her experience as Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation, and her subsequent experience, allowed her to speak with great wisdom in previous debates about the way in which the prison and probation services can sometimes pull against each other. She has said that the services ought to operate as a seamless whole.

That is true, and very important. In my judgment, however, it would be more difficult to achieve that objective if we set up a management structure for the probation service that had those tensions built into it. The Prison Service operates as a clear national service, with appointees answerable to the director general. Of course it takes account of local circumstances and relations with boards of visitors, but that is the general framework. The amendment would mean that the attempt to establish a National Probation Service with a national chief officer would have the problem that the executives attempting to deliver the service would not be appointed by that chief officer—and, ultimately, by the Secretary of State.

Under the amendment, those executives would be appointed by the area boards. That is not a workable arrangement, and it would undermine the goal of establishing a National Probation Service, which is shared by hon. Members of all parties.

In the debate in the other place, Baroness Blatch talked about divided loyalties. I believe that some loyalties will be divided wherever one draws the line, but that more loyalties would be divided if one drew the line according to the amendment rather than according to the Bill.

There are plenty of examples of more centralist approaches being adopted. For instance, the previous Administration did so when they replaced regional health authorities with civil servants appointed as regional general managers as part of the national health service executive. The changes proposed in the Bill are being made for reasons that are similar, although not identical.

We want there to be local responsiveness, which can be dealt with by the local probation boards that the Bill also establishes.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Home Secretary is entitled to a view that is entirely rational, but other people take a view based on the example of police chiefs. Outside London, they are appointed locally by police authorities as part of the criminal justice service. However, the right hon. Gentleman cited examples to show the wide variation of performance among probation services. Does not he accept that that argument is not necessarily one that supports a centralised service? Inspectorates—in the probation service, or in prisons or education—are meant to deal with such variations. Could not better results in terms of consistency of performance be achieved if the inspectorate of the probation service worked to ensure it? That would not require a central appointments system. The argument that ensuring consistency of performance requires centralisation does not hold up as a political conclusion.

Mr. Straw: With respect, I contend that, although good and effective inspection is a necessary condition for

achieving greater consistency of performance, it is not sufficient in itself. Proper management structures are needed as well, and the Government submit that those structures should be as I have described.

The argument about chief officers of police does not really hang together. Although such officers are appointed by the police authorities, they go through the highly centralist funnel of the senior command course before appointment. To get on to that, there is a biennial selection process, with a high degree of screening and national moderation as to who forms the cadre from which those local police officers are appointed. In any event, although the police authority appoints them, they have very few responsibilities in respect of the conduct of the office of chief officer because he or she is operationally independent and answerable to the courts and the Secretary of State more often than to the police authority.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. In a previous existence, I was involved in the pursuit of coterminosity in the context of the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994 in which the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), was also involved. I am not unfamiliar with the pursuit of coterminosity between police, the probation service and prosecuting authorities—in fact, I am rather bound up in it. Have we lost sight of coterminosity of magistrates courts' jurisdictions as well? Why not do them all?

Mr. Straw: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's experience. We are doing that as well, and I am sorry that I omitted to say that.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is already a precedent for central, as it were, control with local leaders in the Crown Prosecution Service as now restructured, in that the Director of Public Prosecutions appoints the local chief prosecutors? I have reservations about the Bill, so will my right hon. Friend undertake to ensure that the mistake of underfunding the Crown Prosecution Service when it was set up will not be repeated when the new service is set up?

Mr. Straw: I accept what my hon. Friend says in his opening remarks. There is a higher degree of local responsiveness under these arrangements than under the Crown Prosecution Service.

There were two major flaws in the way in which the CPS was established in 1985. One was to make it a national service without any regard to local need and to construct administrative arrangements in England and Wales that defied local consultation responsiveness. The second flaw was significantly to underfund the service. I am pleased to say that after a period in which the funding of the probation service went down in the closing years of the previous Administration—1997-98—we have been able to increase funding in the past two years, including this year. For the future, there will be a significant increase in funding because we recognise that a new service needs properly to be provided.

Mr. Bermingham: In asking that question, may I declare an interest as a member of the Bar? I forgot to mention it, but I think that everyone knows.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): That has been noted. Thank you.

7.15 pm

Miss Widdecombe: May I also congratulate you on your occupancy of the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and welcome you? This is the first time that I have performed under your eagle eye, and it is indeed a great pleasure to see you.

Once again, I see some merit in the Government's proposals. I see genuine merit in the central appointment of chief probation officers. However, I also see many problems, and I am not convinced that the Secretary of State has addressed them sufficiently.

The first problem is that of clear line management. How will that be aided if the chief probation officers owe their loyalty to the Secretary of State who appoints them but are accountable to their local wards? That seems a recipe for confusion. I listened carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said on that point, and he glossed over it rather. I would be grateful if he could return to the issue in his closing remarks.

As for parallels, chairmen of NHS trusts, for example, are appointed locally, as are chief constables. There does not seem to be an overwhelming case, at this stage, for having central appointments of chief probation officers. The right hon. Gentleman made the point with considerable force that if we ever wanted to amalgamate the prison and probation services, it would be sensible to have one system of appointments rather than two, and I understand that. However, we are not at that stage. The right hon. Gentleman has already said tonight, for example, that he does not want to join the inspectorate immediately. Therefore, it seems rather premature to appoint chief probation officers centrally.

I could see more merit in the Secretary of State's desire to take more direct control if he did not already have extensive powers. An amendment suggested in another place allows him to approve appointments, so he would still be able, effectively, to block an unsuitable choice. I remind the Home Secretary of the words of Baroness Blatch. She said in another place:

> What benefit . . . is there in one individual being contracted to a different employer? It makes no sense. The Secretary of State's powers are not impeded one iota, but what is important is that the chief officer . . . has a clear management line.

Baroness Blatch went on to say:

> The Secretary of State will still retain the right of approval over the appointment of chief officers. He will still be able to appoint and remove boards. He will have control of 100 per cent. of funding and allocation of funding. He will set overall objectives for the service. He will receive reports from the inspectorate and will be given regular statistical and financial information, audit reports and annual reports from each board. He will also have power of direction and default. For goodness sake, those are sufficient powers!—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 October 2000; Vol. 616, c. 1154-61.]

Baroness Blatch also said in a further debate on the Bill:

> The relationship of the chief officer to other staff and to the board is also critical. For the employer of the chief officer to be the Secretary of State and the employers of all other staff to be the boards will create difficulties and possibly at times divided loyalties.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 801.]

That was the essence of the argument in the other place and it is the essence of our argument tonight. However, I shall be kind to the Secretary of State, in a rare moment

[Miss Widdecombe]

of benevolence towards him. If he can address the points that I have raised with sufficient rigour and conviction, I will not seek to divide the House.

Jackie Ballard: May I also congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and welcome you to your post?

As the Home Secretary said, this is a very important issue. We are asking questions such as who employs chief probation officers, to whom do they owe their loyalty and to whom are they accountable.

We have heard from the Home Secretary and from an ex-Home Office Minister, who warmed to the Home Secretary's proposals, but in the House of Lords a number of ex-Home Office Ministers spoke in favour of the amendments. They believed, as we do, that the Government's proposals are a recipe for confusion of accountability and authority, leaving local boards in an invidious position. The proposals would set up a management structure with an in-built tension—something that the Secretary of State said that he wanted to avoid. Perhaps it betrays the Government's secret—or not so secret—desire for a National Probation Service. I see that that woke up the Minister.

Mr. Boateng: It is not secret.

Jackie Ballard: Perhaps it is not so secret. However, I thought that the Government believed that there was an important role for local probation boards—so important that they want to appoint them all themselves—and therefore a role for local discretion, priorities and needs; otherwise it may as well be a nationalised probation service. Surely, local probation boards are to administer a local service, although they will take direct instructions from the Home Office, get their funding directly from it, and will have to adhere to national standards and priorities. However, those should be used and interpreted in the light of local needs; otherwise, why have local boards at all? If the Minister disagrees, perhaps he should intervene.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred to Lords amendment No. 121, which was accepted in the House of Lords, supported by many of my noble Friends. It would give the Secretary of State the right to approve those appointments, as happens with chief police officers. We should remind ourselves that the Secretary of State is to appoint all the members of local boards and can dismiss them or their chairmen if he thinks that they are not performing properly or not carrying out the tasks that he wishes them to perform. Surely, therefore, he can trust his appointees to make the right appointment in choosing their chief officer.

Mr. Bermingham: I have been listening carefully to the hon. Lady, and a thought has started to cross my mind. If we take the city of Birmingham and the next-door town of Wolverhampton, which are not in the same local government area, why should there be different needs in two adjacent towns? The hon. Lady's argument about the board meeting local needs has no great substance, so perhaps she will provide an explanation.

Jackie Ballard: It sounds as if the hon. Gentleman is arguing against having local boards at all, although I had understood that that was not his opinion. Surely he would accept that, at the very least, there are different patterns of criminal activity and varying availability of, for example, social housing and employment, in different parts of the country. I shall not take up the House's time going through all the different types of needs, but I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman took that line.

In Committee, the Minister challenged me to count the number of new powers that the Bill will give to the Secretary of State. I have to confess that I have not had enough idle moments to complete what he knows is a lengthy task. I suspect that he has not had enough idle moments, either. However, the power is a centralising power too far. The Central Probation Council, which is the probation employers' organisation, generally welcomes and supports the Bill, but it has strong feelings about this issue. In its briefing, it states:

> The Home Office consultations on the Prisons/Probations Review and "Joining Forces to Protect the Public" set out various options for the future governance of the probation service, including a national service with "local reference groups or advisory boards". The government did not choose that option. Instead, local probation boards retaining the full duties of employers of probation staff were decided upon.

The council states:

> It is important to recognise the corporate status of the new boards and the responsibilities placed on them, not only by the Home Office, employment law, financial regulation, health and safety regulations, the Better Quality Services initiatives and the Human Rights Act.

Chief officers will be placed in a difficult position as members of a local board who administer a local service but receive direct instructions from their Home Office boss.

The Home Secretary said that, for the effective performance of the service, it was important to be able to make the chief officer appointment centrally. However, in the national health service, chief executives are employed by local trusts and, as we have already heard, chief constables are employed by police authorities. The Home Secretary said that lack of consistency in the probation service had been a major problem in the past. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, does that not suggest a failure of the inspectorate to monitor and report on adherence to national standards?

The Home Secretary talked about the centralised approvals system of chief police officers and said that it could not be compared to the system for probation officers. In responding to our debate, will he comment on the new assessment centre process for the appointment of chief probation officers? That process will be similar to that governing the appointment of chief police officers. Our debate on this group of amendments has been the longest so far tonight because it concerns the balance of power and lines of accountability, which are key issues in the Bill. I am disappointed that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said that her party is not inclined to oppose the Government on this matter. Liberal Democrat Members are inclined to oppose the Government on their failure to support these Lords amendments and we hope that the right hon. Lady will join us in the Lobby.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) set me the difficult test

of answering her questions with sufficient rigour and conviction to satisfy her. She is on an each-way bet and, should she wish to vote with Liberal Democrat Members once I have finished, that would be consistent with what she said earlier.

I should like to deal with the key issue raised by the right hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard). When discussing institutional change, there is always a tendency to think that it is possible to lay down single lines of accountability and answerability and to think that there must be an algorithm that can establish those to the exclusion of other, more complex, arrangements. However, life is not like that, especially not in a large society in a big country of 55 million people, with 50 million living in England and Wales.

We are trying to do two things—run a national service and make it locally responsive—so there will be a tension. There is not a single line of accountability, but lines of accountability, answerability and responsiveness are drawn. That is no different in the public sector than in the private sector. I can think of plenty of examples in which large national companies wish to ensure that they maintain a national operational framework at the same time as they secure responsiveness to local need. They do that by having the chief executive of each of their subsidiaries appointed by the main board but, day by day, that chief executive is a member of the subsidiary local board, which, in turn, represents the local area or the specific interest of that local subsidiary company. There are other examples in the public sector.

Of course, we will look at parallels. However, in each service in the public sector from, at one end, highly local services such as planning and environmental health, to the armed forces at the other, there are different arrangements to provide for the balance between local responsiveness and national direction according to the needs and functions of each service. We must try to make a bespoke service.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald asked about clear management lines, which were also mentioned by Baroness Blatch. Under the arrangements, the lines of management are clear and the national chief officer will be appointed by the Secretary of State. In turn, the area chief officers will be formally appointed by the Secretary of State, but the national chief officer will have a great deal to do with those appointments. Those chief officers are answerable for what happens in their local areas. Moreover, they are full members of the local boards, to which they and other members are appointed by the Secretary of State, so they are all appointed on the same basis. As for the chairs of NHS trusts, may I tell the right hon. Lady that it is on the record that they are appointed by the Secretary of State, not appointed locally. Chief executives in the NHS are appointed locally, but the chairs are not, although they have a semi-executive position, which must be borne in mind.

That arrangement in the NHS delivers the right balance between clear management lines in a national service and local responsiveness. Local chief officers are appointed by the Secretary of State on the recommendation of the national chief officer, but are full members of their local board, take part in discussions at a local board level and, within the local board's terms of reference, must abide by its decisions. They could be outvoted on the local board.

I ask the House to consider what would happen in the reverse situation in which the chief officer was not a member of the local board but had been appointed by it and was subordinate to it. That must be so; one cannot be appointed by a local board and suddenly become a member of it. It would be odd for the local board to be the employer of one of its own members. Such an extraordinary arrangement would raise difficulties over any employment issue.

Jackie Ballard *rose—*

7.30 pm

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Lady is about to mention head teachers, she is right and I am wrong. I knew that there was some flaw in my argument and it is unfortunate that it occurred to me after I had spoken. However, having chaired the board of governors of a large comprehensive, I have been through difficulties over employment of a head teacher—not the current one. Where there are problems with the employment of a head teacher, the fact that the head teacher is a member of the governing body that appointed him or her raises serious difficulties. I shall now make a good point on the basis of the facts, having made a not-so-good one without the backing of the facts.

If the alternative arrangement proposed by the Opposition were introduced, there would apparently—only apparently—be clearer lines of communication locally. However, it would be certain that national lines of communication would be much more confused. In effect, because the local board had appointed a person, that person would think himself or herself much more answerable to his or her employers than he or she was nationally accountable. That would undermine the concept of a national probation service.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: In a moment.

Among other things, that would make it more difficult in practice to hold the Secretary of State to account for what was going on in an alleged national service. People would say that it was a national service in name but not in practice.

Mr. Dawson: My right hon. Friend has started to answer my point, but we are discussing an important national service and we need to address both consistency and cultural change. We may be moving away from what has been something of a social work service to one that has, as one of its principal aims, the protection of the public. Is it not an index of the Government's seriousness that they propose to manage that change in the way that they do?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who brings to this issue a great deal of experience gained before he came into the House. I know of the interest that he has taken in these matters since he was elected.

More eloquently than I will, my hon. Friend made my next point in answer to the questions of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald on whether the powers that would remain if Baroness Blatch's amendments were to be included in the Bill would be

[Mr. Straw]

sufficient for overall management of the service. There are powers of direction and powers, in one form or another, of effective veto. Given the task before us—the dynamic task of securing the cultural change in the probation service to which my hon. Friend referred—such negative powers of veto on appointment or to issue directions are necessary but not sufficient to achieve change. If we are to achieve cultural change against deep-seated conventions within the probation service and to raise the performance of the average and less-than-average to the level of the best, we need a more continuous process of management, which our structure will secure.

I do not suggest that we are proposing the perfect solution. There is not one. However, on balance, our proposals better achieve the overall aims agreed between all parties for a national probation service. They will also better secure proper accountability, effectiveness and consistency in the national probation service.

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 324, Noes 142.

Division No. 332] **[7.36 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berrningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn

Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Bob Russell and
Sir Robert Smith.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 40 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 41, in page 8, line 37, leave out paragraph (b)

Mr. Straw: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 42, 43, 135, 137 and 138 and the Government motions to disagree thereto.

Mr. Straw: This debate is about similar principles to those that we have just discussed. Essentially, it is about the overall management and structure of the National Probation Service, but our arguments in this case are even stronger than those on the previous group of amendments, which was about who should appoint and employ the local director under the national director for the service.

[Mr. Straw]

We believe that it would be wrong for local probation boards to hold land and that it would be inconsistent for them to do so in the context of a national organisation. Under the Bill, local probation boards will exist to deliver local services, to make a major contribution to protecting the public and to reduce reoffending. They should not have to dissipate that effort to deal with real estate. It is hard to discern what special qualities people appointed to a local probation board to help to contribute to the responsiveness of the service at a local level will necessarily have in respect of property holding.

It is worth bearing in mind the problems that currently arise. One probation committee chairman told my right hon. Friend the Minister of State that up to half of his committee meetings were spent dealing with property matters. That is not the purpose of boards, and neither should it be. The subsidiary point is that we would expect to manage the estate more efficiently and effectively from the centre. It is one sector in which real economies of scale can be obtained.

A further point relates to the comments of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on how better to secure co-operation and co-ordination between the Prison Service and the local probation service. Much of that better co-ordination and co-operation will arise when they are working in the same place and it will be much easier to secure their operation from the same place if it is possible, as appropriate, to amalgamate offices and so on. That can be done far more easily through the National Probation Service than through the convoluted procedures that would be necessary if the land were held locally.

Let me deal with the canard that was raised in the other place—that if real estate were held by the National Probation Service, whenever local staff needed to change a light bulb, repair a leaking tap or make another repair they would have to seek authorisation from London. That is nonsense. Such matters would be dealt with locally and the day-to-day management of the properties that local probation boards occupy would be for them. I hope that the House accepts that there is a world of difference between buying and selling property and dealing with basic maintenance. I ask hon. Members to disagree with the Lords amendments.

Mr. Bercow: I welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the Chair and congratulate you on your appointment.

The Home Secretary is a past master of uttering soothing bromides to reassure any Member who does not readily share his point of view. I am sure, however, that he will not be unduly surprised to learn that, despite the mellifluous tones in which he begged to differ with the noble Lords, Conservative Members are not persuaded. The purpose of the amendments is to allow local probation boards the opportunity to hold or manage land. The Home Secretary referred to the importance of probation boards, and it is arguable that their functions render it appropriate that they should at least have proper discretion over the type of property that they use and over variations in the use of that property. Many active in the service have suggested to us that they believe that that discretionary entitlement, which they might not choose to exercise, is important. They are concerned about an unnecessary and, arguably, draconian confiscation of power by the Government.

The Government have hinted that there could be major restructuring of the property held by the probation service once that property is taken into the ownership of the Home Office. The Home Secretary referred gently to that a moment ago and contented himself with the modest observation—we know that "modesty" is his middle name—that benefits could result from the estate being run more effectively, as he put it, from the centre.

The Home Secretary is aware that I hold him in the highest esteem and that I do not intend unduly to damage his reputation or cause him to blush. He knows that I regard him as the best of a pretty bad bunch of Cabinet Ministers. He is unfailingly courteous, he attends to the argument and he is the closest approximation to a human being that I have yet encountered in a member of Her Majesty's new Labour Government. Although I think that he has many merits, I do not regard him as a suitable estate agent. I have never thought of him as an appropriate chief executive of Hambro Countrywide. It does not seem to me or my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) that it is obvious—to put it mildly—that the control of the estate should be vested in the centre.

As we seek to establish the entitlement of local probation boards to exercise discretion, it is important briefly to rehearse the arguments to which the Home Secretary referred and which were uttered in the other place last month. I was particularly struck by the observations of my noble Friend Baroness Blatch, who discussed the issue on 31 October. She referred to the fact that the Government appeared to have in mind great savings and structural benefits from reorganisation. She was doubtful about that and referred to several letters that Lord Bassam, who speaks for the Government in the other place, had recently sent to interested Members. In paragraph 28 of one letter, he said:

> We [the Government] are convinced, however, that there are sound reasons for concentrating ownership and overall management of the Probation estate in the national directorate.

What heady brew did Lord Bassam offer us in defence of that proposition? It amounted to a twofold assertion—nothing better than that. He said that the Government believed that

> accounting responsibility will be placed squarely on the Government—

as though that were a benefit. It is not entirely clear to me that placing responsibility for accounting in the hands of the Government rather than with the local probation board, which is directly affected by financial management, is necessarily an advantage. His letter added that

> there will be better opportunity to control investment procurement and development so as to make the best of all the assets of the National Probation Service.

Methinks I hear overtones of the old National Enterprise Board. There is a good deal here about nationalisation, even though the word did not trip off the Home Secretary's tongue. He is nothing if not new Labour writ large. He is the emblem of the project, so obviously he did not vouchsafe nationalisation, but that is what the Government have in mind. They have a curious justification—which is also somewhat offensive to the local probation service—for their proposed nationalisation

of the property estate. They have a notion that property will be better run centrally than if it is run by people who are directly responsible for delivering a quality service.

8 pm

Paragraph 29 of Lord Bassam's letter states:

It is also clear that the existing arrangements have worked far from well.

In support of that dubious proposition, a survey by Donaldson's, a firm of chartered surveyors, is cited. It was conducted in 1999 and

concluded that there was inadequate management of the estate despite excessive staffing and that a fair proportion of it was unsuitable for purpose and in poor repair.

I am doubtful about the reference to excessive staffing.

The Home Secretary cavilled at the suggestion that, as a result of the proposed change, control over relatively minor and prosaic matters, such as whether to insert a different light bulb, would be sapped from the local probation boards and conferred instead on a central leviathan. That may be so, but it is clear that the Government are considering rationalising the property estate and possibly reducing the number of people who are engaged at local level. What else are we to infer from the reference to excessive staffing?

Many people are not convinced that staffing at local level is excessive. If the Government are convinced otherwise, they should plainly and openly say so. They should not dress up their intentions in a centralising measure that gives the impression that the Government regard themselves as a property manager. Governments of both colours have a truly risible record of interference in the management of property.

I referred to the belief of Baroness Blatch that the management of local property, offices and interview rooms is best vested in local probation boards. Needless to say, despite the quizzical expression on the Minister of State's face, Baroness Blatch was not alone in expressing those concerns. She was joined, as she was at other times during the other place's Committee stage, by Lord Phillips of Sudbury. It was significant that Lord Phillips and his noble Friends chose to support the amendments tabled by Baroness Blatch. Specifically, Lord Phillips observed:

Far from relieving local probation boards of concern and worry, the proposals—

which the Government are advancing—

are likely to add to them. Nothing can be more frustrating than having relatively modest property matters dealt with via Whitehall, with the distancing and bureaucracy that that can and often does mean.

Lord Phillips continued:

I know from experience on quangos that it is a great boon to be able to handle one's own property matters. It invariably leads to quicker, more effective, more efficient and, in the end, cheaper property arrangements.

That is such a common-sense observation that only an extraordinarily clever person would choose to disagree with it, but, true to form, Lord Bassam did so. He seemed genuinely alarmed by the notion that local probation boards might retain and be granted discretion in the management of property.

The most curious aspect of the debate was that towards the end of the exchanges, apparently irritated with the observations of Baroness Blatch, Lord Bassam said:

My Lords, sometimes I believe that the noble Baroness does not understand that crime is a national and international phenomenon.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 818-821.]

There is not the slightest disagreement or uncertainty about that. The issue is, however, who manages the local resource—the land, the estate and the rooms, including their distribution and the functions to which they are put. We believe that there is much merit in leaving maximum discretion at the local level. We are worried by what seems to be a large-scale and, as far as we can judge it, an unnecessary arrogation of power to the centre.

To avoid doubt, and so that the Conservative position is clearly on the record, I should say that we are not arguing this issue as a great matter of principle.

Mr. Boateng: Ah!

Mr. Bercow: The right hon. Gentleman says "Ah" as though I had vouchsafed spectacular new information, which I have not. The issue is one of practicality. I yield to no one in my respect for and preoccupation with practicality. He can chunter disapprovingly from a sedentary position if the mood takes him, but I am simply saying that if the Government were able to advance a credible case, preferably with a costing attached, to demonstrate that the proposed changes would create savings that could more effectively be used for the purpose of implementing the responsibilities of the probation service at local level, we would be happy to concede. In short, if the Home Secretary proved his case, and argued by using evidence rather than advocacy, we would be content. However, it is not sensible to support and undertake a major accretion of power to the centre unless a proven benefit will result from that arrogation of power. We have not been so persuaded.

I have been very discriminating in presenting my argument because there are many other important issues to address. I could have quoted chapter and verse at substantially greater length, no doubt irritating the Minister of State in the process. I have resisted the sore temptation to dilate further on the subject. Suffice it to say that what the Government are proposing is not necessary. What my noble Friends argued for in the other place, supported by Lord Phillips of Sudbury, was sensible, moderate and justified. Indeed, it was, if I may politely so suggest, in accordance with the dictates of common sense. It is that proposition that I commend to the House.

Jackie Ballard: I shall be even briefer than the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

The three main assets or local resources that local probation boards will need to control to fulfil their statutory responsibilities are staff, finance and premises. Some people already doubt the ability of boards to secure the compliance of staff with their instructions in the event of a conflict between the board and the chief officer. We should bear it in mind that it was made clear in our earlier debate that the board and the chief officer will be appointed by the Secretary of State.

Funds will be provided only by the Home Office and it is now proposed that premises from which the boards' responsibilities are exercised will also be owned by the

[Jackie Ballard]

Home Office, and managed, presumably, by another organisation with which the board will not have a contractual relationship. The Government's proposals on property will fundamentally weaken the role of boards. They must have some power with which to exercise their responsibilities. As we delve deeper into the Bill, it becomes clearer that local boards will have responsibilities without much power, and I wonder who will want to serve on them.

The Secretary of State said that it is more effective to manage and control the estate centrally. I recall that two or three years ago some newspapers and others described him as a liberal. I do not know whether he wanted that description—

Mr. Straw: It is true.

Jackie Ballard: Presumably that means that the right hon. Gentleman welcomes and wants that description. If he wants to deserve it, he will have to curb his desire to centralise everything. It might be a matter of practicality for the official Opposition to oppose centralisation on this subject, but it is a matter of principle for Liberals to oppose centralisation in general.

Mr. Hawkins: The hon. Lady tempts me to ask whether she has in mind the Home Secretary's condemnation of those he described in a famous speech as Hampstead liberals. He has subsequently reinforced that condemnation, as did his hon. Friends in Committee.

Jackie Ballard: I must confess that I do not know any liberals in Hampstead. I am sure that there are many liberals there, but I do not know them personally, so I cannot comment on what they are like or whether they are more or less liberal than the Home Secretary.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jackie Ballard: I do not think that Madam Deputy Speaker will allow us to go too far with this interchange, but I shall give way.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I know that she is always meticulous in the representation of the arguments of other right hon. and hon. Members. May I therefore point out in all seriousness that although the burden of our argument rests on practicality, there are, of course, issues of principle relating to the diffusion of power? We say that the principle of the diffusion of power is not an absolute.

If it could be shown that the benefits that would flow from centralisation were so enormous that they outweighed the general principle of decentralisation, we should be prepared to abide by the evidence. In this case, however, the Government want to centralise and do not have a decent argument, so the position that they are advancing is nonsense on stilts.

Jackie Ballard: The activities of the previous Government do not suggest that diffusion of power was an important principle for them. They might have undergone a damascene conversion that I had not noticed—*[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the *Hansard* reporters heard that. The hon. Member for Buckingham said that he was not a great enthusiast for the previous Government. Perhaps we should leave that comment there.

The Secretary of State said that we need a nationally managed estate to deliver an effective service, but the national health service estate is not nationally managed: local health authorities and local trusts make decisions about the disposal of that estate depending on changing needs and changing means of delivering a service. They can then decide what to do with the proceeds and how to reinvest them in the local service.

I am not at all convinced by the Secretary of State's arguments, but he might be able to convince me if he can point to a precedent for the desperate need for a nationally managed estate to deliver an effective service.

Mr. Straw: I place on record my sincere gratitude for the remarks of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who sought to damn me with great praise. We have a mutual regard. When I was thinking about complimenting him on his appointment, I considered saying that I regarded him as one of the finest adornments of the Opposition Benches to have been elected in 1997, but I did not want to damage his career. However, since he sought to do that to me, I now put it on the record.

The hon. Gentleman skated backwards and forwards, saying on the one hand that all he was doing was applying common sense. I agree that common sense needs to be applied in the case that we are considering, but if all that someone says is that it is a matter of practicality, there is not much behind the argument. On the other hand, he went in for hyperbolic adjectives, which suggested that there was a good deal of emotion behind his argument—for example, the use of the word "nationalisation".

The hon. Gentleman said that the proposal was, arguably, draconian. As I sometimes have to point out, the man who gave his name to that adjective was Draco. He was the chief magistrate in Athens in the 7th century BC, and is remembered for the fact that for virtually every offence in the Athenian criminal code he prescribed death. From that derives the word "draconian".

However one describes an argument about whether the National Probation Service or local area boards should hold the land, to suggest that either or both of those arrangements is draconian is pushing the meaning of the word a tad too far.

8.15 pm

At the beginning of his speech, the hon. Gentleman spoke in tentative terms, saying that it was at least arguable that those functions might be undertaken at a local level, rather than at national level. It is a matter of degree. The decision to vest the land in the Secretary of State flows from the establishment of the National Probation Service, which we are trying better to manage.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that that could be seen as a covert way—he did not use that phrase—of securing cuts in staffing. One of the problems from which the probation service has suffered significantly in the years up to 1999–2000 is underfunding. In 1995–96, expenditure, in cash, was £420 million. That rose to £435 million in 1996–97 and, under a budget set by the

Conservatives, dropped to £428 million. I managed to get it back, under the Conservative spending plans, to £435 million, but it was tight. It then started to rise, to £453 million in 1999–2000 and to £480 million in the current financial year.

We are planning for expenditure to increase from the current baseline by about £97 million in 2001–02, by £139 million in 2002–03 and by £170 million in 2003–04. We are putting a great deal of extra money into the probation service, because we want to make the service better. We do not have the margins, we do not want money wasted and we think that there are savings to be made in the overall management of the real estate in the probation service by the property being vested nationally.

I say to the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) that I do not know enough about the matter, but it is arguable whether the arrangements for the vesting of NHS property in a variety of organisations work better than those that would apply if it were vested in a single institution.

The hon. Member for Buckingham said that we proposed that the property of the probation service was "better run" centrally than locally. We are not discussing the running of the property—the fixing of roofs or the day-to-day management of the property. Of course that should be in the hands of the local area boards, and it will be.

We are discussing much bigger issues—the disposal and acquisition of property—and there is no doubt that the system can be better managed at national level. Why? Without national arrangements, a local area board could become committed to a particular office or a particular piece of real estate, and arguments could develop. Of course, local area boards are entitled to their view, but in a national service that we are trying to make more efficient, someone has to decide, and ultimately that should be the Secretary of State.

When we compare the running of the probation service with other services, we should bear in mind that in practice the accountability of the local probation board or committees to anyone other than those committees has been very thin. The wider public, local newspapers, Members of Parliament and local councillors do not examine what goes on from day to day. The circle is pretty self-contained.

If there was a good argument between a local area board and the National Probation Service about whether a property should be disposed of, that would be better ventilated in this place, where the local Member of Parliament could question the Secretary of State. I do not say that in a mellifluous way. I am not trying to pour bromide over the argument. I am saying that we have thought about the matter and that, on balance, we believe that the proposed arrangement would be better. I hope that it commends itself to the House and to the other place.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way, and I note the terms in which he makes the case. He suggests that local probation boards operate within a relatively closed environment and that there is no significant opportunity for local residents or the media to voice their concerns about their policies. Does he accept that if centralisation is to take place there must be a clear, publicised mechanism whereby local disapproval of national intentions is formally taken into account and respected in the decision-making process?

Mr. Straw: Yes.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 42 to 44 disagreed to.

Amendments (a) and (b) to the words so restored to the Bill agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 45 and 46 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 47 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 48 to 50 disagreed to.

Amendments (a) to (f) to the words so restored to the Bill agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 51 agreed to.

After Clause 23

Lords amendment: No. 52, to insert the following new clause—*Provision for the protection of children—*

".—(1) The Protection of Children Act 1999 ("the 1999 Act") shall have effect as if the Service were a child care organisation within the meaning of that Act.

(2) Arrangements which the Service makes with an organisation under section 13(1) must provide that, before selecting an individual to be employed under the arrangements in a child care position the organisation—

(a) must ascertain whether the individual is included in any of the lists mentioned in section 7(1) of the 1999 Act, and

(b) if he is included in any of those lists, must not select him for that employment.

(3) Such arrangements must provide that, if at any time the organisation has power to refer a relevant individual to the Secretary of State under section 2 of the 1999 Act (inclusion in list on reference following disciplinary action etc.), the organisation must so refer him.

In this subsection "relevant individual" means an individual who is or has been employed in a child care position under the arrangements.

(4) In this section "child care position" and "employment" have the same meanings as in the 1999 Act."

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 57 to 66, 71 and 72.

Mr. Boateng: I add my voice to those congratulating you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. It is a pleasure to serve under you in this first debate on a topic of and in which, having visited with your local magistrates court, I know that you have a profound knowledge and interest.

Amendment No. 52 makes the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, its officers and organisations performing functions on behalf of CAFCASS, subject to the Protection of Children Act 1999. The others are more minor amendments, most of which add to or tidy up the definition of working with children in part II. Exceptions are amendments Nos. 57 and 58, which ensure that the definition of a qualifying sentence is accurate, and amendment No. 60, which closes

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[Mr. Boateng]

a loophole in the offences created by ensuring that it is an offence to fail to remove a disqualified individual from working with children—for example, by holding open a relevant post for someone.

Amendment No. 59 provides for the restoration of disqualification orders through application by a chief officer of police or director of social services to the High Court. The other amendments add appropriate positions to the list of regulated positions—members of the youth justice board and the Children's Commissioner for Wales—or clarify the definition by taking into account the changes currently taking place as a result of the Local Government Act 2000.

The Protection of Children Act gives greater protection to children who may be put at risk of harm. The Act places a duty on child-care organisations to refer to the Secretary of State individuals who have been employed in a child-care position where they have been dismissed on grounds of misconduct which harmed a child or placed a child at risk. Individuals are covered even if they retire or resign before they are dismissed. Child-care organisations which intend to employ someone are placed under a duty to ensure that that person is not on the list held by the Secretary of State. If that person is found to be on the list, the child-care organisation must not employ them.

As officers of CAFCASS, and those performing functions on behalf of CAFCASS, will have unsupervised contact with children, it is essential that the measures apply to the new service. We have considered carefully the principle of allowing for reinstatement of the disqualification order introduced in part II. Having had the opportunity to consider the issue, we have come to the conclusion that it would be right in principle to make some provision to cover the matter, even if, as we believe, there should be a need for it only in rare cases, if at all. The amendment allows for the restoration of the disqualification order without in any way jeopardising the strength of the original order or the consideration of the tribunal for lifting it in the first place.

I trust that the other amendments to part II will not prove contentious. They serve only to ensure that disqualified persons do not remain in posts which would grant them access to children and enhance the range of, and properly define where necessary, those posts from which disqualified people are barred. In both cases the reasoning is clear and, I hope that the House will agree, valid.

Mr. Hawkins: I associate the official Opposition with the Minister's welcome to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your new capacity.

On the third group of amendments, I said that we would return to the sensitive issues concerning the protection of children. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, will have noticed that with this group of amendments we have now reached that point. Perhaps even more significant are the next two groups of amendments, which deal with some of the most sensitive issues.

The Minister is right to talk about the importance of strengthening the Bill, but I want to take a little time to make the point that it might have been more appropriate had he paid tribute to my noble Friend Baroness Blatch for her initiative on behalf of the official Opposition with regard to the reinstatement of disqualification order, which the Minister mentioned in relation to amendment No. 59.

Before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, took the Chair, but as other hon. Members will recall, those on the Treasury Bench suggested that we were being unjust to their noble Friend Lord Bassam of Brighton in criticising the number of climbdowns that he has been forced to make, but amendment No. 59 is the clearest possible illustration of what we were talking about. Because these matters are important to disqualification orders in relation to those who are a threat to children, I want to set out the exact sequence of events.

On the second day in Committee in the other place, my noble Friend Baroness Blatch described in some detail the need for what was then amendment No. 97, headed "Reinstatement of Disqualification Order". She set out all the good reasons that the Government have now belatedly accepted as to why that was necessary. She was then faced with a lengthy attack on her reasoning and the amendment from none other than Lord Bassam. In attacking the Opposition's amendments, he said:

> I suggest that the way in which the noble Baroness seeks to reintroduce a disqualification order is not workable. We want to see a workable scheme. I believe that the scheme we have offered is workable. I believe that the explanation I have given for ways in which a ban could be reintroduced is coherent. We do not think that it is necessary to do what the noble Baroness seeks.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 October 2000; Vol. 616, c. 1538.]

That was in response to many serious points that my noble Friend had made about matters relating to spent convictions. However, when the Government were later forced to change their stance, Lord Bassam did not participate in the climbdown. Another Minister, Lord Williams of Mostyn, dealt with the matter little more than a month later on 8 November when the Bill was being reconsidered by another place.

8.30 pm

My noble Friend Baroness Blatch said:

> My Lords, I shall be very brief. As noble Lords will have noticed, another amendment has been tabled covering the same area of concern—

reinstatement of disqualification order—

> I have had throughout the passage of the Bill. I am deeply grateful to the Government for their Amendment No. 30. I shall now sit down and wait for the noble Lord to introduce that amendment.

Up popped the Attorney-General, Lord Williams of Mostyn, who, by complete contrast with Lord Bassam of Brighton, said:

> The noble Baroness, Lady Blatch, is quite right. I listened to the way in which she deployed her argument on the point of—I believe that I paraphrase it accurately—the restoration of a disqualification to a previously disqualified individual, and, if I may say so, I believe that her argument had substantial merit.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 November 2000; Vol. 618, c. 1536-37.]

Mr. McWalter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hawkins: I shall give way in a moment to the hon. Gentleman who played a distinguished part in our Committee proceedings and, wisely, did not always support the Government. I shall finish my point before giving way.

There is no clearer example of a U-turn. In only a month, Ministers moved from claiming that the proposals of Baroness Blatch were unworkable to saying that her

argument had "substantial merit" and introducing a similar Government amendment. The only practical difference in the Government amendment was changing my noble Friend's description of "reinstatement of disqualification order" to the Government's wording, "restoration" of disqualification order. Lord Bassam of Brighton is rightly called Lord Climbdown.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interesting remarks about my role in Committee. He knows that in Committee we were keen to strike a balance between protection of children and the protection of those against whom malevolent accusations of child abuse might be made. People who have a disqualification order but have not breached it may be especially vulnerable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what he portrays as a climbdown could be an attempt to try to resolve the tension between conflicting ideas about the rights of the different individuals involved?

Mr. Hawkins: I pay a further compliment to the hon. Gentleman, who has again shown his skills, on which the Home Secretary has rightly congratulated him. He is right. We spent much time in Committee discussing that important point. However, it will not have escaped his notice that, if the Government had listened to the comments of the Opposition in the House or in another place, and not simply said that our proposals were unworkable, we might have reached the current, more sensible position, which the Minister presented much earlier this evening.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that all hon. Members are aware of the dangers of malevolent allegations. Perhaps he saw in the national press last week details of an especially harrowing case. Two innocent teachers had been the subject of invented allegations. The charges were dropped against one and the other was acquitted. The judge made some savage criticisms of the investigation, which was insufficient; proper investigation would have led to a much earlier decision. There was no basis to the allegations. Discussing such points led to spending some time on a good and important debate in Committee.

As I said earlier, the Government have been dragged kicking and screaming to accepting some of the points that we made in Committee and in another place. I am delighted that they have done that, and I do not want to take up the time of the House unduly. However, it is important to recognise that the Bill is a classic example of the way in which it should be possible for Ministers, civil servants and parliamentary draftsmen to take on board the sensible points made by opposition parties much earlier. If that happened, we would have better legislation more quickly.

The Minister is right to say that some amendments are minor and consequential. However, we must be careful that we get the measure right and that we ensure that children are protected. The Bill is much better because restoration of disqualification orders is possible under it. I hope that the Minister will pay tribute to the substantial contribution of Opposition Front Benchers in another place to improving the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I, too, have not yet spoken when you have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I add my congratulations on your elevation.

I want to make two points. First, there is clearly a general interest in making sure that the law succeeds in preventing people with a record of abuse or relevant sex offences from working with children, and recording their past history accurately so that future employers and, more important, their charges are protected.

During the summer, the Government consulted Opposition parties about the way in which the law needed to be advanced. I was grateful for the positive consideration of and constructive responses to suggestions that I made to the Secretary of State and copied to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). That resulted at least in conversation about the way forward. That is one example of how we are trying to tighten up the system for protecting children in the proposed legislation as it progresses. I am sure that, whatever the details of debates in another place, we all share a desire to get it right. I compliment the Government and those in another place who sought to tighten up the rules on sex offenders working with children.

Secondly, I want to ask a question that links the Bill to the measure on the equal age of consent, which is being considered at the other end of the building. One issue has been raised both in the context of the Bill that we are considering and of the other measure. If, at the end of the Session, we enacted the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, which deals with correcting a distinction with regard to sexual activity, two matters will remain anomalous. I do not pretend to have perfect knowledge, but they are clear.

First, there is currently a defence at law, which the Minister will know well, whereby a young adult male who has sexual intercourse with a girl who is under 16 is entitled to plead that he believed her to be over 16. For obvious reasons, that defence is not open to someone who is over 24. That matter has not been addressed in the context of equal treatment of people, irrespective of whether they are charged with heterosexual or homosexual offences.

Secondly, and more importantly, if the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill is enacted, it will render people between 16 and 18 potentially not guilty of an offence of which they would otherwise be guilty. Will Ministers address that issue and ensure that legislation does not continue to regard someone as a criminal when their actions are no longer criminal under another measure? Perhaps the Minister will not be able to deal with that matter now. It relates in general terms to amendment No. 59, which includes references to people who are under the age of 18 when they commit offences. That must be reread with reference to disqualification, not the offence. How will the Government correct an anomaly that will remain if both Bills become law at the end of the Session?

Mr. Boateng: I thank the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for his description of our approach to the aspect of the Bill that deals specifically with the protection of children. Our intention has always been to be as inclusive as possible. That means including all parties in both Houses. I believe that that is vital. Protecting children is not a matter on which one should seek to score party political advantage.

I regretted the tone and, at times, the content of the speech of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for

[Mr. Boateng]

Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was not, to my knowledge, in the Chamber for his speech. She was not within sight to hear his speech, and one cannot fail to notice her. She was not in my direct line of vision. If she was hidden behind the ample figure of the silent one on the Opposition Bench, all well and good—lucky her. I did not see her, but had she heard the hon. Gentleman's contribution I do not believe that she would have found it of such a nature as to commend itself to a House that was trying to consider these matters in a consensual manner. It really does not do to attack noble Lords in those terms and in that way.

I pay tribute to all noble Lords and Baronesses for the care and attention with which they addressed these important issues during the passage of the Bill. I am grateful for the improvements that have been made.

I see the right hon. Lady is fixing me with one of her looks. I am only too happy to rise to her challenge on the rigour and conviction stakes, but if she expects contrition from this Minister, she is looking in the wrong direction. We do not have anything to be contrite about.

In Committee, my Front-Bench colleagues and I appreciated enormously the contributions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), because they were rooted in real experience of these issues. They were constructive and at all times supportive. I am very grateful to him for the stance that he took. I do not regard criticism, knowledge and constructive contributions to debates on issues of public importance as anything other than supportive. That is what consideration of a Bill in Committee and on the Floor of both Houses is all about. I am grateful to all those who have made this section of the Bill that much stronger as a result of their deliberations.

I pay tribute to the noble Baroness Blatch. We were not able to accept her original amendment. My noble Friend Lord Bassam was right to reject it. She argued that the tribunal should reinstate the order. Our concern was that, in reinstating an order which it had discharged, it may be tempted to discharge disqualification orders in borderline cases knowing that it could correct a mistake subsequently. That would have been entirely the wrong approach, which is why we took the view that the High Court was important in this area. The Bill as amended has sufficient focus and rigour to ensure that the danger of Baroness Blatch's amendment to which I alluded has been avoided. With that in mind, I urge the House to give these amendments its blessing.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 53 to 66 agreed to.

8.45 pm

After Clause 36

Lords amendment: No. 67, to insert the following new clause—*Extension of offence: conduct towards 14 and 15 year olds—*

. In section 1(1) of the Indecency with Children Act 1960 (indecent conduct towards young child), for "fourteen" there is substituted "sixteen".")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 68 and 69.

Mr. Boateng: At present, it is an offence under section 1 of the Indecency with Children Act 1960 for a person to commit an act of gross indecency with or towards a child under 14 or incite a child under that age to such an act with him or another. The first new clause will raise the age of the child against whom the offence could be committed from 13 to 15. In Northern Ireland, a similar offence of indecent conduct towards a child in section 22 of the Northern Ireland Children and Young Persons Act 1968 applies to under 14-year-olds. The second new clause will raise the age of the child against whom the offence could be committed in Northern Ireland from 13 to 16.

Amendment No. 69 will increase the maximum sentence under the Protection of Children Act 1978 for taking, making, distributing, showing and possessing with a view to distribution indecent photographs of children under 16 on conviction on indictment from three years' imprisonment or a fine, or both, to a term not exceeding 10 years or a fine, or both.

The amendment will also make the simple possession of indecent images of children under 16 an either-way offence, and will increase the maximum penalty available under section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 from six months' imprisonment or a fine, or both, to a term not exceeding five years' imprisonment or a fine, or both.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: Before I turn to the detail of this amendment, I should like to set out the Government's position on this area as a whole, then the hon. Gentleman can certainly intervene.

We agree on the need to protect children and on the urgency of action. The Government are working actively on a number of fronts, of which the criminal law is an important aspect, but not the only one. As hon. Members will recall from our debate in Committee, we all realise the importance of the criminal law in this area, but we also recognise the other steps that need to be taken by the agencies and the parents' responsibilities. It is clearly vital for those who seek to offend against children, on or off the internet, to be prevented from doing so, and to be dealt with effectively as far as possible by the criminal law.

It may be helpful if I deal first with Lords amendment No. 69. The Government fully share public abhorrence of the crime to which it refers. The production and possession of child pornography is condemned by all right-thinking people. We well understand that misuse of the internet has led to an increase in the number of offences under the Protection of Children Act 1978, and public concern about the circulation of such material has understandably grown. The amendment would ensure that the penalties available for offences of this kind reflected the seriousness with which society regards them. We cannot forget that pictures of child pornography are pictures of child abuse: nothing more, nothing less. This is abuse, and it must be treated as abuse.

In the light of our anxiety to ensure that the law delivers protection for children—as well as the wider concern about increased incidences of child pornography offences—the time is now right for enhancement of the penalties.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I think there was just one inaccuracy in the Minister's introductory remarks. He mentioned amendment of the Indecency with Children Act 1960. According to my reading of Lords amendment No. 67, it would extend the law protecting children under 14—rather than 13—to those under 16. It is a small matter, but I think the Minister must have received an inaccurate briefing.

Mr. Boateng: I do not think so, but I will certainly give the hon. Gentleman reassurance that he seeks.

Let me now deal with the details of Lords amendments Nos. 67 and 68. We considered carefully what was said in another place. It appeared that, although our laws on sex offences are comprehensive, it was felt that the law was inadequate to deal with some preparatory acts, as they might be described, prior to the commission of any substantive offence. Particular concern was expressed about internet chatrooms, which are a whole new phenomenon with which parents and, now, the law must deal.

In Committee, Lady Blatch cited three cases in which children had been lured by men over the internet into meetings and the intention or result was a sexual crime. I have received briefings on that from both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and our own police during the last 18 months or so. The problem is global, and these people operate globally—and in ways that require a response.

Lady Blatch pointed out that no action had been taken in two cases, and said that that demonstrated the inadequacy of, in particular, the Indecency with Children Act 1960. At present, however, the Act can apply only to those of 13 and under. In two of the cases cited by Lady Blatch, the girls involved were above that age.

That is a loophole, and it will be plugged. The amendment would do that in a simple, straightforward manner—and, crucially, without creating further anomalies. If it were passed, the Act could apply in respect of any person under the age of consent: it could apply to those under 16 in England and Wales, and to those under 17 in Northern Ireland. I hope that that provides the clarification sought by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

What would be the effect of the amendment? It extends the protection offered by the 1960 Act to those aged 14 and 15 in England and Wales, and 16 in Northern Ireland. If, for instance, someone were to persuade or encourage a person of 15 to commit an act of gross indecency with him or another person, that behaviour—which might not be criminal at present—could come within the ambit of section 1 of the Act. We believe that much could be achieved by that change, which is simple and straightforward, as well as being right.

This is important, because I will be considering the comprehensive review of sex offences that resulted in the recommendations contained in "Setting the Boundaries". If further detailed changes to the law are required, they must be made on the basis of a sensible, comprehensive approach. They must not be complex piecemeal changes that would only add to the confusion in the law. The aim of "Setting the Boundaries" was to enable us to deal with the issue comprehensively and to avoid the anomalies created over the years by an ad hoc approach.

We all want more protection for children from sex offenders. The proposed change would add significantly to that protection, without further distorting the law.

Mr. Hawkins: The Minister is right to say that this is an important matter, and we are pleased that the Government have tabled an amendment to the 1960 Act.

On 8 November, Lord Williams of Mostyn, the Attorney-General, moved the amendment in column 1538 of the House of Lords *Official Report*. However, in that same debate, as the Minister pointed out, my noble Friend Baroness Blatch sought to persuade the Government to make yet more amendments. The Opposition remain concerned about the misuse of the internet by paedophiles. There is still a need for an even more thoroughgoing review of the law and we sought to persuade the Government to toughen the legislation, although we welcome the fact that they have taken all those matters extremely seriously. Even though more could have been done through the Bill, we hope that the Government will continue to consider the issues carefully and perhaps take an early legislative opportunity to do even more.

I hope that the Minister will again pay tribute to the constructive approach taken by my right hon. and hon. Friends and by my noble Friend Baroness Blatch in another place, on this issue above all. We agree with the Government that the protection of children is extremely important and all of us—from all parties and in both Houses—are concerned about it. There is no more serious danger to children than adult paedophiles who try to entrap young children by posing as children themselves. The Minister agrees with that and I hope that the Government will continue to listen. They may take another opportunity to strengthen the law still further, as we have requested.

Mr. Simon Hughes: There is a broad consensus on this important issue, which, given modern technology and the internet, has taken on a new relevance. Like others, I take a strong view, and it is right for political parties to hold firm views because that reflects not only public opinion, but our duty to ensure that people whom our society defines as children are protected. To achieve that, we need a clear law that punishes those who offend. Amendment No. 67, which applies to the Indecency with Children Act 1960, would take the indecency age limit up to 16. It refers clearly to the age of majority, which is also the school leaving age, and rightly does not add another age limit. No one should be in any doubt about that.

On amendment No. 69, it is right to send a tough signal that the courts should have significant powers to deal with people who commit offences involving using, passing and dealing with indecent photographs of children. The Minister was correct that there are examples of offences involving internet chatrooms and the passing of indecent photographs. The law must be able to deal very severely with people who commit such offences. Society wants the parties to stand together and put that view; amendment No. 69, by amending the Protection of Children Act 1978 and the Criminal Justice Act 1988, would achieve it.

On the amendment of the law in Northern Ireland, the Minister rightly pointed out that there is a different age of majority—17, not 16—for these purposes. I shall not

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

stray into constitutional areas that contain important differences, but I ask Ministers, if they find it appropriate, to consider with colleagues in Scotland and Northern Ireland whether there may be an opportunity to review the ages of majority and consent to achieve consistency in this area of law. I understand that that is entirely a matter for separate Northern Irish and Scottish legislation, and I am also aware that for Northern Ireland there is an all-Ireland dimension in terms of legislation that relates to the Republic, but the different age limits and different legislation for offences committed in Northern Ireland have been a problem over the years and cases involving the European convention on human rights have been brought. It would be sensible for the three Administrations to consider whether it would be appropriate to agree that that should change.

In that context, I hope that after we have legislated it might be possible to draw up a clear, consistent and readily accessible guide to the law. These three simple amendments would amend the Indecency with Children Act 1960, the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968, the Protection of Children Act 1978, the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, and the Criminal Justice Act 1988. It is all very well for us to pass such legislation; there might be people in the Library or political researchers and lawyers who can look at all those measures, but I am someone who, like others, has to try to find out what the law means, and we must ensure that the law is clear so that people can find out information without doubt.

9 pm

There may be an argument for consolidating legislation dealing with children, offences against children and the protection of children in the near future. Ministers might receive the support of the Liberal Democrats if they did so. There has been much recent legislation on such matters, and it would be better if those measures were put together. The Liberal Democrats welcome the fact that the Government initiated the review of sexual offences legislation generally. Although they have allowed the review to be brought to a conclusion, the Minister makes the point that further work remains to be done. The report, which is before the Minister and has been published, will eventually lead to Parliament tidying up the legislation, some of which dates back to the 19th century and beyond.

We should bring the law up to date. It is right that old-fashioned, out-of-date, difficult to understand, discriminatory legislation should be done away with. It is also right that that should be done carefully, after serious consideration, but I hope that we shall use that opportunity to tidy the law as a whole. Children, young people and those who deal with them need to know where they stand. Parents, teachers, guardians and others who are responsible need to know where they stand. Equally importantly, those who think of offending need to know where they stand. The law must be clear; there must be no confusion or complexity. The clearer the law is on such matters, the better we shall do our job of protecting young people.

Mr. Boateng: I shall first deal with the points made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). To avoid any doubt, given his initial confusion about age, I should explain that the Children Act 1960 protects children under 14—hence my reference to children aged 13—and that the amendment would change the 1960 Act so that it covered children under 16, hence my reference to children aged up to and including 15.

On the other points that the hon. Gentleman makes, sometimes when listening to him speak about a range of issues, including devolution, I feel that he dwells among the angels, such is his general approach. I know of his deep and abiding faith, but I have to tell him that devolution is an area where even angels should fear to tread, so he will understand the reason why I, who most certainly am not one, do not intend to deal with devolution as he would urge me to do.

Codification is a virtue to which successive generations of lawyers—the hon. Gentleman is, of course, a lawyer—and others who practise in criminal law aspire. Indeed, it is a virtue to which we all aspire, but it has not yet been achieved. *[Interruption.]* We are all entitled to our aspirations, and he has shared his with the House, so I shall say no more about it.

I shall deal with the thrust of the argument of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), who generously accepted and welcomed movement in this area. I appreciate his approach. He asked me to extend my gratitude for and recognition of the work by Baroness Blatch, among others on both sides in the other place. I do so.

We need to keep the law constantly under review. We are doing so. We need better to enforce existing law and the law as it will be amended. We are working closely with the police on that, improving their capability to use current law to deal with internet crime.

We need to pursue the issue of law enforcement and the internet through active support for the continuing work of the internet crime forum. We need to ensure increased responsibility by ISPs—internet service providers—and other providers of chatroom services, particularly in relation to chat services for children. We need greater education and awareness of the potential dangers in using chat services for parents, children and other internet users. We are doing all that. Yesterday, we announced further major investment of some £25 million, which is aimed at developing the police's capability to tackle internet crime.

No one listening to the debate, or reading the debates upstairs or in the other place, could be under any doubt that that is all activity in which we need to engage. Every penny is money well worth spending. That must be the way forward. In that spirit, I commend the amendments to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 68 to 72 agreed to.

Clause 38

PROBATION ORDERS RENAMED COMMUNITY REHABILITATION ORDERS

Lords amendment: No. 73, in page 21, line 7, after ("orders)") insert ("whenever made")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Boateng.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 74 and 75.

Mr. Hawkins: I do not wish to detain the House long, but there are one or two points that I should like to make.

I appreciate that the Minister has moved the Lords amendment formally, but Members will appreciate that the official Opposition were hoping that the amendments that we tabled in time, but have not been selected for debate, would be able to be discussed. We were seeking to draw attention to our consistent concern, which we have raised on several occasions—in the House on Second Reading and in Committee, and again in another place in Committee and on Report—about the way in which the Government have sought to rename the orders, which could damage the standing of such orders in the courts and the way in which the public perceive them.

We felt that there was considerable importance in sticking to names that had been hallowed by usage, and that members of the public were very familiar with the terms "probation order" and "community service order". We also reckoned that we were quite clearly supported in that belief by the majority of those who are at the sharp end of the business. The point was repeatedly made that the National Association of Probation Officers was very supportive of the official Opposition's stance, which could be summarised as, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".

We felt that there was no reason to rename the orders. We particularly felt that there was a concern that, as in another section of the Bill, the new names could bring the law into disrepute, especially because of the acronyms that would result from a community rehabilitation and punishment order. One does not have to be a genius to see how, even if punishment and rehabilitation were switched around, young criminals would be referring to the orders. We had much support on that in Committee, including from Labour Members who expressed the same concerns as those expressed by people at the sharp end.

I do not want to rehearse all the arguments at this stage in the Bill's passage. However, we were hoping very much that, even at this late stage, the Government might be persuaded to agree that no commencement order for the provision should be made until completion of the current review into the operation of sentencing powers under the Criminal Justice Act 1991. The Government have commissioned that review and analysis of how this sphere of law will operate, and we thought that it was only logical not to put the cart before the horse. We were supported in that stance by the Liberal Democrats, both in Committee and, I think, in another place.

It was for that reason that we tabled our two amendments, both of which were called amendment (a). We were very sad that, although they had been tabled in time, neither of them were selected for debate. Nevertheless, although the Minister has moved this group only formally, we should like him to respond to our continuing concern—which was shared by Lords on all sides of the other House. We also recognise that there are continuing concerns among the professional bodies.

We do not think that the Government have made a sufficiently convincing case to change names that have been in the law for many years and that—as I know from my own professional experience—are perfectly familiar to all those who are involved with the courts. Everyone knows exactly what a community service order and a probation order are. The same argument can be made in relation to other spheres of the law that we debated earlier.

There is significance in titles and in using things that are familiar. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, unless Ministers can present a compelling reason for change, it is necessary not to change. We do not think that Ministers have ever made a convincing case on this matter. Moreover, not only the official Opposition and Liberal Democrat Members object to the change. If the National Association of Probation Officers does not think that the Government have it right, surely Ministers should be persuaded to think again. They were not so persuaded in Committee or in another place, but we hope that, even at this very late stage, they might change their minds.

Even when a Bill is enacted, it is still for the Government to decide when to implement its various provisions. We hope very much that Ministers will decide to think again about this provision. They have agreed to think again about some of their own legislation in other spheres of the law and not to implement various provisions. After all the debates, at the very last minute they were persuaded that perhaps they did need to think again.

Mr. Boateng: We are unlikely to be persuaded, even by the rather interesting alliance between the hon. Gentleman and the National Association of Probation Officers. We noticed that alliance in Committee where, time and again, he would refer to NAPO briefings. However, I was not persuaded then, and I am not persuaded now. We are seeking to make the names of all the orders as stated, regardless of the date that they are imposed. We do not want there to be the possibility of any confusion about non-existent differences between the names.

The Opposition have become strangely attached to the rather arcane existing titles of community orders. They conveniently seem to have forgotten that the Home Affairs Committee Report on "Alternatives to Prison Sentences"—published in September 1998—concluded that the language used for community sentences was often misleading. The Committee said that the term "community service" carried with it inappropriate connotations of voluntary activity and recommended the alternative name of "community work order". We believe that the names of orders ought to reflect their content and purpose, hence our desire to change them in clauses 38 to 40. We further believe that it is right to change the names as soon as convenient.

Mr. Hawkins: I am surprised that even after all our debates, the Minister can still refer to the existing titles as arcane, as a number of Labour Back Benchers tried—as we did—to persuade him that there was no need to change. The existing names are familiar to all involved with the courts. It is not a simply a matter of an alliance between the official Opposition and the National Association of Probation Officers. All of the professional bodies at the sharp end think that there is no benefit in confusing everybody with new names.

Mr. Boateng: I hear and respect that view, but I hear, respect and agree with the all-party Home Affairs Committee, which has a different view. That is the nature of dialectic; there is an exchange of views, a thesis, an antithesis—*[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) getting very excited at the prospect of such a debate. We hear the arguments, but remain unconvinced—despite the forceful advocacy of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). It is right

[Mr. Boateng]

to change the names as soon as convenient. We see no reason to await the results of the sentencing review which is, in any case, not a creature of statute. That review, which will report next year, is looking in much broader terms. Our need is to deal with the immediate situation and to enable community sentences to be better understood.

We see no reason to put in any restriction on commencement. I understand what has been a good argument, but the time has come to move on.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos 74 and 75 agreed to.

Clause 41

EXCLUSION ORDERS

Lords amendment: No. 76, in page 24, leave out lines 31 to line 38

9.15 pm

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu thereof, Government amendments (d) and (e) to the words so restored to the Bill, Lords amendment No. 79 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Government amendments (a) and (b) to the words so restored to the Bill, Lords amendment No. 80 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu thereof, and Government amendments (c) and (d) to the words to restored to the Bill.

Mr. Boateng: Our amendments achieve two objects. First, they restore to the Bill a power for the Secretary of State to add to the list of factors that must be taken into account when imposing exclusion orders and exclusion and curfew conditions. Secondly, they increase the maximum length of exclusion order and conditions to two years, rather than 12 months.

Amendments accepted in another place, which were moved on the advice of the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee, deleted from the Bill the power of the Secretary of State to alter the maximum period of exclusion orders and exclusion and curfew requirements of other community sentences.

However, those amendments inadvertently deleted non-contentious powers that allowed the Secretary of State to add to the list of factors that must be taken into account when imposing exclusion orders and exclusion and curfew conditions. Notice was therefore given that it would be necessary to restore those powers. The amendments in lieu are designed to achieve the point of principle conceded in another place, but at the same time to ensure that the powers that ought to remain do remain.

Furthermore, as a corollary to the deletion of the delegated powers to extend the maximum sentence in these matters, the Government also gave notice that we would need to extend the maximum sentence for exclusion from 12 months to two years. In so far as any further changes to the maximums will need to be carried out in primary legislation, the amendments grant courts the flexibility required to carry out the piloting of the provisions in the short term, by increasing the available maximum sentences.

I trust that hon. Members will see that these changes are not contentious, and I hope that we will not long delay the House.

Mr. Bercow: I am afraid that the Minister's trust is misplaced. We have considerable concerns on this front. Once again, the tactic is becoming clear. Whenever Ministers have something unpalatable to say to the House—this was certainly considered unpalatable in the other place—they deploy a mixture of a tone of sweet reasonableness and a weary cynicism about the possibility of anyone dissenting from their propositions.

We are here concerned with some extremely important matters: exclusion orders and exclusion and curfew requirements. There is a legitimate concern about the wisdom or appropriateness of the Government arrogating to themselves such Henry VIII powers in order to add to—or even, conceivably, subtract from—judgments made elsewhere.

It might prove in the end that the Government have a point, in which case, with my customary grace, I shall be happy to concede, but I am concerned about the extreme breeziness and insouciance—I use the words advisedly—with which the Minister dismissed the legitimate concerns expressed by some very distinguished Members of the other place.

To prove that I am not exclusively preoccupied with my noble Friend Baroness Blatch, I will instead focus briefly on Lord Russell, whom I regard as an immensely distinguished man and a thoroughgoing humanitarian. That does not mean that he is not wrongheaded, as most Liberal Democrats are, on all sorts of matters—of which, no doubt, more anon, in the weeks and months ahead—but there can be no doubt that he is concerned with justice and the rights of the individual and with propriety in our legislation and procedures.

Lord Russell is very worried indeed that the Government are riding roughshod over the views of the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee. It has been asked for, and has given, its view of the Government's proposals. That view is singularly unflattering. However, all that the Minister can do is to chuckle at any expression of dissent. I find it perturbing that he is not only grinning in a somewhat unendearing fashion but is chewing something. He is certainly not chewing on the argument. If he did so, he might see that there is some sense in saying that the Government should not take to themselves powers to amend in a matter of this kind.

We are talking about the conditions of a sentence imposed on someone convicted of an offence. The idea that the Government should subsequently impose new conditions or variations in the places to which people are entitled to go, without obvious good reason or clear justification to the House, does not seem credible to me.

In seeking hastily to dredge up some justification for its shabby treatment of the other place, the Government argued that there was a precedent. They looked back to the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and invoked an example of a similar procedure being applied.

There is, however, a key difference, which will have penetrated your fertile mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, almost as soon as I rose to my feet. That difference is that that august body, the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Select Committee, had not been established when the 1991 Act was passed. It was not invited to pronounce and did not offer any criticism or commendation of that part of the 1991 Act. We now have the benefit of its view, which the Government disdain.

Many people who are concerned with the reform of offenders and involved in the legal profession, who have experience of the probation service and who are united in a passionate belief in justice and an opposition to overweening state power will be very concerned by the Government's extraordinarily laid back and somewhat arrogant attitude.

We rest our case. We are the defenders of the rights of the individual, and the opponents of the leviathan. The Minister has never been much of a champion of the rights of the individual. He has always been in favour of a big state. He is fast becoming an enthusiast for an overweening, centralised and unaccountable exercise of state power.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We were in danger of getting into some general and philosophical political theory, but we skirted away fairly quickly.

These amendments are important. I have a question about policy clarification, and a more detailed question on the matter to which the Minister alluded.

First, will the Minister confirm that the amendments would take away the Government's power in relation to three earlier parts of the Bill—clauses 41, 45, and 46, which deal with exclusion orders, curfew orders and exclusion requirements, respectively—and mean that the Government would no longer be able to vary the possible sentence of the court? We think that that is a very important matter, and it relates to the wider debate that has already received some consideration in this parliamentary year.

The Home Secretary came to the House almost a year ago to confirm the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in relation to the killers of James Bulger. It ruled that the court should set the tariff, and not a Minister. The right hon. Gentleman indicated that the Government accepted the ruling and would act accordingly.

The European Court appears still to permit Ministers to set the tariff for adults, as opposed to juveniles. That has not been corrected yet, even though some of us find it hard to understand how the European Court and the Government can argue that the courts can set tariffs only for juveniles and not adults.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he and his party oppose ministerial interference or intervention in setting any tariffs?

Mr. Hughes: I confirm that absolutely. Our view is very clear: it is for Parliament to pass the laws within which judges set sentences. It is not for Ministers to interfere to fix either the tariff or the sentence. Those are matters for the courts.

We also consider that there are some circumstances in which an indeterminate sentence may be appropriate. That view is shared by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). The later consideration of whether the person involved should be released should also be determined only by the court, and not by Ministers.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) was right to ask the question. Our view is clear, and it differs from that of Conservative Members.

Mr. McWalter: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is nevertheless important for Parliament to indicate various scales and how seriously or severely it believes that certain offences should be punished? That is particularly important given that sometimes the courts have taken a very mild view on offences such as domestic violence. It has been right for Parliament to give the lead to indicate how gravely it believes that the court should consider those offences to be.

9.30 pm

Mr. Hughes: There is a whole debate here. It is for Parliament to set the maximum and the minimum sentence and to review those as it thinks appropriate. The Government, or anybody else, can bring forward proposals. It is for the courts to seek consistency of sentencing across the country so that the courts do not impose arbitrary sentences in one area. It is of course open to individual Members of Parliament, to Parliament as a whole and to the Government to express a view.

Sometimes the court—the Court of Appeal, the Court of Criminal Appeal, the House of Lords or the Lord Chief Justice—will pass a sentence that is intended to send a message regarding the view that society takes about a particular case. There are various ways in which it can be done, but I accept the hon. Gentleman's general proposition.

I do not want to delay the House further. I want to know that in accepting what the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the House of Lords has required and the amendments that the Lords have proposed, the Government will not seek, in this Bill or in other legislation, to hold to the Government and Secretaries of State the power to amend the length of sentences by order, as opposed to leaving that decision to Parliament. I share that view with the hon. Member for Buckingham. If we are to provide for longer exclusion orders, longer curfews and a period for which a curfew can be imposed, Parliament must decide the maximum period, not Ministers. Will the Minister confirm that the Government have accepted that view, not just for these three clauses, but as a general matter of policy, in relation to the Bill and in general?

The Minister said that in relation to these three clauses, the Government proposed to have pilot schemes looking at exclusion order and curfew provisions. Is it just a theory and a plan so far, or are arrangements in hand for it to happen? If so, where and when does he anticipate that action will be taken to start the pilots and how long will they last?

Mr. Boateng: I will set the mind of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) at rest for the avoidance of any doubt on tariffs and delegated powers. Tariff setting involves ministerial

[Mr. Boateng]

decision making about an individual offender. We believe that the consistent position of successive Governments—Conservative and Labour—on tariff setting for adults, which has been supported by the court in Strasbourg, is right, and we intend to maintain that position. The hon. Gentleman should be under no illusions about that. We disagree profoundly with the Liberal Democrats on that issue.

On the delegated powers, those which have been removed from the Bill relate to amending the sentencing maximum within which the courts make sentencing decisions. The Government will not be able to alter the maximum or minimum period that courts can impose for those sentences. That is the effect of the provisions. Let us be absolutely clear about that.

No doubt the speech of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) added enormously to the jollity of nations but, as a performance from the Dispatch Box on a serious issue, it was a bit wanting. Indeed, the early exit polls—at least on this side of the House—are not favourable. The hon. Gentleman must not expect a Florida recount if he goes on like this. It is not possible to accuse me of breezy insouciance—that is a new one for me—on the one hand and weary cynicism on the other. Breezy cynicism, maybe, but the hon. Gentleman cannot accuse me of both.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): It is an oxymoron.

Mr. Boateng: I thank my hon. Friend, it is certainly a contradiction in terms, if not an oxymoron.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister is a contradiction in terms.

Mr. Boateng: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I shall not go down that road. We have had an interesting debate in which serious and important points have been made. We remain firmly of the view that I have expressed and I trust that, even if hon. Members regard the amendments as partly contentious, they will not regard them as overly contentious. I therefore urge the House to accept them.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 76 agreed to.

Government amendments (d) and (e) to the words so restored to the Bill agreed to.

Clause 42

DRUG ABSTINENCE ORDERS

Lords amendment: No. 77, in page 26, line 2, after ("(2)") insert (", (3A)")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 87 to 94, 107 to 118, 125, 155 to 244 and 249 to 329.

Mr. Boateng: These amendments are minor, technical and consequential

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 78 and consequential amendments (a) and (b) agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 79 disagreed to

Amendments (a) and (b) to the words so restored to the Bill agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 80 disagreed to.

Clause 48

BREACH OF COMMUNITY ORDERS: WARNING AND PUNISHMENT

Lords amendment: No. 81, in page 32, line 45, at end insert ("and

( ) where one of those orders is a curfew order that fact shall be disregarded for the purposes of sub-paragraph (4) above")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 82.

Mr. Boateng: Our original enforcement proposals attracted criticism of the mandatory nature of the sentence of imprisonment for breach of an order. Our objective is not to imprison large numbers of extra offenders, but to improve compliance with community sentences and enhance their credibility. Community sentences must not be ignored or treated lightly by offenders subjected to them. All too often, I fear, however, they are, and we require a more rigorous and consistent enforcement regime. We have reflected on the representations made to ensure that clause 48 is as effective as it can be. That is the reason for the amendments, and we have revised the clause to allow more judicial discretion while retaining certainty of outcome and providing that some penalty must be imposed for every breach of a community order.

We have reached the view that a fine would not be an appropriate penalty for reasons that hon. Members who have been practitioners in our courts will know only too well. In cases such as those concerned, the fine would be at a lower tariff than the community penalty breached, which cannot be right even if set aside from issues surrounding the enforcement of fines, which cause much exasperation to all concerned, not least the courts and honest, law-abiding citizens who fulfil their obligations.

There are several consequential amendments to schedule 6, and I hope that they will find wide support on both sides of the House.

Mr. Hawkins: I can be very brief. I am delighted with what the Minister has said. The Government have accepted several arguments advanced in Committee by the official Opposition. I recognise the spirit in which the Minister spoke, and there is great joy in heaven over a sinner who repenteth.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 82 to 99 agreed to.

Clause 60

SHORT-TERM PRISONERS: RELEASE SUBJECT TO CURFEW CONDITIONS

Lords amendment: No. 100, in page 41, line 34, leave out from ("subsection") to end of line 37 and insert

("(2)(d) there is inserted—

"(da) the prisoner is subject to the notification requirements of Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997;"")

9.45 pm

Miss Widdecombe: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take amendments (b) to (f) to the Lords amendment, and amendment (a) in lieu thereof.

Miss Widdecombe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, although—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—I am so sorry, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to correct myself—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps by the time I have finished with this, I might have been demoted to Deputy Speaker.

Miss Widdecombe: Mr. Speaker, I add to my correction belated congratulations and hope that that will make up for my mistake.

We are content with Lords amendment No. 100, but we believe that it would be improved by our amendment (a) in lieu, or, if that is a hopeless case, by the inclusion of amendments (b) to (f).

It seems extraordinary that, both in this and in the other place, the Opposition should have met with such resistance from the Government to our proposal to exclude from home detention curfew people who have been placed on the sex offenders register. The refusal of the Home Secretary to budge until faced with defeat in another place will do little to reassure the public as to his commitment to protect them from some of the worst offenders.

The most recent statistics issued by the prisons Minister make grim reading. They give added impetus to our amendment (a), which rightly provides for the end of the disgraceful system of special early release whereby prisoners leave custody even before the halfway point of their sentence. To date, 26,609 such lucky convicts have completed their sentence in the comfort of their own homes, thanks to the generosity of the Home Secretary who solves his prison population pressures by the simple expedient of sending the prisoners home.

Among those released in that premature fashion were 58 people convicted of manslaughter; seven of attempted murder; 235 of homicide or attempted homicide; four of incitement to murder; 3,437 of wounding; 178 of assault on a police officer; 33 of cruelty to children; 4,273 of drugs offences; 162 of arson; 319 of violent disorder; and 2,487 of burglary—to name but a few. Should we, therefore, be surprised that between them that collection of not insignificant offenders has committed a further 1,003 crimes while on the scheme? That means 1,000 more people who might never have been victims but for a scheme introduced by a man who claimed to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. Those statistics are merely an addition to the scores of people who are unlawfully at large and to the hundreds who have breached their conditions.

We take the victim somewhat more seriously, so although we should like to press amendment (a) to a vote, in the likely absence of success for the proposal to remove the scheme altogether and to consign it to a disgraceful history that we cannot too soon forget, we at least want to limit the application of home detention orders. Amendments (b) to (f) would do that.

Amendment (b) would exclude from eligibility for the home detention curfew scheme those convicted of assault on police officers. I remind the Minister of the statistics I cited: under the Home Secretary's scheme, 178 people who were convicted of assault on a police officer were released from prison before they were halfway through their sentence. What message does that send to our police officers? It is hardly surprising that we have problems with recruitment and retention, when the message from the Government is, "Don't worry, if you assault a police officer, you'll be getting out earlier than ever before".

Amendment (c) attempts to address what appears to be a gross inconsistency on the part of the Government. On one hand, they are proud of the fact that they managed to implement the policy on burglary—"three strikes and you're out"—introduced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). Yet at the same time as glorying in that, they are passing a law that would make it possible for people who receive the minimum sentence for a third conviction to be released earlier than they would have been otherwise. That is a complete contradiction. It is nonsense.

Amendment (e) similarly addresses a contradiction. The Minister will be well aware that, under the immigration rules, entry into this country can be denied to people who have been convicted of crimes that can attract a sentence of 10 years or more. However, people who have been convicted of such a crime can, under the home detention curfew, be let loose in the community. We will not let people who have been convicted of such crimes into the country, but if they are convicted of them here, we will let them loose into the community.

Amendment (d) would give the court the ability to override the exercise of Executive power and it would provide for the court to be able to say that the special early release scheme would not apply to a particular offender. If the Minister has any respect for the independence of the courts, I would have thought that he would at least welcome amendment (d).

Amendment (f) endeavours to ensure transparency at the point of trial, so that it would be clear to the victim—who at the moment is bemused by the fact that the sentence served does not remotely match the sentence handed down—whether the extra early release will or will not be applied.

The home detention curfew scheme is probably the clearest possible message that the Government could send that they are soft on crime, soft on the cause of crimes and wholly indifferent to the fate of the victims who have been created by people who have been released from prison but who would not have been released but for the scheme. Therefore, those victims would not have been

[Miss Widdecombe]

created but for that scheme. The Minister should accept our amendments but, in the surprising event that he decides not to do so, we shall press them to a vote.

Mr. Boateng: I urge the House to reject all the amendments and to do so unequivocally. I regret the right hon. Lady's strident tone and her complete failure to recognise that there might be another view. There is another view and it is shared by Members on all sides of the House who have a clear and unambiguous record that demonstrates their determination to see that the House deals adequately and properly with crime and offending. That fact is evidenced by the Select Committee on Home Affairs giving all-party support to the home detention curfew scheme.

Let us not forget that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) put his name to an all-party report that specifically recommended the home detention scheme as providing adequate protection to the public because of the tagging element. It also made the point—a point that I reiterate—that the scheme gives prisoners an opportunity to readjust to life outside prison. That, rather than the shallow rhetoric of the right hon. Lady, is the best way to protect the public.

Miss Widdecombe *rose—*

Mr. Boateng: No, the right hon. Lady has had her say. She can now listen and accept that there is another view. That is all we ask. We do not ask her to accept our view, but to recognise that another view can be rooted in concern to protect the public. That is the view shared by her hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and her colleague on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. *[Interruption.]* It is no use the right hon. Lady denying that, because we have got the paper and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath has signed it.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the Minister now admit that my hon. Friends the Members for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) actually said that they believed in tagging as an alternative to prison, but not as a means of early release?

Mr. Boateng: Methinks the right hon. Lady doth protest too much. I make no such admission, and the absence of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath is glaring testament to the truth of my assertions.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: No, I will not. We have informed the House—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Front-Bench Members seem to be getting very excited.

Mr. Boateng *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I do not go in for bogus points of order.

Will you confirm, Mr. Speaker, that it is a tradition of the House, even if not a binding rule, that when one Member has referred to another, especially disparagingly, he then gives way? The Minister referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Should he not give way?

Mr. Speaker: Those are matters for the Member's discretion, not for the Chair.

Mr. Boateng: I made no reference whatever to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). I referred to the hon. Members for Aldershot and for Surrey Heath. For once, the name of the hon. Member for Buckingham did not come to my lips.

We have no intention of scrapping the home detention curfew scheme; it has operated highly successfully since its introduction, and we are taking measures to strengthen it still further. The proposal is concerned with statutory safeguards and public protection, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The debate was in danger of petering out and needed resurrecting, and I am glad that we have received some encouragement.

The remarks of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) were predictable because when we looked at the selection of amendments, we foresaw a rerun of the debate that took place in the Committee of the whole House, in which the Tory party attacked the home curfew and home detention schemes.

The Tories' criticism is wrong because they start from the principle that people who are sent to prison must be kept there for as long as possible, irrespective of whatever benefit there might be in releasing them.

Miss Widdecombe *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Lady agrees—such people should be imprisoned for as long as possible. It does not matter that we have one of the highest prison populations in Europe, that our prisons are full and we are having to build more, or that prison appears to have no effect on the crime figures. Putting more people inside and keeping them there longer appears to be the Tories' answer to crime and disorder. I have to tell the right hon. Lady that, as the Minister of State and the Home Secretary have said, the evidence does not support that answer.

The evidence shows that the vast majority of people who are released before the end of their sentence—always on the basis that they can be recalled if they reoffend—not only stay on the straight and narrow but start contributing to the community. They begin earning and are no longer a burden on the state, whereas it would cost a fortune to keep them in prison. Outside, they can once more pay their taxes, look after their kids and contribute to family life.

Of course, we must monitor the schemes, but the Minister was right to point out that the matter was tested by the Select Committee, which includes representatives of all parties, and there is a widespread view that we should try to reduce sentences where the risk of doing so is acceptable.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman seems to be easily dismissing the 1,000 victims who have resulted from the scheme. He has said that most people do not

reoffend, but does he agree that a significant number do and that that should give pause for thought? If not, what would he say to the victims?

Mr. Hughes: I absolutely share the right hon. Lady's concern that, as a Parliament and as a country, we must ensure that we better look after victims. The right hon. Lady and I, together with hon. Members across the House, have sought to increase the rights of victims and the protection for victims. If we never take any risks, there is only one logical conclusion: we lock someone up—

It being Ten o'clock, further consideration of the Lords amendments stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

Lords amendments again considered.

Question again proposed, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Hughes: If we take the view that we should protect victims to the maximum, we would keep offenders locked up for ever. We would never let them out. Then, of course, apart from the other people inside, there would be no victims.

In all the cases under discussion, release would take place only after a risk assessment. If, after a period of trial and experience, a judgment is made that we should adjust the measure, adjust it we must. For the right hon. Lady to argue, so early in the scheme, that we should scrap it would not only prevent many people from starting a life of law-abiding activity early, but would mean that one of the incentives for the prisoner was removed.

For the first time this evening, we will support the Government in a Division. We believe that the scheme should continue. Enlightened penal policy demands that we retain the initiative and make sure that we use it wisely. To abolish it tonight would be wrong.

Amendment proposed to the Lords amendment: (b), in line 4, at end insert—

'(db) the sentence is for any of the following offences—

(i) an offence under section 89 of the Police Act 1996 (assaulting, obstructing or resisting a constable);

(ii) an offence under section 38 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (assault with intent to resist arrest);

(iii) an offence under section 18, section 20, or section 47 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (wounding, causing grievous bodily harm and causing actual bodily harm) committed against a constable in the execution of his duty.'.—*[Miss Widdecombe.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 109, Noes 386.

Division No. 333] **[10.2 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. James Gray.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard

Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela

Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Welley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Lords amendment No. 100 agreed to.

After Clause 60

Lords amendment: No. 101, to insert the following new clause—*Amendments of the Sex Offenders Act 1997*—

". Schedule (*Amendments of the Sex Offenders Act 1997*) (which amends the Sex Offenders Act 1997 in respect of persons who are subject to the notification requirements of that Act to make provision, in particular, for—

(a) altering the requirements,

(b) increasing penalties,

(c) enabling courts to make restraining orders, and

(d) improving the information held about such persons),

is to have effect."

10.15 pm

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Speaker: With this we may discuss Lords amendment No. 154.

Mr. Boateng: Amendment No. 102 provides new statutory duties to assess and manage risk and to consult and inform victims, whereas these provisions form the second part of the measures to be known as Sarah's law. The provisions in this part tighten existing protections and create new protections against sexual and violent offenders. They tighten part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997.

A number of other measures strengthen the protection afforded to victims by, for example, allowing the court at the time of sentencing to restrain an offender from certain actions, such as contacting the victim. They also provide for the Secretary of State to regulate the flow of information about the discharge of registrable offenders between and from institutions that detain them. That will help to ensure that accurate, updated information is available to the authorities about where such offenders are.

This important package of measures should be seen alongside and as an integrated part of a whole that includes the other measures that we debated at the commencement of our deliberations today. I commend them to the House.

Mr. Hawkins: I recognise that the Government have tried seriously to address the important issues on sex offenders. We acknowledge that the Government have tried to incorporate in the Bill some important extra powers and to tighten further—as the Minister put it—the 1997 Act to recognise the appalling crimes that have been committed in recent times.

We repeat our earlier point. We hope that the Government do not regard this as a completed task. We said that the Government will need to keep under review the problem of internet-related sex crimes. We hope that the Minister will confirm that those matters will be kept constantly under review. We believe that there might have to be further legislation to address some of the points that were made by my noble Friends. I hope that the Minister will confirm that in the spirit of seriousness with which all parties have taken these crucial issues tonight, as they did in the other place.

I do not want to detain the House for long on these amendments, but I hope that the Minister will give us that reassurance when he winds up this short debate.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We, too, made it clear from the outset that we hoped that there would be a consensus among the parties to amend the legislation at the first opportunity. In the summer, I said that, having reflected on the events surrounding the tragic death of Sarah Payne and the newspaper campaigns that followed, the Bill offered opportunities to make some improvements.

Some of us took the view from the beginning that the Sunday newspapers, such as the *News of the World*, were wrong to propose such a remedy, and we were proved right. It resulted in victimisation and inaccurate identification of people, who were confused with possible sex offenders. People tried to be judge and jury. That was an unsatisfactory and unhelpful approach. It was noticeable that the newspaper was unable to carry on the campaign because, as we predicted, it did not secure the co-operation of individuals.

It was important, however, for the public to learn three things. First, wherever they lived—in London, Portsmouth or elsewhere—they could discover what the local police policy was on dealing with people who were on the register. Would the police regularly record their presence? Would there be a regular check, and, if so, how regular would it be? The public are entitled to know, in their communities, what the police policy is. They are also entitled to know what the probation service policy is, because they are entitled to a sense of security. They are entitled to challenge the authorities—to challenge the way in which the authorities deal with people who are in the community, but are clearly a potential risk.

What the public are not entitled to know—I think that there was general consensus on this—other than in an exceptional case to which I shall come shortly, is exactly

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

where people live who may at some time in their past have committed a particular offence. That is wrong, first, because those concerned are entitled to rehabilitation and support while they return to society and, secondly, because if people are concerned or suspicious about a certain household, a certain estate or a certain resident—throughout my time as an MP, people have frequently come to me with such concerns—the duty of all of us is to ensure that the police are alerted and that they, the social services and the probation service check what is going on so that the law can act. But it is the law that must act, not individuals, although the law will have been prompted by the concerns of individuals.

Mr. Hawkins: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most significant developments to emerge while these issues were being discussed was an incident in south Wales, where a mob of ignorant and prejudiced people confused the terms "paediatrician" and "paedophile" and made an appalling attack on someone who was actually an extremely well-qualified medical specialist? Does that not demonstrate the dangers of mob rule, which, sadly, has been fuelled by some of the less reputable parts of the media?

Mr. Hughes: Of course I agree. The summer produced frightening scenes in many of our communities. People were encouraged by rumour and innuendo to believe that they could deal satisfactorily in their own communities with people who, in many instances, were not offenders, although they might have shared a surname or a first name with an offender, or might have resembled someone who had appeared in a newspaper.

We learned a clear lesson: that it is for Parliament and public authorities to respond to public concerns. In the context of the proposed Sarah's law, we should note that Megan's law was not very successful in the United States. It would have been a bad idea to import it to the English legal system.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is making some powerful points. Does he agree—further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said—that one of the most depressing and alarming features of the summer's public demonstrations was the sight, on our television screens, of children who had obviously been exhorted so to do holding placards urging, for example, the imposition of capital punishment for sex offenders? Was that not utterly wrong, and should not the House deplore it?

Mr. Hughes: Of course it was wrong, but in many cases those children's actions were instigated by their parents and other adults.

Mr. Bercow: I said that.

Mr. Hughes: Yes. Children were being used. We condemn the putting of children in the front line in other countries to make a case for adults standing behind them. It is exactly that sort of manipulation of children that I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning.

I have a question for the Minister about a matter that we suggested could be included in the Bill, but which does not feature in the Lords amendments. I know that there are difficulties in this regard. Lords amendment No. 154, which proposes a new schedule to the Sex Offenders Act 1997, contains a section dealing with people who give notice of their intention to leave or return to the country. That is obviously proper: if people are leaving the country we need to know that they are leaving, and if they are returning we need to know that too.

There is, however, a category of people who are not caught by the law: people who commit offences abroad—they might be British citizens—but who then return to this country. I know that there are difficulties with ensuring that we know about all those people, but reciprocity of civil and criminal judgments is now common practice and there is much more collaboration between countries. It is increasingly possible for the police, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, Interpol and others to be aware of people's movements, particularly if they have been subject to an order in another state. I shall give an example.

In the United States, the reporting requirements and obligations on a convicted sex offender to remain on the register are the same as in this country or even tougher and there is no reason why we should not be told when a person leaves American jurisdiction to come to ours so that the remaining processes can be dealt with satisfactorily. However, it is no consolation to people in any constituency in the United Kingdom to know that there is a general system for ensuring that those who have committed sex offences are known and are being monitored, but that some will slip through the net.

What progress have the Minister and his colleagues made in working out the legislation that we clearly need to plug a loophole that has been used and is a worry to a considerable number of the people of this country?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman refers to people convicted of sex offences abroad who move or return to this country. That important issue is being examined by a review group including the police, the probation service, children's organisations and others to see how best to strengthen the law. Although sex offenders are often wicked and determined people who seek to mask their movements across international boundaries, co-operation between police forces in this country and abroad is increasing. We need to link that with the provision of more information to our people and legations overseas. Those issues are being addressed and I have no doubt that the House will return to them to take forward and strengthen the law.

Members on both sides of the House can agree that continuing vigilance is necessary, but there is all the difference in the world between vigilance and the actions of vigilantes. Vigilance is an attitude to be adopted; the actions of vigilantes are to be deplored. We move forward from the events of the summer and the inspiration of Sarah Payne's life, but the tragic circumstances of her death mean that we must create something that does her honour. As such, I commend the amendments to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 102 to 105 agreed to.

Clause 63

FAILURE TO SECURE REGULAR ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL; INCREASE IN PENALTY

Lords amendment: No. 106, in page 43, line 2, at end insert—

("( ) This section shall apply only in cases where the failure to attend school is with the knowledge and consent of the parent or other adult responsible for securing the child's attendance at school.")

Mr. Boateng: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu thereof.

Mr. Boateng: I commend amendment No. 106 to the House. Concerns have been expressed that a stiffer penalty for failure to secure regular attendance at school would be unduly harsh in certain circumstances. Having listened to all the arguments, we propose to create a new and additional aggravated offence for truancy with a maximum penalty of a level 4 fine and/or three months' imprisonment. That would leave unchanged the current offence under section 444 of the Education Act 1996, but the new and additional offence would require parental knowledge and a failure to act without reasonable justification. We had a good debate in Committee and there was a good debate in the House of Lords. The points that were made by the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) have been taken on board in our deliberations and in our amendment.

10.30 pm

Our objective has always been to get parents to court, so that the seriousness of the offence can be brought to their attention—that is our purpose; it is not the imprisonment of parents. The failure to appear in court to answer a summons for that aggravated offence would allow the issuing of a warrant to secure attendance. That is enormously important. Anyone with any experience in the matter knows the importance of bringing home to parents in those circumstances the seriousness of their children not attending school, but the higher penalty would be linked only to the most serious cases where parents failed to take their responsibilities seriously. We do all we can to help parents to educate their children, but ultimately we need an effective legal sanction for parents who, despite extensive help, still do not fulfil their duty. At the moment—we have to face the fact—the sanction is simply not working. Eighty per cent. of parents prosecuted for school attendance offences fail to turn up at court. They are mostly fined in their absence, and the fines are sometimes as low as £1. That cannot be right. We must send a different message. I commend the measure because it does that. It builds on good practice in Newham, with police, education welfare officers and social workers all working together. It gives the courts, the police and education welfare the power that they need to protect and to secure the rights and interests of children in a good education. I commend the amendment.

Mr. Hawkins: As the Minister says, we had a good debate in Committee, but he did not refer to the equally important debate in another place, where there were extremely good speeches not only by Baroness Blatch but by Earl Russell, who spoke for the Liberal Democrats. One phrase came to mind. When Earl Russell criticised what the Government were saying, he used words that many of us will understand were accurate:

This clause altogether over-rates the power that some parents have over teenage children.

Nevertheless, we recognise the spirit of what the Government are seeking to do.

There was an important debate in Committee and in another place on the role of responsible officers and parents in relation to children who repeatedly play truant. That problem plagues many schools in many parts of the country. There will be a small group of persistent truants whose parents, as the Minister says, simply do not care to encourage their children to attend school, so we recognise that the Government are trying to deal with an important issue.

The Minister did not refer to what Baroness Blatch said. She wanted to know

the extent to which the schemes to reduce truancy in schools that have been put in place already at very great cost have been successful. Right across the country local authority schools have received money to help them produce strategies for reducing the number of young people who are truanting from school.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 927-9.]

She tabled questions for written answer about the result of the Government's policies. To all her questions, Baroness Blackstone's answer was that the Department did not know and that it would be disproportionately costly to find out the information. That is not an acceptable answer. We are talking about the use of taxpayers' money. If strategies are being developed, surely both Houses need to be given the proper answers. I hope that in due course there will be reconsideration of the importance of this House knowing chapter and verse about all that.

If we are to discuss the issues of truancy seriously, we need to know how existing systems are working. It is not acceptable for the Government to say that it is disproportionately costly to find out the information. If Parliament does not get the information, who on earth is going to get it? I hope that the Minister will respond positively to that point, which we think is important. We also welcome the contribution that the Liberal Democrats have made on the issue, both in Committee and in another place.

Jackie Ballard: As my noble Friend Earl Russell—whom the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) so much admires—said in a debate in the other place, he would have preferred to delete clause 69 entirely. As the Minister said, I tried to achieve the same objective in Committee. However, as my noble Friend was too late to attempt to delete the clause, he moved an amendment providing that it would affect only a parent whose child failed to attend school

with the knowledge and consent of the parent or other adult responsible for securing the child's attendance at school.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 November 2000; Vol. 618, c. 1550.]

The other place accepted the amendment, which seems to have the same effect as the Government's amendments in this group. In the other place, however, it was widely accepted that, although a parent can register a child for school and even see the child through the school gates, the child can subsequently leave, and it is very difficult for the parent to know about or to control that truancy.

[Jackie Ballard]

which obviously occurred without parental knowledge or complicity. It was also accepted that it is important to distinguish between parents who could not care less where their children are and parents who make every effort possible to ensure school attendance.

I still maintain that a £2,500 fine or three months' imprisonment is not the right way to deal either with parents who are culpable and plain inadequate or with parents who are simply not coping. I suspect that, even with the threat of such penalties, a large percentage of those parents will not turn up in court. They probably believe that the courts would not imprison them—especially if they have other, younger children—and that the courts would realise that they could not pay a £2,5000 fine.

I suspect that the £1 fines that the Minister mentioned were imposed because courts realised that people could not pay more. A £1 fine may sound ridiculous, but the courts may have realised that the parents did not have the wherewithal to pay a larger one. I think that ever more help and support for parents, not ever heavier penalties, are the answer to truancy. We have to help ensure that parents are able to bring up their children responsibly.

The Lords were constructive in their opposition to clause 69, and I am pleased that the Government have responded constructively to their improvement of the Bill. However, although I believe that the clause is improved, it would have been better if it had not been included in the Bill at all.

Mr. Boateng: I referred to the debate in the other place, and I linked it with the very good debate that we had in Committee in which the hon. Lady played an important part. We are still not at one with her on the issue, but I suspect that we never shall be. Although we desire the same objective, we approach the issue from a different perspective.

I commend the work of Earl Russell and of my noble Friend Lord Bassam on the issue. The deliberations of the other place have refined and developed the approach to the issue that we share with Earl Russell. That approach enables us to tackle the problem in a manner that sends a clear message.

I really do feel that we cannot accept fine levels in which the sum of £1 features. The notion that a £1 fine could ever be appropriate is absolutely absurd. We are not prepared to accept that such fines could ever be appropriate.

Information on the fines levied is not available centrally and could not be obtained except at disproportionate cost. However, we know from research that the fines levied are lamentably low.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) referred to the evidence of success in tackling truancy. We have stemmed the flow in truancy that took place in the 1990s by determined action on the part of my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Home Secretary, whose Departments have jointly taken initiatives in this area. I would commend to the hon. Gentleman and to Baroness Blatch a visit to one of the schemes; the one at Newham is particularly helpful. They would gather from such a visit that it is possible, through concerted effort by social services, education, welfare and police, to make a difference. Our amendments give them and the courts the power to tackle this problem, and I commend them unreservedly to the House.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 106 agreed to.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have come to the end of the substantive debate and we will now go through the formalities to deal with the remaining amendments on the Order Paper. Given Mr. Speaker's interest in trying to modernise our procedures and the struggle that the occupants of the Chair and Members have had throughout the day in trying to following the procedure, could I ask whether there is a way in which all the non-contentious business that comes back here can be processed at a logical time or without having to go through this House? A lot of material comes back to us, but only a certain amount causes any contention at all. Could that matter be referred to whichever parts of the system are looking at modernising our procedures so that those here—let alone those outside—can understand what is going on?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman—who has long experience of this House—ought to know that it is not necessary to raise that matter on a point of order at this point of the proceedings when it is perfectly open to him to write to the Procedure Committee to ask that it consider these matters. From the Chair, I can only proceed in line with what is laid down.

Lords amendments Nos. 107 to 120 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos 121 to 124 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 125 to 129 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 130 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) to the words so restored to the Bill agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 131 to 134 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 135 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 136 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 137 and 138 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 139 to 244 agreed to.

Government amendment (a) to Lords amendment No. 245 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 245, as amended, agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 246 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) to Lords amendment No. 247 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 247, as amended, agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 248 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 249 to 329 agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That was not too bad, was it, Mr. Hughes?

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments Nos. 14, 15, 25, 39, 41 to 43, 45, 46, 48, 49, 121 to 124, 135, 137, 138 and 246 to 248: Mr. Paul Boateng, Mr. Mike Hall, Mr. Nick Hawkins, Mr. Peter Luff and

Angela Smith; Mr. Paul Boateng to be the Chairman of the Committee; three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I propose to put together the Questions on the two social security motions.

Motion made, and Question out forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Jobseekers Allowance (Joint Claims: Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 28th July, be approved.

That the draft Social Security (New Deal Pilot) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

Council Chief Executives

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House to now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

10.49 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I shall approach this subject by illustrating how the chief executive of Broadland district council, which covers part of my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), managed to achieve early retirement, a glorious pay-off and, for all I know, wonderful references. I raise it as a case study that requires Government action on two fronts: a public inquiry into this particular case, and an examination of the need to standardise the terms, conditions and powers of chief executives. The terms and conditions enjoyed by chief executives should safeguard their security of tenure—against political whims, for example—but they should not prevent a council from taking appropriate action where there is a clear need.

The individual concerned, Mr. John Bryant, banned elected persons from entering council premises outside of council or committee meetings, thereby interfering with the councillors' ability to carry out their duties on behalf of their voters. He negotiated his salary to disproportionate levels, given the size of the council, and became one of the best paid chief executives in England. There was no link to average earnings or inflation, as is the case with other groups of workers and constituents. He played a prominent role in his own work appraisal, and took on extra duties—at elections, and by monitoring affairs—to increase his earnings. He generally expanded his duties, and it was all done without council approval.

Mr. Bryant initiated a court case against the leader of the Labour group. That caused further court cases, and a court case is still pending that may cost the council tens of thousands of pounds. He made statements to the press without the council's approval. He brought the council into disrepute by attempting to control councillors, accusing them without foundation of breaking national codes, and in general took major decisions on his own, without recourse to elected members.

The zenith of Mr. Bryant's career came when he instructed that all the mail addressed to councillors at the council offices should be opened by council officers. Those officers could act on that mail if they felt it appropriate to do so, without disclosing that they had done so. Clearly, councillors did not like that and complained. Mr. Bryant said that he had the official approval of internal auditors. He stated publicly:

> I cannot agree to your request not to open mail addressed to you and would suggest that in future you ensure that any mail is not routed through these offices.

In other words, he was telling constituents that they should write to their councillors only at home, if they did not want their private correspondence to be opened. The Controller of the Audit Commission, Andrew Foster, wrote that

> the general principle must be that mail should be opened by the councillor to whom it is addressed or by someone authorised by them to do so.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

I have had an influx of letters, from constituents and non-constituents alike, on those matters. One parish council clerk wrote:

> I have written to Broadland District Council stating that members of my council were disgusted that the District Council was giving a person, reprimanded for alleged gross misconduct, an early retirement package worth around £270,000, and asked how the District Council could justify spending such a large sum of taxpayer's money for this purpose.

The answer that she received stated that

> matters between a local government employee and employer were dealt with as exempt matters and therefore no information could be provided.

My correspondent adds that district councils should have informed parish councils, which have been encouraged to keep their precepts down. She said that the pay-off of £275,000 did not set a good example, and pointed out that it meant that council tax would rise. Finally, she wrote:

> Mr. Bryant had taken jobs on and . . . was looking after himself rather than the tax payer. Parish Council members feel that he is being paid for being incompetent and that this situation should be re-addressed.

I am sure that such events are rare. Broadland district council was led for a time by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance, and is now run by a Conservative majority. In most circumstances, such arrogance would not have been allowed to flourish. Where there is transparency and partnership between elected representatives and non-elected officers, such events could not occur. That they have happened requires that the public have alternative ways to access council procedures and hold a local government accountable.

Although a source of leaked information has suggested that there were five serious counts against Mr. Bryant, there was no public disclosure, and it was not possible for me to access information. When I wrote to the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, the answer was again that such matters were between the employer and the employee, and that they could decide whether they were disclosed.

In a written question, I also asked whether the Audit Commission Act 1998 was appropriate to access the accounts of public bodies. The answer again was that it is the responsibility of each local authority to decide whether information on personal or contractual matters in a particular case is owed a degree of confidentiality, and to act accordingly.

I suggest that the events that I have discussed raise issues beyond the personal and contractual which, while a feature of the events, do not address the situation that set this whole sad affair into motion. For example, how are chief executives held to account in situations in which they practice autocracy, secrecy and bullying tactics, as in the case at Broadland? Dismissal of a chief executive is a cumbersome process and, as happened here, it is obviously easier to pay someone off than to have a proper investigation, which would happen in most employment situations.

In her letter of 10 May, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions also suggested that if I had any queries on value for money, I might approach the district auditors. Many councillors went to the district auditor because they were concerned about the credibility of financial information on particular matters. Despite Mr. Bryant's entreaties, the auditor declined to identify the councillors who had raised the matter with him. In a confidential report to the council, Mr. Bryant alleged that the councillors had breached the national code of conduct by going to see the auditor. I think that that allegation would have been laughed out of any court in the land.

Even more bizarrely, not being able to identify the councillors, Mr. Bryant wrote:

> In the absence of any other information—

that is, identity—

> I assume the councillors were acting on behalf of the Labour Group and, therefore, the Group Leader must take responsibility for this breach and must be held accountable to the full council.

He went on to invite the council to take action against the leader by removing her from the policy and resources committee, which they did. The irony was that the leader of the Labour group was on holiday abroad during the whole period. On legal advice, the Labour councillors called a special council meeting and moved the reinstatement of the group leader to the committee, threatening the council with immediate legal action if councillors pursued the improper course put to them by Mr. Bryant.

I submit that nothing short of an inquiry into the behaviour of the council in this affair will satisfy my constituents. We need disclosure of the total on-going costs and the details of the final settlement. How were they negotiated, over what best years were they attained and how much employee time was involved in all this public hoo-hah?

We must ask how to prevent this from happening again. I would love to see the document giving the details of the early retirement package, and I think the public would too. They are certainly demanding that in their letters to me.

At a time when we are democratising local government, with cabinet structures and more public scrutiny, does my hon. Friend agree that this case illustrates the need to define the role and accountability of chief executives? We need to initiate procedures for councils to use when the chief executive is seen to be failing.

Last, but not least, and most importantly, councillors and the public should have the right to access key information. Will my hon. Friend please act?

10.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): My hon. Friend has raised matters of great concern to him and his constituents. As he said, he has raised a number of points using Broadland council as a case study.

My hon. Friend has covered the following issues: he has referred to the events at Broadland council, particularly those concerning the actions of the chief executive. He has questioned whether those actions are consistent with what it would be reasonable to expect a chief officer to do in fulfilling his or her role properly. He asked what powers my Department has if a chief executive falls short of what is expected and a council wants to initiate disciplinary action. He also asked whether the outcome of events at Broadland, particularly the settlement agreed between the council and the chief

executive, was reasonable. Finally, he asked what steps the Government can and will take to ensure that concerns about the behaviour of council employees or even members can be dealt with more transparently in future.

My hon. Friend mentioned that legal proceedings are under way in relation to events at Broadland. An appeal by Mrs. Barbara Lashley against the decision of Mr. Justice Munby not to grant a judicial review will happen in a few weeks' time. That fact means that I must be careful about what I say since issues remain sub judice. I hope that my hon. Friend will not take that to mean that I am ducking the issues.

I have read all that I can on the case, including Mr. Justice Munby's report and reports prepared by my officials on what was going on at Broadland. Certain basic facts are in the public domain following events in May 1999. The chief executive, following discussions and events shortly after the election, barred Barbara Lashley from council premises—except for formal meetings—and applied several other sanctions to her which curtailed the extent to which she could fulfil her duties as a local councillor. The sequence of events that began then continues and will not be resolved until the further appeal is heard.

I am puzzled about one matter relating to events as they have panned out. The grounds on which the initial application for judicial review was made concerned the actions of the standards committee to which the case had been referred after the chief executive lifted his sanctions following correspondence from Mrs. Lashley's solicitors. The grounds for the review did not relate to the actions of the chief executive, which, as I understand it, have not been questioned in relation to his competence as monitoring officer to the council in applying the sanctions that were applied to Mrs. Lashley. We are yet to receive an answer to that point.

I cannot comment much more on circumstances at Broadland because of the point that we have reached in the legal process. My hon. Friend, however, more generally questioned whether the actions taken were consistent with what might reasonably be expected of a chief officer in fulfilling his or her role. By statute, councils are required to have a monitoring officer as well as a head of paid service and a chief financial officer. The post of chief executive is not specified in law; only those three posts are. Where a council appoints a chief executive, the post can combine the posts of head of paid service and monitoring officer or chief finance officer. The position varies from council to council.

Whatever the precise duties of the chief executive—in this case, I understand, he combined with that post the role of monitoring officer, which is a significant point—he or she has an important role to play in ensuring the proper discharge by the council of its statutory functions and the building of effective working relationships between elected members and council staff. Clearly, one can at the very least, without stepping too far over the mark, question whether that was the case at Broadland. Traditionally, chief executives have had to balance a number of overlapping roles; providing advice to councillors on policy and on the discharge of council functions; and building the corporate and managerial capacity of the organisation—working with councillors for the benefit of their communities.

In future, under legislation that we shall introduce, it will not be possible for a chief executive to combine the role of head of paid service with that of monitoring officer—as is currently the case in several authorities, such as Broadland. The increased demands that will be placed on those officers both by the new political structures and by the new conduct framework that we are introducing will, in our view, make the ability of one individual to hold both posts untenable, as well as increasing the likelihood of conflicts of interest between the two roles. My hon. Friend may feel that that has been the case at Broadland.

The roles of chief executives and monitoring officers in councils will be pivotal to the efficient operation of councils in this new environment. It is extremely important—as my hon. Friend points out—both that officers have the confidence of councillors and that councillors respect the integrity and independence of those officers, especially when they provide advice to councillors on the discharge of council functions.

Such advice may on occasion be unwelcome. It would undermine the impartiality of officers if the council were simply able to get rid of its chief executive when councillors disagreed with the advice of their officers. The statute therefore provides the chief executive officer and, in future, monitoring officers with protection by law. A designated independent person has to be appointed to investigate any alleged misconduct by a chief executive, or any attempt by a council to dismiss him or her. The person appointed must be acceptable to both parties and, if agreement cannot be reached, such a person must be appointed by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Although I realise that my hon. Friend is not happy with the resolution of the case involving the chief executive of Broadland district council, the matter has been resolved locally and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has thus not been required to—and cannot—play any part in the process. I must stress that any involvement is strictly limited to the appointment of an independent adjudicator. Once the adjudicator is appointed, the Secretary of State plays no further role—under current law—in the matter under investigation.

I acknowledge the strong views expressed by my hon. Friend on the case, but the council has dealt with the issue—however well or inadequately. It has not called on my right hon. Friend to appoint an independent adjudicator—under current legislation, that is the only route available to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The Minister points out that, as the council had followed certain procedures, she could not get involved unless there was a request for an independent adjudicator. Have there been cases involving a dispute with a chief executive, such as that at Broadland, which followed a similar pattern, or do the majority of councils in such situations ask for the appointment of an independent adjudicator?

Ms Hughes: I am sorry that I cannot offer the hon. Gentleman much help, because my ministerial experience is limited to the past 15 months, during which time this is the only case that has come to our attention. I cannot speak with certainty about what happened before that.

My hon. Friend asked whether the outcome of the process agreed between Broadland council and the chief executive is a reasonable settlement. We do not yet fully

[Ms Hughes]

know the outcome, because an appeal has been made against the decision not to grant a judicial review to Mrs. Lashley. If she were to be granted a judicial review, there would be a wider judgment on some of the issues that have been raised. That might have a bearing on the outcome.

At one level, the settlement that has been reached is a matter for the council and the chief executive in that the council apparently did not initiate proceedings to dismiss him. We do not know what took place in the discussions between the chief executive and the council and we do not know whether he wanted to go or whether councillors had concerns that led to the discussions being initiated.

My hon. Friend referred to the district auditor and I was going to come to that point. From what my hon. Friend said, it was not clear whether the district auditor had been approached at an earlier stage in the proceedings to intervene to consider the proprietary of what was happening. However, the use of public money to reach a settlement with the chief executive is clearly a matter on which anyone can ask the district auditor to adjudicate. The question of whether there has been a good use of public money in the circumstances is one that the district auditor would be required to examine. It is in his remit to adjudicate not so much on value for money, but on whether public money has been used appropriately. If the auditor has not been asked to examine the settlement, that is one course that my hon. Friend can pursue.

Dr. Gibson: What would happen if the agreement around the settlement is secret and confidential and if everyone who took part in the discussions swore not to disclose the details of the agreement? How can the district auditor overcome that secrecy? I understand that the public cannot discover the details, but can the auditor override a council that has made a secret and confidential agreement?

Ms Hughes: I shall obtain proper advice on that point. However, subject to that advice, I would say that nothing is outside the bounds of a district auditor's inquiry into the use of public money. I would be very surprised if the terms of an agreement that require the use of public money could be kept secret from a district auditor if he decided to examine the case. I shall obtain advice on that point, but it might provide a route that my hon. Friend might want to pursue.

One of my hon. Friend's main requests was for me to instigate an inquiry, possibly a public inquiry. In law, I cannot do that. Councils are directly elected bodies, and people who write to me with complaints about their councils are constantly surprised by the lack of powers that central Government have to intervene in their business. In the normal course of events we can trust our councillors and their senior managers to deal with issues appropriately, and it is right that we cannot intervene willy-nilly. Even when there is a belief, such as that described by my hon. Friend, that matters have not been handled properly, we cannot intervene. However, there may be recourse through the district auditor, and if my hon. Friend wants to pursue that, I will seek an official view on how best he can do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fifteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS]*

Ordered,

That the promoters of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne Bill *[Lords]* shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next session of Parliament, provided that notice of their intention to do so is lodged in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present session and that all fees due up to that date have been paid;

That, if the bill is brought from the Lords in the next session, a declaration signed by the agent shall be deposited in the Private Bill Office, stating that the bill is the same in every respect as the bill brought from the Lords in the present session;

That the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay upon the Table of the House a certificate, that such a declaration has been deposited;

That in the next session the bill shall be deemed to have passed through every stage through which it has passed in the present session, and shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having passed those stages;

That no further fees shall be charged to such stages.—*[The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Aviation Industry (South Wales)

1. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): What assessment he has made of the impact on the aviation industry in South Wales of the possible relocation of aero-engine jobs at RAF St. Athan to the south of England; and if he will make a statement. [136862]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): Mr. Speaker, as this is the first Welsh Question Time since you became Speaker, may I, on behalf of all Welsh Members, wish you well in your office?

The workers at St. Athan are employed by the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, responsibility for which lies with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I understand that this proposal is subject to formal, confidential consultation between the Defence Aviation Repair Agency and the trade unions.

Mr. Smith: Will my right hon. Friend meet the Secretary of State for Defence at the earliest opportunity, to discuss not only the possible loss of jobs but the proposal to move DARA from RAF St. Athan to Cardiff airport? I understand that that could result in as few as half the work force being invited to move with DARA, leaving far too few personnel to run the biggest military support base in western Europe. If that hare-brained proposal was accepted—I doubt that it will be—thousands of jobs would be at risk. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend to do all in his power to put a stop to it.

Mr. Murphy: As I said previously, DARA has proposed a transfer of engine overhaul work, which comprises about 165 civilian staff, to another site in Hampshire. That is the only firm proposal of which we are aware that poses any threat to jobs, and it is subject to full consultation. I understand my hon. Friend's concern, and I shall certainly raise the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Fuel Duty (Hill Farmers)

2. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): When he last met representatives of the National Farmers Union in Wales to discuss the impact of fuel duty upon hill farmers. [136863]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): In the past few weeks, I have met representatives of both the main Welsh farming unions and discussed a wide range of issues, including fuel duty. I have also met a delegation of farmers, hauliers and others, led by Mr. Brynle Williams.

Mr. Chope: If, as he claims, the Secretary of State has been meeting hill farmers, why was he not able to secure a better deal for them in the Chancellor's recent statement? Did he read the evidence to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry from Mr. Pratt, a hill farmer in the Brecon Beacons, who said that his total net income last year was £1,600 and that, as a result of extra taxes on fuel, his costs have already increased by £2,654 this year? Why should Mr. Pratt have to pay the highest fuel taxes in Europe so that the national health service can be subsidised?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman's last comment was unworthy, as I am sure that all the farmers in Wales are conscious of the need to make sure that the NHS and all our public services are properly funded.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's first question, using figures that are based on cash income—the best reflection of the genuine day-to-day position of Welsh farmers—the estimated cash income for Welsh hill farmers for this financial year was £20,000. That figure is down by 5 per cent. on that of the previous year. However, I appreciate that that is an average and that, within those figures, there are considerable difficulties for individual farmers. I must say that, thanks to the Conservative party's

economic policies, many of my constituents were forced in the 1980s and much of the 1990s to live on incomes that were well below the level that I have cited.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): In my right hon. Friend's talks with hill farmers on the impact on their livelihood of fuel duty, was there any discussion of the decisions of the previous Government, with their totally London-centric, overbearing attitude of omniscience? They pushed aside the advice of the chief medical officer of the then Welsh Office that there was something badly wrong with the handling of the BSE crisis. If they had listened to Wales, hill farmers would not have half the trouble that they have today.

Mr. Murphy: All of us have read the report and are conscious of the fact that officials in the Welsh Office at the time were extremely diligent in the advice that they gave. As it turned out, their advice was timely but, unfortunately, it was not followed by their colleagues elsewhere in Whitehall—although I guess that is a matter for another debate.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Mr. Speaker, as this is your first Welsh Question Time as Speaker, I echo the personal good wishes of the Secretary of State.

Hill farmers and all those who live in rural Wales have been severely affected by the 34 per cent. increase in fuel duty that has occurred since the Government came to power. Hill farmers cannot take their sheep to market by public transport, and those who live in isolated rural villages have to use their car to go to work, to take their children to school and to go shopping. The Chancellor has not cut the duty on fuel—he has created the mirage of ultra-low sulphur fuel. How many filling stations in Wales stock ultra-low sulphur petrol, and how many does he estimate will have it by April next year?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman seems to forget that Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom were governed for two decades by the Conservative party. Many of the difficulties that are now facing us in Wales are a direct consequence of decisions taken by the hon. Gentleman's colleagues.

On the availability of low sulphur fuels, the hon. Gentleman knows that low sulphur diesel is generally available and that decreases in the duty on low sulphur petrol will come into effect in March next year. We are assured by the industry that that fuel will be available throughout the United Kingdom, including Wales.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): After 50 years of generous and very large subsidies for farmers in this country, how is that farmers in New Zealand, who have not received a penny in subsidies for the past 15 years, can produce meat, have it transported across the world and offer it on the British market at a lower price than that charged by farmers in Wales? Is not the truth that subsidies are not the answer to but the cause of farmers' problems?

Mr. Murphy: Happily, it does not fall on my shoulders to answer questions on New Zealand agriculture. Although I accept my hon. Friend's point, I am sure that he is aware that the farming community in rural Wales faces genuine problems, which the Government are doing their best to overcome.

Rail Services

3. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on rail services to Wales and the west country. [136864]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular discussions with my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport.

Mr. Heath: Must not Isambard Kingdom Brunel be turning in his grave at what has happened to God's wonderful railway? There have been broken rails, a criminally dangerous signalling system at Paddington and clapped-out locomotives that simply break down half the time. Do not the people of Wales and the west country deserve a better railway system? Will the right hon. Gentleman make it his business to talk to his colleagues and to authorities in Wales, and on the other side of the bridge in the west country, to ensure that we have the railway system we deserve?

Mr. Murphy: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more, especially because, many years ago, I had the privilege of fighting his seat in the west country. As I am now Secretary of State for Wales, he will be aware that I failed to win that seat.

The task facing this country is to get a safe and efficient railway system working at full capacity as quickly as possible. That imperative was made crystal clear to railway companies by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport. The whole House is aware of the serious problems in Wales and the west country. The regulator has said that by next Monday there will be a sustainable timetable, so that people will be conscious of the amount of time they have to spend on trains. By the end of this week, I hope to have further information on how best to repair track and ensure the safety of the system. I hope that the bulk of repairs will have been completed by Christmas.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Does my right hon. Friend accept that our constituents want railways to be run as a public service, whereas those who currently run railways are interested not in providing a service but in making a quick profit?

Mr. Murphy: I am sure that most hon. Members believe that many of the problems that we are currently facing were the direct result of the ideological and misguided policy of railway privatisation, which was carried out by the Conservative Government during their final years in power. They were warned that privatisation would be a disaster, and that turned out to be the case.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I, too, offer you our congratulations on your appointment, Mr. Speaker, and wish you well in your responsibilities.

Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that there have been improvements in the rolling stock on the north Wales line recently and that Virgin Trains will again introduce new stock, next year? Does the right

hon. Gentleman acknowledge that if the best use is to be made of the new rolling stock, we need to upgrade the line in north Wales?

The right hon. Gentleman will know that there are plans to upgrade the line between Crewe and Bangor. Will he impress on Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority the need to extend the work to Holyhead?

Mr. Murphy: I could not agree more. Our railway system across north Wales, and the section of the trans-European network from Ireland to England, is one of the most important links between Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as between different parts of Wales. I hope that the Strategic Rail Authority will take that into account in considering bids for the single franchise.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the removal of all Virgin services to north Wales constitutes major discrimination against my constituents and others? Yesterday, two people from north Wales wanted to travel to the House of Commons to attend a reception connected with lupus, a serious medical condition. The only way in which they could have come to London was by reserving seats, and that facility was not available to them, although it is available on some Virgin services between London and other parts of the country. Will my right hon. Friend please undertake to investigate this unsatisfactory state of affairs?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is, of course, right about the inconvenience caused to her constituents, which is also experienced by Members and their constituents throughout Wales. As she knows, following a meeting with the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister last Thursday, Railtrack announced that the bulk of the necessary track repairs would be completed by Christmas, and the remainder by Easter. It also announced that the industry planned to publish a national track recovery plan this Friday—which, as I have told the House, will include details of a sustainable timetable that will come into force next Monday.

The main problem is the lack of reliability. Even if it takes longer to travel from one place to another, ensuring that people know how long the journey will take constitutes a big improvement in itself.

Employment

4. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): When he last met the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the current employment prospects for the country; and if he will make a statement. [136865]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I meet the First Minister regularly and discuss a wide range of issues, including employment in Wales. There has been a steady increase in employment. The number of people of working age in employment in Wales has increased, from more than 1,181,000 in May 1997 to more than 1,215,000 in May 2000. Figures published today by the labour force survey of the Office for National Statistics show that the number of people in work in Wales is now 1,261,000.

Mr. Llwyd: Gross domestic product in Wales has fallen by 3 percentage points since new Labour took office, and we have lost several thousand jobs in the Japanese hi-tech industries in south Wales recently. Have the Minister and the Secretary of State made any representations to their colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry? If not, why not?

Mr. Hanson: We have regular discussions with all Departments about the economy in Wales.

Employment in Wales has increased by 80,000 since the general election. Youth unemployment has fallen by 75 per cent. since the election, thanks to the new deal, and long-term unemployment has fallen by 60 per cent. Genuine difficulties occasionally occur in industry in Wales and elsewhere, but we are dealing with the fall in GDP through objective 1 funding, and we will do all we can to ensure that employment in Wales continues to rise.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Welsh development agency and the Devonshire county council economic development committee on the creation, in the past four weeks alone, of 480 jobs at WTS Holdings in Prestatyn, 170 jobs at Hotpoint in Bodelwyddan, 150 jobs at TRB in St. Asaph, 1,000 proposed jobs related to Devonshire county council objective 1 projects, and 300 jobs at Morrison's superstore?

Mr. Hanson: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating those companies on creating jobs—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is a great deal of noise in the Chamber. The House must come to order.

Mr. Hanson: The job opportunities in Denbighshire and my hon. Friend's constituency are in no mean part due to his efforts. The employment increases that have occurred are part of the strong, stable economy that we have in Wales—as, indeed, are the 80,000 new jobs that have been created since the general election. We now have the lowest level of unemployment in Wales for some considerable time—certainly, lower than that throughout the Conservative years.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given last week's finding of the National Centre for Social Research that 80 per cent. of those who have supposedly found jobs through the new deal for young people would have got them any way; that people completing the training and education option of the new deal are twice as likely not to get a job as to get one, and that the average cost for each job through the new deal is about £17,000, why does not the hon. Gentleman give up the unequal struggle and admit that the new deal for young people provides a rotten service at a rip-off price?

Mr. Hanson: I should be surprised if a Question Time went by without the hon. Gentleman whingeing about the new deal. The real issue is that youth unemployment in Wales has fallen by 75 per cent. since the general election. That is in no mean part due to the efforts of the new deal and the Employment Service. I have met new deal workers throughout Wales, all of whom benefit from the scheme. Employers enjoy the scheme and find it worth while, as do the people on it. Given what the hon.

Gentleman has said, they know that the Conservative party would abolish it. That will help us no end at the general election.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Last week, I met some young people on the new deal—people who have been given hope and opportunity as a result of being taken into work by the new deal. They are the sort of people who were abandoned by the Conservative party. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be rather nice if the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) were to have a word with his hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones), who is sitting next to him, and persuade Plaid Cymru in the National Assembly for Wales to start helping this Government and the Government of Wales in the Assembly to make the most of the opportunity provided by objective 1 to create jobs and opportunities for young people and all people in Wales?

Mr. Hanson: Whingeing is not the prerogative of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow); with regard to objective 1, it is also that of Plaid Cymru Members. The new deal is working in Wales; it has created jobs and reduced unemployment, especially among young people. It is worth while, but the Conservative party does not support it, and Plaid Cymru is a little lukewarm about objective 1.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Sadly, today's figures show that unemployment is on the rise and, indeed, that unemployment in Wales is on the rise, with thousands of job losses in the manufacturing sector. The M4 corridor used to be a magnet for inward investment. Now, unfortunately, it is job-loss alley, with Panasonic, Sony, Hitachi and Corus announcing recent job losses. Does the Minister think that the introduction of the climate change levy as proposed by the Government will help or hinder job creation in Wales?

Mr. Hanson: From the Ribble Valley, unemployment may appear to be rising in Wales, but those of us who represent seats in Wales know that it is definitely falling. The figures announced today show that unemployment is lower than it was yesterday. That is a genuine fact for the hon. Gentleman to chew on in due course. Despite the difficulties with Sony and other companies, there is still a great deal of high-tech investment in Wales. It should not be forgotten that 3,000 people still work for Panasonic and Sony in Wales.

On the climate change levy, the hon. Gentleman knows the views of the House. The House has voted for it. Many businesses will benefit from the levy, as will the environment, and I support it.

Mr. Evans: Does not that response show that the Government are simply not listening? While the Labour-dominated Welsh Assembly is spending more than £40 million on a new building for itself—three times the original estimate—businesses are being attacked by the Government on several levels, with £5 billion of extra taxes, as well as £5 billion of extra regulation, being heaped on them. Meanwhile, we have a Prime Minister who is prepared to sign up to anything in Europe, which will make Britain less competitive than other countries. That means that we are exporting jobs from this country to our competitors. Will the Secretary of State meet representatives of the employers—the CBI, the Institute of Directors and especially the Federation of Small Businesses—and listen to them, particularly in regard to their campaign to ensure that the climate change levy does not damage Wales?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has yet again missed the point. If he had listened to what I said, he would have heard that unemployment has fallen by 80,000 in Wales since the general election. There is positive investment in our community in Wales. It is creating jobs. The Secretary of State meets businesses, the CBI and small businesses regularly—I was with him on Friday evening last week—to discuss issues. They know that the way to a strong economy is through the Government's policies. The Ribble Valley ranter can rant on all he likes, but he will not get far.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Will my hon. Friend, when he meets the First Secretary, raise with him the recent report that the venture capital firm 3i has closed its offices in Cardiff because of a lack of business opportunities and moved to Bristol? Will he press the First Secretary to do everything that he can to remedy the situation that created that?

Mr. Hanson: I will look into my right hon. Friend's points. I am not aware of the situation that he has raised, but I will look into it and discuss it with the First Minister.

Flooding

5. **Mr. Richard Livsey** (Brecon and Radnorshire): What recent discussions he has held with the Environment Agency regarding river flooding in Wales and England. [136866]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): In recent weeks, the Under-Secretary and I have discussed the matter with the Welsh Minister for the Environment, Transport and Planning and others. I am pleased to tell the House that, last Friday, while visiting flood-affected areas of north Wales, I was able to announce that the Welsh block would be increased by some £3 million over the next four years, consequential on additional funding for flood prevention in England. On that visit, I was able to see the results of the dedicated hard work of the emergency services and local authorities in dealing with that serious state of affairs.

Mr. Livsey: I reiterate the words of welcome that you, Mr. Speaker, have been given today.

Does the Secretary of State not agree that the greatest possible sympathy needs to be given to flood victims and, indeed, that more money needs to be allocated to the Environment Agency? Much more than the £3 million that he has achieved needs to be allocated; about £12 million is my estimate. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the hard-pressed local authorities are not in a position to fund the Environment Agency properly for flood prevention schemes in Wales? Will he do something to ensure that the agency is properly funded by direct funding from Government, so that it can do the job properly?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is aware that the £3 million is not the only money that is going into flooding in Wales. That is for flood defences over the next number of years, but, only this week, the Assembly has indicated that it will look carefully at all the points, including the matters raised by the hon. Gentleman. In addition, the Bellwin formula has been improved. It will help local authorities and help directly all the people affected by the floods.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): As well as talking to the Environment Agency, will my right hon. Friend have discussions with his friends in the Cabinet and with the Association of British Insurers to see if help can be obtained for those unfortunate people in my constituency and elsewhere who have not been able to obtain insurance against flooding?

Mr. Murphy: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As he is aware, the Government are committed to discuss with the Association of British Insurers how the insurance industry can respond more quickly and effectively to such emergencies.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): In his discussions with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, has the Secretary of State extracted a date for the implementation of new national planning guidance policy—PPG25—and considered the impact on drainage, in particular of new houses being built on flood plains?

Mr. Murphy: No, but I am aware of what the hon. Lady is referring to. This week, the Minister for the Environment, Transport and Planning made a statement to the National Assembly. She is aware of the points that the hon. Lady has made and is looking carefully at future planning applications in areas affected by flooding.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): May I inform my right hon. Friend that my constituents in Tintern, Usk and Maesygwartha, near Gilwern, were affected by the recent flooding? Although they commend the work of the emergency services and the county council, who helped in the clear-up, there is clearly a need for local authorities to have more powers and more resources, on the same basis as those provided to the Environment Agency, to invest in flood prevention work.

Mr. Murphy: Yes; I am very conscious of the points that my hon. Friend has made. His constituency is next to mine, and I know the problems that his constituents have faced. I shall ensure that the points he has made are taken up with the First Minister.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Proportional Representation

Q1. [136892] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What his policy is on proportional representation.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): We set out our position in October 1998, and again in June 1999, and it has not changed.

Dr. Lewis: Why is it that the Prime Minister is so much more reticent about his position on proportional representation with Members of this House than he used to be with the former leader of the Liberal Democrats when he was trying to carve out a shady deal for a permanent Lib-Lab coalition based on PR? If he will not answer that, will he at least answer this? Will he give an assurance that he will not give his support in the future to a system based on the alternative vote—which is not even proportionate, but simply exaggerates the winning party's number of seats even more than the first-past-the-post option does?

The Prime Minister: The latter part of the hon. Gentleman's question betrayed a certain nervousness. On the first point, we have introduced proportional representation for the European elections and for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In relation to PR, however, I am not in favour of any system that breaks the link between constituency and Member of Parliament.

Engagements

Q2. [136893] **Angela Smith** (Basildon): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 November.

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Angela Smith: Does the Prime Minister recall the dire warnings from Conservative Members that the national minimum wage would cut the number of jobs in this country by more than 1 million? *[Interruption.]* Does he therefore share my scepticism about their apparent conversion now that we have the highest employment levels for a generation? Nevertheless, many young people, including those who came to my youth forum just last week, feel somewhat disadvantaged. Will my right hon. Friend therefore consider removing the temporary differential youth rate for those who are under 22?

The Prime Minister: As we said at the time, we shall keep that under review. However, I think that it is important to recognise that the way in which the minimum wage has been implemented should not, and currently does not, affect youth unemployment levels. Indeed, long-term youth unemployment has been more than halved under this Government. As for my hon. Friend's comment on Conservative Members, as she read out the prediction that they made before the general election, some of them were shouting, "We were right." I do not think they realise that the position has changed, and that there are now 1 million more jobs in the economy, with the introduction of the minimum wage, than there were at the time of the general election.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Last week, the Prime Minister tried to blame everyone but himself for the dome disaster. Now, we have had the National

Audit Office report and a full account of his Cabinet meeting. Can he confirm that the member of the Cabinet who insisted that the project should proceed and said that it "could even make money" was him?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly true that I said that it should proceed. It is also true, however, as we demonstrated conclusively last week, that funding for the dome, financial management, the dome and the site itself were all agreed by a Cabinet committee when the right hon. Gentleman was a member of it. We still have not had his admission that he was a member of that committee. Perhaps he will admit it, or not, when he asks his next question.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minster did not only say that it should proceed. From the minutes of that meeting, we know the following:

Blair: We are already getting more inquiries from the private sector. There could be a billion pounds of revenue for the UK.

Blair: It is a bit of fun and a bit of learning.

In that meeting, should not the Prime Minister have listened to the Foreign Secretary? He said:

We can always blame the Tories if we stop now. If we go ahead we'll have to take the blame if the whole lot goes wrong.

It is a pity that the Foreign Secretary is not here to tell him that again.

We also know from the National Audit Office report that, in July, when Lord Falconer told Parliament that the dome was trading solvently, he must have known that that was not the case. As Ministers who do not tell the truth in Parliament are meant to resign, when is he going?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman should not confuse Cabinet minutes with what appears in *The Mail on Sunday*. Secondly, if he is in the business of quotes, this one is from December 1999:

But the decision was made by the previous government and this one to do it. Having spent that money, I think it's now the job of all politicians to make a success of it. So we shall go there and join the party.

Who was that? It was the Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr. Hague: Of course we enjoyed the party: we were laughing at the right hon. Gentleman. So there we have it: no resignation and a special exemption from the ministerial code for the Prime Minister's old flatmate. We used to have government by Parliament, then it was by Cabinet. Now we have government by clique. Is not the only reason that the right hon. Gentleman clings on to the discredited dome Minister that, although he may be a useless Minister, he is very convenient as a human shield? Should not the Prime Minister now be man enough to stand at the Dispatch Box and apologise to the nation without blaming it on somebody else?

The Prime Minister: Last week we had the major economic statement for the country and one might have expected the right hon. Gentleman to have asked about it. It is interesting that, this week, he cannot ask about the economy or public services.

As for the dome, we have said already what the difficulties were and why we still proceeded with it, but if we want to quote at each other across the Chamber, since last week we have discovered something else. In the past few months the shadow culture Secretary has been travelling around the country telling people that the dome is a disaster, asking how we could ever have done it and saying what a waste of money it is. What does he turn out to be? He was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the National Heritage Secretary in the last Conservative Government, and this is what he has said:

From the outset, I was a supporter of the dome . . . I know that there are domophobes—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Maclean, be quiet.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said:

From the outset, I was a supporter of the dome . . . I know that there are domophobes on both sides of the House—people who think the whole project was destined to be a failure . . . I am not one of those people.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1306.]

Why does not the Leader of the Opposition take his bandwagon and drive it off somewhere else?

Q3. [136894] **Ms Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North): While I welcome the extra money for schools in the pre-Budget report, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is very important that it is paid out as quickly as possible? Assuming that the Welsh Assembly uses the £9.9 million allocated to it by the Chancellor for schools, schools in my constituency will get a welcome and much-needed boost.

My constituency includes Whitchurch comprehensive school, the biggest comprehensive school in Wales, ysgol Glan Tâf, the Welsh medium school as well as Corpus Christi Catholic school and Llanishen and Caathay schools. Does my right hon Friend agree that allowing schools to decide their own spending priorities will assist staff, teachers and parents?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to read out the list of schools in her constituency because each one of them will get extra money from the Labour Government. What we now know, courtesy of the shadow Chancellor, is that the Tories would take that money back off those schools. That extra money is there. It is going into the largest real-terms rise in education spending that this country has seen for years.

I know that my hon. Friend has a certain influence in the Welsh Assembly. I hope very much that the Assembly will make sure that that money gets through to the schools that need it to improve our children's education.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): On the national health service, is the Prime Minister aware of the number of so-called excess winter deaths that occurred last winter, and will he confirm the figure?

The Prime Minister: I do not know what the right hon. Gentleman means by the term "excess winter deaths," but it is of course the case that there were severe pressures on the NHS last winter. Those pressures will be easier this year, at least in terms of our being prepared for them,

because of the additional money that has been put into the NHS. As many people in the NHS have been saying over the past few days, in winter there is always more pressure. However, we are better prepared and the health service is better funded.

In addition, I can tell the House that there are now some 10,000 more nurses in the health service than three years ago, and that 5,500 nurses are returning to the service as a result of the nurse returner campaign.

Mr. Kennedy: Successive Governments have recorded the numbers of excess winter deaths occurring in the December to March period, when the number of unfortunate deaths rises as a result of climatic and other conditions. Last year, the figures showed that there were 54,000 deaths in the period. There will be another national winter crisis this year. Will the Prime Minister acknowledge in the House this afternoon what he has acknowledged elsewhere—that the persistent underfunding of the health service in the first half of this Parliament means that doctors, nurses and patients will have to cope with excess winter deaths again? Does he not accept that there is a degree of urgency about the need for a national plan to combat this disgrace in our country?

The Prime Minister: This Government have put far more money into health service funding than the Liberal Democrat party has ever asked for. However, we had to make sure that any funding that we put into the national health service could be sustained year on year on year. For far too long, there was boom and bust in health service spending, with money put in one year being taken away the next. Now, over a four-year period, there will be the largest sustained increase in health service investment, and we will be able to keep it up. As a result, there are more nurses, doctors and beds. However, it will take time for those people to be trained fully.

In relation to hypothermia, the winter fuel allowance, the cut in VAT on fuel and the extra measures on home insulation show that the Government are doing our best to minimise the pressures. Those pressures will continue, but it is wrong to suggest that we have done nothing to correct the problem.

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck): Will my right hon. Friend join me in extending our best wishes to the remaining British miners and their families, following today's announcement that the European Union has accepted the Government's aid package to the coal industry? I am sure that he will agree that that package will secure the jobs of many thousands of people. However, would he also agree that it is to the eternal shame of the Conservative party that, when in power, it set out to destroy not only Britain's mining industry but the people who relied on it totally?

The Prime Minister: People will remember the record of the Opposition. Many people in my hon. Friend's constituency and in other constituencies who are dependent on coal mining will welcome today's news. It is a case of the Government helping the industry restructure and make change in a way that preserves jobs and the fabric of local communities. That stands in sharp and stark contrast to the policies of the previous Government.

Q4. [136895] **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): The people of Guildford are deeply concerned by plans to put a giant incinerator in our county town. This month, we learned that Government officials have tried to hide the health hazards caused by such incinerators. Why does that culture of secrecy still fester? Why did Labour and Liberal Democrat peers vote last night for a Minister's right to hide information, and against the people's right to freedom of information?

The Prime Minister: So now the Conservatives are the champions of freedom of information. [*Laughter.*] No, let us be fair. It is just that for 18 years, it slipped their minds somehow. Indeed, at the last election, I seem to remember that in their manifesto they called it an unnecessary gimmick.

I do not know about the actual case in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I will look into it and write to him about it, but, really, let us have no lessons from the Conservative party about freedom of information.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): Many hon. Members will have seen the media coverage of the village of Gowdall in my constituency, which has been submerged by the worst floods in more than 300 years. Residents are concerned and angry at some of the actions of the Environment Agency, fuelled by its refusal to meet villagers last night. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will ensure that there is an investigation into the actions of the agency; that the flood defences will be looked at and improved if necessary; and that the Government will play a full and active role in regenerating communities such as Gowdall, including fast-track support wherever possible?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly happy to look into the issue of the Environment Agency's refusal to meet residents in my hon. Friend's constituency who have been affected by the floods, and I will be in touch with him about it.

As for the efforts that we are making generally and nationally, we are spending a substantial additional sum of money on flood defences. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced new money—more than £50 million—to help with that. The rate of Government support under the Bellwin scheme, which reimburses local authorities for the costs of flood damage, used to be at 85 per cent. and is now at 100 per cent. I hope that that shows my hon. Friend and his constituents that we will give them some hope for the future.

Q5. [136896] **Mr. William Cash** (Stone): Will the Prime Minister explain how a European super-power would not be a European super-state? In his speech on 13 November at Mansion House, he said that it was obvious to him. Will he give the British people a White Paper on the constitutional and political implications of the process towards European integration?

The Prime Minister: Where nation states acting in unison can do more in common than they can alone, that, it seems to me, is the reason for the European Union.

Examples of such states being able to exercise more power and strength together than alone include the current negotiations over Kyoto, world trade and areas of foreign policy where, as a result of us operating together, we are more powerful than individual nations. In other words, we are a super-power.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): The Prime Minister will know that last month Amnesty International launched its global campaign against torture. What steps will the Government be taking to meet the objectives of the campaign? Will my right hon. Friend be working in this Parliament to ensure that we have legislation to ratify the International Criminal Court statute and to outlaw the broking of torture equipment?

The Prime Minister: We are, of course, committed to making sure that we introduce legislation for the International Criminal Court. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that she seeks on acts of torture. This country has fought a very strong, solid campaign over a number of years in respect of human rights abuses wherever they occur, and we will carry on doing so.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Will the Prime Minister expand on his definition of a super-power which he offered a few moments ago? He said on Monday that he wanted Europe to be a super-power. Can he name a super-power at any time in the history of the world that has not had its own currency, its own taxes, its own army and its own Government?

The Prime Minister: I cannot name another institution like the European Union, which is precisely why it is a unique union of member states which are nation states coming together to exercise more power than they can alone exert. If the right hon. Gentleman wants an example of Europe as a super-power, he should look at trade negotiations. We are not able, as the United Kingdom, to make a real impact on world trade, but we are as the European Union. If the right hon. Gentleman disagrees with that, perhaps he can get up and say so.

Mr. Hague: We did not ask the right hon. Gentleman for two minutes of waffle about Europe. We asked him whether any super-power ever had not had those assets which we listed. We take it from his response that the answer is no. There has never been a super-power without its own currency, taxes, army and Government, just as there has never been a Prime Minister who used words so carelessly to please the audience of the moment. Now that the right hon. Gentleman has argued for a super-power, all he could say when the German Foreign Minister called yesterday for an elected head of Europe was that the "time was not right" for that idea. Can he think of a super-power, as he would have it, that has not had an elected head? *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: In view of the events of the past week, that is a rather unwise question to ask me. Of course, Mr. Fischer has his view. He wants a European federal super-state. That is true. What is the response of Conservative Members? They hitch up their skirts, go to the sidelines and say, "Get on with the debate, we'll have nothing to do with it." We should enter into that debate and say why we are against the super-state but in favour of more co-operation.

The idea that we have no support for that position is absurd. A few weeks ago, President Chirac said:

> I do not think that one can have a federal Europe . . . The creation of a United States of Europe is not realistic, because not a single nation is prepared to give up its identity.

I agree entirely. So we have Mr. Fischer arguing one thing and Mr. Chirac arguing something else. I am on the side of those who want Europe to co-operate more closely because it is in our interests to do so, but not to have a federal super-state. Where does the right hon. Gentleman stand?

Mr. Hague: We can get a straighter answer from a Florida recount than from the Prime Minister on the Floor of the House. He says that there is a difference between a super-state and a super-power, but there is no example in history to support him. Those who favour a super-state have taken support from his words. The truth is that he wants Europe to be a super-power when the only possible result of such a policy is the creation of a super-state and the end of Britain's independence. Cannot we now see that in the Government's handling of European policy we have a disaster in the making, a distinction without a difference and a Prime Minister without a clue?

The Prime Minister: As usual, with the right hon. Gentleman's pre-rehearsed little jokes, he makes his point. However, he has mentioned the negotiations that are coming up at Nice. His position is to be against any extension of qualified majority voting.

We have done a little research. In the course of the Maastricht treaty, there were 30 items of qualified majority voting agreed, including on free movement of capital, visas, economic guidelines, public health, education—shall I go on? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."]—consumer protection, European transport and European regional development funds. In all 30 items. How many times did the right hon. Gentleman vote against them? Well, it is a round number that equates roughly to the Conservatives' economic and foreign policy credibility.

The best way to secure the best deal in Europe is to fight for British interests on issues such as tax, border controls and social security, but where it is in our interests to have qualified majority voting, to have that too.

The choice is simple: a Conservative party in the grip of those who would damage our country's true national interests or the Labour party, which will get engaged, and therefore get the best deal for Britain.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr. Speaker: Ann Cryer.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I called Mrs. Ann Cryer.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I could not hear.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that following the severe flooding of more than 200 homes in the Stockbridge area of my constituency two weeks ago, it is singularly unfortunate that the Conservative leadership of Bradford council is seeking to make political capital out of my unfortunate constituents?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition went around the country a couple of weeks ago claiming that we were in crisis because of the floods, proving only that bandwagons can be amphibious. I do not know the circumstances of the Conservative leadership of Bradford council, and can only hope that it soon changes back to Labour.

Q6. [136897] **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): Is the Prime Minister aware that his proposals to scrap community health councils—independent watchdogs for NHS patients, such as Cheshire Central and Chester and Ellesmere Port—is bitterly opposed by my constituents, by patients and by staff? Will he drop those plans?

The Prime Minister: I am aware that there is bitter opposition, which is why the proposals are being consulted on. If he goes round the country, however, the hon. Gentleman will find that people in certain areas do not believe that community health councils have been as effective as they might have been. It is precisely because we want to consult that we have issued the health plan. We will report back to the House in due course on the consultation.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the better regulation taskforce report on environmental regulation and farmers? Will he take from it the need further to improve control of British bureaucracy's implementation of European regulations?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I welcome that report, because it makes it clear that we should be careful in implementing European legislation to ensure that we do so with the lightest possible touch. However regulation is extremely important in such areas as safety issues, for example BSE. A balance must be struck, and we are trying to get it right. I very much welcome the report and believe that we shall act on it.

Q7. [136898] **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): On 13 July, the Prime Minister gave the House an absolute commitment that on the Liaison Committee's report on parliamentary scrutiny there would be free votes on the Government side. Last Thursday, the Leader of the House shaded that commitment by saying that it would be contingent on the Government putting down substantive motions. Will the Prime Minister honour his July commitment by ensuring that the Government put down substantive motions?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House of Commons tells me that she did no such thing. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh yes she did."] Well, there is always a free vote on House matters, and the right hon. Gentleman has my assurance that that will remain so.

Q8. [136899] **Ms Claire Ward** (Watford): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the difficulties that pensioners face in claiming their full entitlements? The measures announced last week are to be welcomed, but we know from the 60,000 currently claiming the minimum income guarantee that they still have problems in receiving what they are entitled to: What will the Government do to ensure that more people will be able to claim the minimum income guarantee?

The Prime Minister: There has been a problem, which is why we launched a campaign to ensure that pensioners entitled to the minimum income guarantee should receive it. I understand that about half a million more pensioners are now claiming it. Those measures, together with additional money for pensions, the winter fuel allowance and free television licences, are an important signal of our commitment to Britain's pensioners. In relation to the winter fuel allowance, free television licences and the Christmas bonuses, the Conservatives' policy is to take those things away from Britain's pensioners.

Q9. [136900] **Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson** (Lagan Valley): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the Royal Ulster Constabulary on intercepting the mortar bomb at Derrylin and the bomb in west Belfast that was destined for the City of London? Will he join us in calling for a moratorium on changes to policing until peace is assured in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: On the first point, of course the work of the RUC has, as ever, been absolutely invaluable in stopping acts of terrorism. On the Patten reforms, we think that it is important that the reforms should proceed and that, at the same time, all the varied aspects of the agreement into which parties have entered should be implemented properly.

Mr. Speaker: Caroline Flint.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): My question has already been asked, so I shall sit down.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is due to make a speech today in which he will point out that there is a winners' circle of prosperity in London and south-east England to the detriment of other areas in the country. However, if 700 jobs go at Biwater Industries of Clay Cross, which manufacturers pipes, for no reason apart from a rip-off effect, north-east Derbyshire will become a losers' circle. Will my right hon. Friend therefore have a word with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to get that matter referred to the Competition Commission, which is the last means of saving those jobs?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look into the issue in my hon. Friend's constituency and get back to him as soon as possible.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On today's Order Paper there are 29 questions to the Secretary of State for Wales, including five which refer to discussions that he may have had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales and two which refer to someone called the First Minister. Section 53(1) of the Government of Wales Act 1998 states:

> The Assembly shall elect one of the Assembly members to be Assembly First Secretary.

Section 53(2) states:

> The Assembly First Secretary shall appoint Assembly Secretaries.

The Act's only reference to Ministers is to Ministers of the Crown, and section 43 states that when those powers are devolved, they are devolved to the Assembly, not to individual office holders. There is a clear distinction between the powers and definitions in the Scotland Act 1998 and those in the Government of Wales Act.

I seek your guidance, Mr. Speaker, on the correct way in which the First Secretary and the Assembly Secretaries should be referred to in the House. Should we use the titles in the legislation passed by the House, or can we call the First Secretary and Assembly Secretaries whatever we like?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made a fair point. Normally, the Table Office would have corrected the notices to use the First Secretary's correct title. I hope that the proper designation will appear on the Order Paper in future. However, I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In order that a confusing precedent is not set, may I ask you to advise the House under which Standing Orders a Member may be evicted from the House, even if he has not said anything on the record of the House in violation of its procedures or Standing Orders?

Mr. Speaker: I really do not know the incident to which the hon. Gentleman is referring. However, if he is referring to a previous incident of mine, I have discussed that with the hon. Gentleman concerned and we have come to an understanding. I will ensure that there is good order in the House: that is the important thing. There will be occasions when, perhaps, I request that an hon. Member leave the Chamber even though he or she may not have broken any rules. However, for the sake of order, I will ask that hon. Member to leave. There again, that is a request, and it is up to the hon. Gentleman or hon. Lady to accept it. I hope that that helps.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Could you perhaps invite the Prime Minister to ensure that the record is corrected, and that his reference to half a million new people claiming the minimum guarantee is altered to the 24-plus thousand who, in fact, have got it, according to a House of Commons answer.

Mr. Speaker: These are matters of argument. However, I suspect that the hon. Lady has managed to put something on the record.

Genetically Modified Food and Producer Liability (No. 2)

3.34 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I beg to move,

> That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make further provision with respect to the safety of and liability for the deliberate release or marketing of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified food; to establish a genetically modified organism compensation fund; and for connected purposes.

Let me turn the clock back a moment. It was late in the afternoon of Friday 31 March that Mr. Petersen reserved a telephone call from the German authorities notifying him that genetic contamination had been found in the oilseed rape seeds supplied by his company, Advanta UK. The House will recall that, in the furious debates of the following two months, the Government decided that the crop planted in the United Kingdom should be destroyed. In the UK alone, more than 5,000 hectares of oilseed rape had to be ploughed in, along with the entirety of that season's plantings in Germany, France and Sweden.

The question that remained was who was liable for the damage and loss caused in that exercise. When Advanta came to give evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, it said that it had supplied what it thought to be non-genetically modified seeds. The crop had been cultivated on land never used for GM crop growing, and with separation distances 20 times that required in the United Kingdom. In turn, farmers had grown in good faith crops that they believed to be non-GM. They were as shocked as anyone else to discover that their crops were contaminated by the Aventis herbicide-tolerant gene.

I hope that the House will excuse the pun when I say that the crunch in deciding what to do about the issue came when the oilseed crushing industry announced that it was refusing to buy any of that season's contaminated crop. That was great news for consumers, but pretty frightening news for the farmers who faced financial disaster.

To its credit, Advanta told the Select Committee that it had stepped in and picked up many of the bills relating to those losses. However, it was adamant that in doing so it accepted no legal liability for the damage or loss. That is the contradictory position that we are currently in and which my Bill seeks to address. The biotechnology industry has spent millions of pounds trying to convince society that its products are safe, yet, when asked whether they accept producer liability for the products, the answer is absolutely no.

When we turn to UK law to find out who is liable, the answer is unclear. The issue threatens to become one of the big whodunnits of our time and, sadly, our position as a Parliament appears to be that we neither know nor care what is the answer to that question.

I have recently taken part in the Chardon LL hearings elsewhere in London. They are destined, I fear, to descend rapidly into farce. On the day on which I gave evidence, MAFF issued a press release pointing out that it was unable to identify not the fields in which the crop trials had taken place but the countries. This situation risks making a mockery of the issues of scrutiny and liability that are central to how we view the introduction of GM crops into the food chain and the arable and animal system.

My Bill would fill the loopholes in our legislative framework, and it would do so in five ways. It would place a duty on Government to apply the precautionary principle to which we signed up as a country in the biosafety protocol negotiated in Montreal this year. It would require the Government to introduce a new scrutiny regime that was at least equal to the paradigm shift into which biotechnology and genetic manipulation have taken us. It has to be the case that, when faced with a technology that can cross all the frontiers that nature has set for us, we introduce a scrutiny system to test the technology at least as rigorously as we would test a new drug, rather than looking at the technology as a novel form of cake decoration.

For industry, three critical changes would have to be made vis-à-vis its relationship with consumers and farmers. The Bill would require companies to accept that they were corporately liable for the harm or damage that resulted from the release of GM organisms that they had produced or marketed. We would make it a condition of any marketing consent or licences that the companies be in possession of full public liability insurance in respect of any damage that followed.

Finally, we would require the companies to work with the Government in the creation of a compensation fund to ensure that, at least where damage from genetic contamination could be identified, even though its specific source was unclear, the farmer and the consumer would not be left to pick up the bill.

Why is the Bill needed? The current arrangements leave farmers hanging out to dry. NFU Mutual, the largest insurance company for the farming community, has already stated that it will not insure against genetic contamination or damage. Supermarkets have turned their back on purchasing genetically contaminated seed supplies or crops. Recently, Iceland went even further: it will no longer honour contracts to purchase non-GM cattle food if it turns out to be contaminated.

To add insult to farmers' financial injury, a legal opinion supplied to Friends of the Earth states that the idea of farmers seeking financial remedy or redress through civil action in the courts is pretty much a non-starter. Those farmers who were not bankrupt at the start of the process certainly would be long before they were even close to the possibility of obtaining redress.

That is why the Government must take a lead. We must place producer liability in the lap of the biotechnology industry rather than with the farmer or the community. We must do that now because the issue will not go away. The danger is that if we do not address the problem, it will move alternately between tragedy and farce.

Two weeks ago, Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer, came to the UK to deliver a message to the Prime Minister, warning of the inherent danger that the UK could end up in the same position as the United States. That farmer has never planted, grown or tried to market GM crops, but he found that some of Monsanto's GM seeds were growing on his land. He was even more astonished when Monsanto decided to sue him for that. The company wants to levy fines on farmers of up to $30,000 for the adventitious arrival of GM crops on their land, even though the farmers do not know that the crops are growing there.

If we are to avoid being caught up in such farcical situations, the Government must give a lead. In the social climate set by the Phillips report after the crisis and tragedy of BSE and CJD, the public expect a lead from the Government on the definition and appraisal of risk, and on scrutiny, responsibility and liability. We must do that by taking the path of legislation, not that of litigation. I hope that the Government will hear and respond to this message, and that the House will endorse it.

3.43 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): It is with some trepidation that I rise to speak on this measure, as I do not want to take too much time from discussion of our main business today. I also assure my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) that my opposition to his Bill will have no bearing on my selection decisions for the parliamentary football team.

I have some reservations about GM food, but I do not accept that it presents any more difficulties than those that arise in conventional breeding. My views were sharpened recently, when I led a parliamentary science and technology delegation to China where we saw GM cotton fields and learned of the advantages that had resulted. There is less use of pesticide and insecticide, and the flourishing cotton plants are not savaged by insects.

Conventional breeding is imprecise, but it has been successful because plant breeders have learned how to test and evaluate plants, selecting only those with desirable characteristics and rejecting the rest. All the tests in conventional breeding are practical, and there is a wide range of additional safety assessments for GM crops. The tests evaluate actual and potential impact on food, human and animal health and the environment. Although trials are still continuing, there is as yet no evidence that would lead us to assume that GM crops are less safe than conventionally bred crops. The demonisation of genetically modified crops and the deification of organic foods are unacceptable at the current time. All food crops should be subjected to thorough examination for benefits, and effects on health, the environment and so on.

I share my hon. Friend's views about multinational companies and the undermining of traditional farming practices. I repeat that I strongly agree that we need to provide crops that are of clear benefit to the consumer, taking into account price, health implications and effects on the environment. However, the Bill should address all crops, whatever technology is used in their production. The Bill is particularly limited on the liability issues.

There is no crop that we eat, however we produce it, that can be deemed natural. That is another reason why I believe the Bill to be flawed. The truth really is that we cannot say what food, however it is produced, is absolutely safe and carries absolutely no risk. I welcome the Food Standards Agency and its assessment of the problems of all crops. John Krebs has made an illuminating start in the arena of organic foods, and other foods will now be subjected to the same rigid scrutiny.

If we deter scientific experimentation by passing such a Bill, which is so narrowly focused, we may one day find that the world population has doubled, and that nutritional needs cannot be met by food redistribution. However, I am not arguing that transgenic foods are the answer.

The Bill is far too limited, and we should vote against it today.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 97, Noes 30.

Division No. 334] **[3.46 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atherton, Ms Candy
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bercow, John
Berry, Roger
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Dismore, Andrew
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Evans, Nigel
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Godman, Dr Norman A
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin
Illsley, Eric
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonnell, John
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mudie, George
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Huw Edwards and
Miss Anne McIntosh.

NOES

Ashton, Joe
Blizzard, Bob
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cawsey, Ian
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Dobbin, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Gapes, Mike
Gibson, Dr Ian
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
McFall, John
Maxton, John
Moffatt, Laura
Organ, Mrs Diana
Page, Richard
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne Campbell and
Mr. Nigel Beard.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Alan Simpson, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Norman Baker, Miss Anne McIntosh, Mr. Tony Benn, Mr. David Drew, Mrs. Ann Cryer, Mr. Llew Smith, Mrs. Maria Fyfe, Mr. John McDonnell, Mr. David Chaytor and Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews.

Genetically Modified Food and Producer Liability (No. 2)

Mr. Alan Simpson accordingly presented a Bill to make further provision with respect to the safety of and liability for the deliberate release or marketing of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified food; to establish a genetically modified organism compensation fund; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed [Bill 184].

Transport Bill [*Ways and Means*]

3.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Transport Bill, it is expedient to authorise

(1) the imposition of charges in respect of the execution of works in a highway, and

(2) the charging of fees in connection with driver training courses.

The resolution relates to two amendments to the Bill that were made in another place. The Government tabled them to fulfil commitments made in response to amendments tabled by others at an earlier stage. I shall speak to them briefly.

The provision in the resolution on the execution of works in a highway arises from the fact that the Bill now contains a power for the Secretary of State to make regulations so that local authorities can charge utility companies from the start of any works that they undertake on the street; that is known as lane rental.

The provision on driver training courses arises from the fact that the Bill now enables the Secretary of State to make regulations to require drivers of specific types of vehicle to undertake training as part of obtaining their licence. Fees could be charged to recover the Secretary of State's costs for supervising such training, which includes assessments of trainers authorised to provide courses. There are also powers to cap the charges that trainers could make for those training courses. We already have similar requirements for motor cycle training, and the powers mean that they could be extended to other vehicles, in fulfilment of an important part of our road safety strategy.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: It is highly premature, but how can I resist the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Bercow: I am always enticed by the Minister's words, as he should know by now. I simply wanted to ask him whether the regulations that he is helpfully describing will be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure.

Mr. Hill: It often seems as if the hon. Gentleman is positively obsessed by me. I am delighted to tell him that the regulations will be subject to the negative procedure.

Both the amendments to which the resolution relates were welcomed by all parties in another place, and I commend them to the House.

4.2 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I do not believe that this matter should detain us too long because there is broad agreement on it. Clearly, utility organisations cause disruption to traffic, and the motoring public will believe that giving them an incentive to get on with the work is good.

There is a slight difference between setting a small charge to incentivise and another stealth tax. Perhaps the Minister could reassure us about the levels of charging and confirm that the utilities will not ultimately have to turn to the hard-pressed public and add substantial amounts to bills for water and electricity. As the matter must be tackled through statutory instrument, perhaps the Minister can tell us the likely timetable for its implementation.

4.3 pm

Mr. Hill: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, we have always said that we regard the powers as residual. Our first move will be to introduce provisions under section 74 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 to set out penalties for overstaying in street works.

On the question about charges, it is too early to say. If we decide to proceed with lane rental, we shall want to discuss an appropriate level with highway authorities and undertakers. On the usual question about stealth taxes, I point out that each utility is subject to a regulator to prevent abuse by any monopoly power.

Let me make a minor correction: lest I be accused of misleading the House, the regulations will be subject to the affirmative procedure.

Question put and agreed to.

Transport Bill (Supplemental Programme)

4.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move,

That the Order of the House [9th May] be supplemented as follows:—

Lords Amendments

1.—(1) Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments to the Bill shall be completed at today's sitting.

(2) If not previously concluded, the proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion at midnight.

(3) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order—

Nos. 27 to 29, 31, 1 to 26, 30 and 32 to 235.

(4) Each part of the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the time specified in relation to that part of the proceedings in this Table.

TABLE

Proceedings	*Time for conclusion of proceedings*
Lords Amendments Nos. 27 to 29.	Three and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr Stephen Timms relating to the Transport Bill [Ways and Means] (No. 3).
Lords Amendment No. 31.	Four and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion.
Remaining Lords Amendments.	Six and a quarter hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion.

2.—(1) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any further amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown, and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment, and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in the Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has—

(a) agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments, or

(b) disposed of an Amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

Subsequent stages

3.—(1) The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further message from the Lords on the Bill.

(2) The proceedings on any further message from the Lords shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

4.—(1) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 3.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the question already proposed from the chair.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords message.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords proposals.

Reasons Committee

5. The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its chairman.

6.—(1) The Committee shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(2) Proceedings in the Committee shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion 30 minutes after their commencement.

(3) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with sub-paragraph (2), the chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided, and

(b) then put forthwith successively questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(4) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further questions being put.

Miscellaneous

7. The following paragraphs apply to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments to the Bill.

(b) proceedings on any further message from the Lords on the Bill, and

(c) proceedings on the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons (and the appointment of its chairman) and the report of the Committee.

8. Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings.

9. The proceedings shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

10.—(1) If on a day on which any of the proceedings take place a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (emergency debates) would stand over to seven o'clock—

(a) that motion stands over until the conclusion of any of the proceedings which are to be brought to a conclusion at or before that time, and

(b) the bringing to a conclusion of any of the proceedings which are to be brought to a conclusion after that time is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(2) If a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day to such a day, the bringing to a conclusion of any of the proceedings on that day is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

11. No dilatory motion with respect to, or in the course of, the proceedings shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion made by a Minister of the Crown shall be put forthwith.

12. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which any of the proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion, no notice is required of a motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this order.

The motion has been agreed through the usual channels. Its aim is to ensure consideration of the amendments made to the Bill in the other place in a logical manner, and in a way that provides time for debate on the issues that are most likely to be of concern to hon. Members. Thus we begin with part I, and especially with the two groups of amendments—Nos. 27 to 29 and No. 31—that will doubtless excite most attention. The proportion of time allocated to debate those groups reflects their significance.

However, time is also allocated to debate the other amendments that were introduced in the other place and there will be an opportunity to consider them, too. Although the vast bulk of the amendments are, as usual, of a technical, minor and consequential nature, the most important deal with, for example, the extension of concessionary fares to the disabled, bus lane enforcement, street works and quiet lanes, and relate to latter parts of the Bill. They were either introduced by the Opposition and accepted by the Government or are the subject of an all-party agreement.

The overall total of six and a quarter hours to consider the amendments and the Ways and Means resolution is appropriate and reasonable and will allow proper consideration by the House.

4.5 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I do not want to detain the House for longer than is necessary because we want to get to the substance of the amendments.

The timetable was negotiated through the usual channels and there is a good reason for dealing with the most contentious items at the beginning of our debate, not least because that will cause the relevant Minister, who should be present, the least inconvenience. The relevant Minister is, of course, the Deputy Prime Minister himself, but he is not in the Chamber and has no plans to come here to discuss these matters. That raises the question whether the timetable is relevant.

The Deputy Prime Minister's absences have become something of a regular occurrence. He ducked our debates on the fuel crisis and, on Monday, on the London Underground public-private partnership. As I predicted then, he is now ducking this debate. On Monday, I drew attention to the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks made a fortnight ago:

> I am constantly available to discuss such matters either in statements or other debates . . . There are many matters that I am prepared to debate, and I commonly come to the House.—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 150.]

In fact, the right hon. Gentleman was in the House a few moments ago during Prime Minister's questions, but he is not here now. His private office does not even try to offer an excuse for his absences. I thought that the Government were against truancy, but he is playing truant. The situation is getting beyond a joke.

On Monday, we welcomed the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), to the Dispatch Box. He at least has responsibility for London and railways. I like dealing with him but, as I said on Monday, he is not the organ grinder of his Department.

I understand that we shall later enjoy debating with the Minister for Housing and Planning, but, with regard to transport responsibilities, he is not even the monkey—he comes from a different zoo. I have a document issued by the Cabinet Office, entitled "List of Ministerial Responsibilities", which states that the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich is

> Minister of State (Minister for Housing and Planning).

His responsibilities, which are clearly highlighted with bullet points, are for "Housing and planning" and "Construction". By no stretch of the imagination could he be held responsible for the policies that we are likely to debate when we consider the most contentious amendments that were introduced in the other place and which relate to National Air Traffic Services.

The document states that the Deputy Prime Minister has

> Responsibility for the overall direction of the Department and its agencies

but he is not here. We cannot cross-examine the Minister for Transport, who is responsible for integrated transport policy and strategic responsibility for all transport matters, because he is a Member of the other place. The Minister for Housing and Planning serves, to put it not too kindly, as the ventriloquist's dummy. I leave it to the House to decide whether the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Transport or the Treasury is pulling the strings on this occasion.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I do not think that personal abuse helps to make a serious case.

Mr. Jenkins: I do not regard my comments as being particularly personally abusive, so I reject the hon. Gentleman's charge. However, I am sure that he would be the first to agree that it is one thing to accept timetabling of such debates and another for the Deputy Prime Minister to snub the House and, of course, the British people—that we cannot accept. The Deputy Prime Minister is snubbing right hon. and hon. Members, who have a constitutional duty to express their concerns and those of their constituents about NATS privatisation to the author of that policy.

This is clearly an important debate. According to the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*:

> Labour Whips are understood to have ordered all ministers back to London.

It goes on to report that the Whips have

> offered a day off to MPs who might vote against the Government, in an attempt to head off the rebellion.

That makes me wonder whether the Deputy Prime Minister is one of those who have been let off—or is he just out of control? This occasion was important enough to have dragged him from his Department to a private meeting to address Labour Members this morning, so where is he now?

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): As one who, in fact, will not be supporting the Government tonight, may I observe that the hon. Gentleman is trivialising the issue? We want to deal with the substance. We will reach our own views and vote accordingly, or abstain, as the case may be. The petty stuff that the hon. Gentleman is dishing out does not impress anyone. It certainly does not seem to impress his own side—the four Back Benchers sitting behind him, that is.

Mr. Jenkin: That intervention took up extra time needlessly.

As we discuss the motion, Members should bear in mind the fact that it relates to the Deputy Prime Minister's policy, and that the Deputy Prime Minister is not here to discuss it. He—not the Minister for Housing and Planning—bears responsibility for it. This occasion is marked by yet another denial of proper scrutiny and proper accountability. I know that that does not matter to some Members, but it should matter to all of us.

Who is the Deputy Prime Minister hiding from? Who is he more frightened of? Is he hiding from the public, or just from the House—or, indeed, from some of his own Back Benchers? The Government are avoiding democratic accountability to the House.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I agree with my hon. Friend. The Ministers who are present are a couple of very agreeable Members who work hard, debate matters extremely courteously and thoroughly, and give proper answers when they can. Today's unanswered question, however, is, "Where is the Deputy Prime Minister?" We do not doubt the Ministers' integrity or their quality; it is just that they do not hold the job of the man with whom we wish to debate.

Mr. Jenkin: My hon. Friend is right. The Government shelter their Minister for Transport by appointing to that post someone from the other place, and prop up the

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Secretary of State who has increasingly become a stooge Deputy Prime Minister incapable of carrying out his proper duties in the House.

Mr. Hill *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Other Back Benchers wish to speak.

4.13 pm

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I agree with the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) that we do not wish to delay the proceedings unnecessarily, but, as he says, there is a great deal at stake. This is an important debate, and I think that rather more time should have been provided for debate on the Lords amendments. The air traffic control set-up could jeopardise safety, if the privatisation goes ahead. It involves major issues of national security. No other country apart from Fiji has privatised its air traffic control system. I do not think that the House doubts the significance of what we will shortly debate.

I welcome the deliberations in another place, which have given the Government a window of opportunity—a chance to think again before making what is potentially a big mistake. No matter what happens in the Chamber today, that window will still exist, and I hope the Government will take advantage of it. However, although I think we should have been given more time, I do not intend to vote against the motion, and urge others not to do so either, so that we can begin the main debate as soon as possible.

4.14 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I endorse what was said by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) about the need to get on with the substance of the debate, but, as a signatory to the motion, I want to say a word about its significance. First, however, let me say that I find it extremely difficult to take seriously the comments of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). I can only imagine that his diatribe was intended to disguise the fact that he was the only Conservative Member who had the honesty to admit guilt about the privatisation of the railway system. All his colleagues seem to have disappeared. He talked about others hiding, but he was trying to disguise his own integrity and honesty by going off on that extraordinary tangent.

We, too, regret the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister is not here to debate this extremely important issue.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I will not give way; I want to get on.

We acknowledge the fact that the two Ministers who carried the burden of the day in Committee are here, and I hope that they will listen carefully to the concerns of many Members on both sides of the House, including distinguished Labour Back Benchers.

The programme motion is indicative of the way in which the House can improve its consideration of legislation. As has been said, there is a consensus about several measures in the Bill, not least those on lane rental and penalties for the way in which the now privatised utilities can hold us all to ransom. I pray in aid the chaos that has been caused in my own county, Cornwall, by the cable contractors—profit-making utilities that are nothing to do with public services in the old sense. That is why a programme motion is so helpful in concentrating on the matters about which opinion is still divided.

I acknowledge the fact that some Conservative Members are here in support of the motion, and it is helpful for us to reach agreement on the proper way to debate the issues that remain contentious. That is why it was such a lot of hot air the other night when Members said that occasionally reaching agreement on the proper way to debate such Bills was an outrageous affront to the dignity and proper responsibilities of Members of Parliament. We welcome the programme motion. More time could have been allowed, but there will be opportunities to consider the big issues, such as public safety.

4.17 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I hope that there will be time to clarify a very important issue of fact. Not long ago, in answer to a question about the pilots' attitude, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said—I shall be told whether I quote him wrongly—that the British Air Line Pilots Association's view did not necessarily represent that of the airline pilots. I should like the Government to clarify precisely whether or not they believe that BALPA speaks for the pilots.

My own experience is that on the 18 separate occasions that I have gone into the cockpits of either British Airways or British Midland aircraft on the Edinburgh-London run and asked the captains—they are senior captains—whether they support BALPA, the answer has always been yes in relation to such proposals.

I hope that time will be given to considering whether the proposals constitute a danger. I choose my words extremely carefully and after due consideration. Of course the Government do not mean this to happen, but I think that the proposals represent a path to possible manslaughter because, in the pilots' view, they are dangerous. The issue of possible manslaughter must be addressed because my constituents and those of every other hon. Member in the north certainly did not send us to the House to acquiesce in possible manslaughter.

4.19 pm

Mr. Hill: The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) is verging on tedious repetition on such issues. We heard a diatribe on Monday, and we are hearing it again now. I suppose that he has to do that because he has already issued his press release, but the truth of the matter is that the Deputy Prime Minister is a most frequent attender in the House, not least on issues such as this. The hon. Gentleman is on pretty thin ground in pursuing that particular question. I suppose that he is seeking to avoid the substance of the debate because he does not want the public to be reminded that his party is for the total sell-off of NATS—lock, stock and barrel.

As the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) pointed out, it was my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning who took part I of the Bill—that dealing with NATS—through the Standing Committee stage. This is the

team that took the whole of the Bill, over a period of 87 hours, through Committee. This is the team that it is most appropriate be present to deal with those matters in the Chamber.

If we are talking about who is and who is not in the Chamber, where, as a number of my colleagues have asked, is the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman)? After all, I thought that he was responsible for the environment, transport and the regions in the shadow Cabinet—not that he would be likely to add much punching power to the debate.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hill: No; we have heard quite enough from the hon. Gentleman.

May I persist with the boxing analogy that I drew earlier in the week? The hon. Gentleman will have to be satisfied on this occasion with both bantam and middleweight performers. That flatters him, too. I suggest that we should now get on with the serious business that is before the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Transport Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Mr. Speaker: I draw the House's attention to the fact that privilege is involved in Lords amendments Nos. 81, 86, 112 to 114, 120, 125, 170 to 183 and 194. If the House agrees to any of those amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

Clause 40

TRANSFER SCHEMES MADE BY CAA

Lords amendment: No. 27, in page 27, line 5, at end insert—

("( ) No direction to make a transfer scheme shall be given under subsection (1) before the first Session of the next Parliament after that in which this Act is passed.")

4.22 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 28 and 29 and the Government motions to disagree thereto.

Mr. Raynsford: The purpose of the three amendments is to ensure that no transfer schemes are made or approved before the first Session of the Parliament following that in which the Bill receives Royal Assent. Transfer schemes involve the transfer of assets, rights and liabilities to relevant parties in readiness for the NATS public-private partnership. That cannot be set up until those transfers have been effected. Therefore, the amendments have the effect of delaying the PPP until the next Parliament—until after the next general election.

I am sure that it will come as no surprise to hon. Members that the Government do not think that that delaying tactic is helpful. We do not see the need for any further delay in proceeding with the establishment of the PPP. We made our first announcement of the proposal for a partial sale of NATS on 11 June 1998. That was followed by a public consultation on the proposal in October that year and a statement was made following that consultation.

There are other instances of consultation. There has been a Select Committee inquiry. The sale documentation was made available to the House, and certain parts of it to other interested parties, and was subjected to lengthy debates in Committee. There has therefore been ample time for public scrutiny of both the policy and its detail.

In addition, it has been necessary to introduce legislation to enable the partial sale of NATS to take place. There have been lively debates on the Bill in the House, in Committee and in another place. That in itself has enabled the Government's proposals to be subjected to further detailed scrutiny.

I turn to the main purposes of the PPP. There is an urgent need for investment in NATS and for the injection of new project management skills. Important investment

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decisions need to be made now in respect of major projects. The ability of a strategic partner to make a meaningful contribution to those may be lost if the PPP is delayed.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will the Minister confirm that the Government now intend to put the air up for sale?

Mr. Raynsford: If my hon. Friend waited a little while, he would hear a full explanation of the Government's policy, including our absolute commitment to maintaining full safety in all United Kingdom air traffic services. I hope that he will form a proper and considered judgment when he has heard all the arguments.

There have already been delays in introducing new technology at the Swanwick centre, and there is a pressing need for the contribution from the strategic partner both here and at the new Scottish centre at Prestwick. NATS has an excellent reputation and record on safety, but it would benefit from a strengthening of its capabilities in the introduction of new technology. A delay in the introduction of the PPP, which the amendments would cause, could jeopardise the prospects for both centres.

Moreover, further delay and uncertainty will not be helpful to NATS or its staff, who have had to live with uncertainty for far too long. The previous Administration started questioning the future of NATS some years ago. We have tried to put a stop to that uncertainty by making an early announcement on the PPP. To add further delay now would be unfair to NATS staff, and could jeopardise the urgent need to recruit more air traffic controllers.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I ask this question because I would genuinely like to know the Government's latest view on the matter. My hon. Friend has rightly reminded us that the new en-route centre at Swanwick is well behind schedule. As he will know better than me, although development of the centre is NATS' responsibility, all the software, hardware and equipment—which we hope will be a quantum advance in air traffic control—are the responsibility of the private sector, including the main private contractor. How does he apportion blame for the delay between the private contractor and National Air Traffic Services? Is it still the Government's view that the centre will come on stream not this winter but next winter, and that, when it does, it will indeed be a quantum advance in air traffic control?

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend has studied this matter carefully because, if I may remind him, he was the Minister who, on 11 June 1998, made the statement to the House on the Government's decision to proceed with the public-private partnership. At that stage, he acknowledged the fact that there was a need for a partnership both to secure investment to develop services and to mobilise private sector resources.

My right hon. Friend said on 11 June 1998—and I entirely agree with the position that he took at that time—

Our preference is that 49 per cent. of the shares, and a golden share, are held by the Government; and 51 per cent. by private investors including employees.—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 637W.]

That is exactly the model with which the Government are currently proceeding. The logic that led my right hon. Friend to that conclusion remains the logic that has led the Government to the current proposals.

As for Swanwick, we are five years behind schedule and have over-expenditure of several hundred million pounds. That is not a cause for congratulation. It is essential that we have in place a proper management structure that can ensure that, in future, procurement of the necessary information and other technology to provide services to guarantee effective and safe air traffic control systems is handled better than it has been.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I would like to finish my reply to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang).

Whatever the merits or failures of individual contractors, ultimately it is the responsibility of the commissioning body to ensure that it gets the brief right and introduces the appropriate technology and systems on time and on budget. We believe that we need to strengthen national air traffic controls with the new arrangement of a public-private partnership to ensure that new technology is commissioned on time and on budget, rather than to repeat the rather unhappy experience that we have had at Swanwick. It is equally important to ensure that the new Prestwick centre goes ahead. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh and others who represent Scottish constituencies are particularly keen to see that happen.

4.30 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Before the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) intervened, the Minister was saying that the Lords amendment that we are discussing was unfair to NATS staff. Can he tell us, therefore, why the NATS staff whom I and other hon. Members have met support the amendment?

Mr. Raynsford: Some NATS staff probably do support the amendment, but I was making the point that prolonging the continuing uncertainty about the future of NATS, which would be the effect of the amendment, would not create a climate of confidence in the future. It would certainly not be in the interests of recruiting new staff. NATS and others have made the point forcefully that there is an urgent need to recruit new air traffic controllers. I believe that it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that the people doing that hugely important job can have the confidence to look ahead and know the framework in which they will be expected to operate.

Mr. Dalyell: It is not a question of some NATS staff; it is a question of the considered view over many briefings

of the Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists and the British Air Line Pilots Association. In particular, why have Ministers been unable to persuade the IPMS on the issue of the willingness of the PPP to maintain public interest services, notably to general aviation users, which are uneconomic but essential for safety reasons?

Mr. Raynsford: I have to tell my hon. Friend, for whom I have a great deal of respect, that it is not the Government's responsibility to ensure the adherence of every particular body to the proposals. It is their responsibility to take a view on this. I cannot answer for the decision of the IPMS, but I can assert firmly that the Government have made it absolutely clear from the outset that the safety of air traffic control systems in this country is the top priority. We have said it again and again and, in order to show our bona fides, we have accepted amendments that we will be debating later this evening which give effect to that by putting it clearly and unambiguously in the Bill.

Safety will be paramount. It will be the No. 1 priority under the new proposal. I can assure all right hon. and hon. Members of that because there has been a certain amount of misinformation on the subject from people who have suggested that safety might be compromised.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I shall give way in a moment, but first I should like to make this absolutely clear to the House, because there has been some uncertainty: Safety will be the No. 1 priority. The Government are absolutely committed to the maintenance of the safest possible air traffic control system. We are also committed to ensuring that it is a modern, up-to-date and efficient system which is able to cope with the many pressures that it will face in the years ahead as traffic increases.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend has stated that part of the motivation for the proposal is to provide security for the staff and to respond to their concerns. Has he visited the air traffic control centre in West Drayton in my constituency in the past two years? I may have missed his visit. Has he consulted the staff? If he has not, why not ballot the staff and ask them for their views on the issue? Their view is very clear. The unions involved have consulted their members and made it clear that they are opposed to the Government's proposals.

Mr. Raynsford: I have not visited the air traffic control centre at West Drayton, but my ministerial colleagues have. We have listened very carefully indeed to the views that have been expressed by all interested parties. However, my hon. Friend will be aware that a range of different parties all have a view on the matter. The Government clearly have to take a balanced view in the light of the evidence and, above all, in the national interest. It is our considered view that the necessary investment to secure an effective future service of air traffic control systems in this country is best served by a public-private partnership which can bring in the benefits of additional private sector investment and private sector project management expertise, while at the same time ensuring the most rigorous safety regime which, as I have already made it clear to the House, is the No. 1 priority.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Given that we are now seeing the results of the Tory privatisation of the railways, does it really make sense at this time to go for the semi-privatisation of a public service? That is what some people call the Government's proposed public-private partnership. I should have thought that the Lords' decision would have encouraged Ministers to reflect and seriously reconsider the proposal.

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend airs understandable and justifiable concerns about safety on the railways, which many of us share. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that effective action is taken to deal with the problems, which have been much in evidence. However, the model that we propose for the NATS public-private partnership is very different from the privatisation model adopted for the railways.

These are very important issues. Specifically, under the model that we propose, the private sector will be invited to supply investment and project management skills. They will be hugely important in the procurement of efficient new IT systems to enable the service to operate as we want it to in the future. I have already explained why that is so vital.

However, my hon. Friend will be aware that the Bill ensures that the whole issue of safety remains in the public sector. The Civil Aviation Authority will retain the primary responsibility for safety and will set the safety standards. Safety will remain its No. 1 priority, as the Bill makes clear. That is the difference between the framework that we propose and that adopted for the privatisation of the railways.

I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that the framework proposed in the Bill is different, and that it has been designed to take account of the special needs involved in providing safe and efficient air traffic control systems. The framework will ensure that we can expand the system to meet changing pressures and needs, while at the same time guaranteeing the maintenance of the safest service possible. That has always been our No. 1 priority.

I understand that in another place a precedent was cited for delaying the implementation of transfer provisions. In 1982, during proceedings on the Telecommunications Bill, the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that neither the transfer of assets and obligations to the new company nor the issue of shares to the public would take place before the general election that was coming up.

There is, however, a major difference between the British Telecom case and NATS. The former was a flotation in which the Government were selling off their interest in the business in its entirety.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The British Telecom arrangement would nowadays be called, in modern parlance, a public-private partnership. Only 51 per cent. of shares were sold, with the Government retaining 49 per cent. for a considerable time.

Mr. Raynsford: I am perfectly happy to stand corrected on that point, but it was the intention of the then

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Government to dispose of their entire holding, and British Telecom is now an entirely privatised utility. That is not the Government's intention with regard to NATS. As the hon. Gentleman will know from our lengthy and enjoyable debates in Committee, the Government intend to retain a significant shareholding in NATS at all times. That difference is very important.

In the case of the PPP, the Government are proposing to dispose of a proportion of our interest in NATS, but we will retain a substantial stake to ensure that the public interest remains protected.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): That very substantial interest may amount to only 25 per cent. Will my hon. Friend explain that? Moreover, is not the crucial difference between the privatisation of British Telecom and the Government's proposals with regard to NATS that these proposals were never mentioned in the 1987 Labour manifesto?

Mr. Raynsford: First, as my hon. Friend will have noted, the Bill sets the level of Government shareholding initially at 49 per cent. The Bill allows for that to be reduced if it is felt appropriate to do so, through dilution, to a figure no lower than 25 per cent. The purpose of that was made very clear in Committee and right hon. and hon. Members who were there will understand the reason. We have frequently made the point that air traffic control systems in Europe will change dramatically in the years ahead. We will inevitably see a consolidation. We will see a reduction from the large number of current air traffic control centres to probably only a handful.

We want to ensure that NATS is in a strong position so that it can play a leading role in the process of consolidation. There may well be, as part of that process, a case for some further disposal of shares to enlarge the number of interested parties. However, the Government have been clear that they will always retain a minimum of 25 per cent. of shares, which is the sufficient shareholding to ensure that they are capable of blocking any activities that could threaten the whole basis of the operation. That is the framework, and that is why the figures of 49 per cent. and 25 per cent. appear in the Bill.

My hon. Friend's second point was about the manifesto. He will be aware that the Prime Minister made a clear commitment in our manifesto. He said:

> We will search out at every turn new ways and new ideas to tackle the new issues . . . how to put the public and private sector together in partnership to give us the infrastructure and transport system we need.

That is a pretty clear indication that we were ready to consider public-private partnerships in relation to transport services.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, the hon. Gentleman had better listen to this, because he will not necessarily like it.

Let us compare that commitment with the Conservative proposals. The previous Government proposed the total privatisation of air traffic control services without having made any such proposal in their election manifesto. It is sheer cant for the Conservative party to claim that there is anything wrong with bringing forward a proposal without its having previously been in the election manifesto. That was how they behaved when they were in Government.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: Of course I will—if the hon. Gentleman wants to come back on that point, he is welcome to.

Mr. Jenkin: The Labour party manifesto can be accused of being a little misleading, while ours was perfectly clear. The Labour manifesto says, under "Shipping and Aviation":

> The guiding objectives of our aviation strategy will be fair competition, safety and environmental standards. We want all British carriers to be able to compete fairly in the interests of consumers.

I do not think that anyone reading that will have got the impression that the sale of National Air Traffic Services was on the agenda. The hon. Gentleman should at least admit that this was a little thin.

Mr. Raynsford: I have quoted directly from the Prime Minister's words in the Labour party manifesto. He made it perfectly clear that public-private partnerships to give us the infrastructure and transport system we need would be pursued at every turn. That, in my view, is a clear commitment to consider such options. We considered them but had not reached conclusions at the time of the manifesto. However, when we were in government we concluded that an appropriate public-private partnership was the right way forward. That was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh in a statement to the House in June 1998, and we stick by that commitment.

Mr. Llew Smith: Will the Minister now quote directly from the Labour party conference, when our spokesperson gave a commitment that we would not be selling off the air?

Mr. Raynsford: I recall very well the Labour party conference endorsing our public-private partnership recently. That is a clear commitment by our party conference, and the Government are acting in line with it.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Just for information, what did the phrase "the air is not for sale" mean?

Mr. Raynsford: I am not sure what it means. It is one of those phrases that people use glibly and repeat. However, there is an absolute commitment on the part of the Government to ensure that there will be a safe system for air traffic control. The public sector will continue to oversee the safety issue through the Civil Aviation Authority, which will remain in public ownership; and the public-private sector partnership will be there for the purpose that I have outlined—to bring in the necessary finance and new management expertise.

This is a genuine partnership, by strong contrast with the Conservative party's view that total privatisation is the preferred option. We reject that option. We have a way

forward that guarantees the improved service that is so vital for the future and unquestionably guarantees public scrutiny and control of the safety issue, which is equally vital for the future.

4.45 pm

Mr. Dalyell: If there is to be monitoring, the self-regulation group will require a huge increase in human resources to regulate all NATS activities. As I understand it, 17 inspectors are employed for air traffic control and 10 for engineering. NATS employs 1,800 controllers and 1,300 engineers. How is regulation to be effected in terms of human resources?

Mr. Raynsford: We have made it clear on many occasions, and I am happy to give a further commitment now, that the Government will ensure that resources are available to maintain the safe system that we are committed to achieving. We will not allow human resource levels to fall below those that we regard as appropriate to meet the objectives.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I asked the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), what plans there were to alter the number of safety inspectors after privatisation. He replied:

> The Air Traffic Services Standards Department . . . employs 27 inspectors dealing directly with operational safety issues . . . The CAA currently has no intention to alter the number of inspectors as a result of the completion of the National Air Traffic Services Public Private Partnership.—[*Official Report*, 10 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 419W.]

How can that give the public confidence?

Mr. Raynsford: I think that the public would want the confidence of knowing that the Government are committed to ensuring that manpower resources will be sufficient to maintain appropriate standards. If the CAA were to come to Government seeking additional resources, its application would be examined extremely carefully and sympathetically. However, the hon. Gentleman is referring to something quite different—that is, the current basis for staffing expectations. That does not relate to concerns about the adequacy of the staff to do the job. I have given the answer, and I hold by it.

Perhaps not sufficient attention has been given to the suggestion made by the other place that it would be appropriate for it to pass amendments that would prevent the Government from implementing certain provisions in the Bill until the next Parliament. It is my view and that of the Government that it would be entirely inappropriate for such amendments to appear in the Bill. It is even more inappropriate for such amendments to be proposed by a body which has not been subject to the judgment of the electorate. It is for the elected Government to determine the speed at which they can implement their legislation. Were the proposals of the other place to remain in the Bill—I hope that all my right hon. and hon. Friends will consider this carefully—we would be straying into dangerous constitutional territory, and creating a precedent that could be used again and again to damage the Government's good intentions. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to remember that when they consider how they will be voting at the end of the debate.

There are some in another place who have argued that we do not have a mandate from the people to pursue our proposals for NATS. That is rich, coming from a Chamber which has never been tested by the electorate. We look to that Chamber to act as a revising body, not as a body that dictates when Government legislation can or cannot be implemented.

I move on to the public interest. Under the Bill's provisions, the public will be protected through a range of measures, including the licensing regime, the strategic partnership agreement, the special share and the powers of direction. As all the necessary public protections are in place, no additional benefits for the public interest will be gained by delay. However, there will be considerable detriment. The PPP was included as a commitment in the White Paper on integrated transport, which was published in 1998. The focus of the White Paper was on transport safety and improvement of current regulatory systems. Implementing the PPP will make a positive contribution to safety by effecting a complete separation between safety regulation and service provision. I see no sense in delaying the split, which has overwhelming support from all those who have looked seriously at the issue, including the Select Committee.

The Bill contains several provisions that are important in their own right, including those that subject NATS to economic regulation irrespective of when the PPP is completed. The amendments would delay the PPP and the introduction of an improved incentive-based system of economic regulation, which is intended to benefit users.

I hope that I have explained why the Government are unable to accept the amendments.

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): If the amendments were agreed to, would my hon. Friend see any prospect of the Government changing their mind and considering, for example, a trust? Would he expect Labour policy on NATS to change at the general election?

Mr. Raynsford: We have considered a range of options and models proposed by various parties. We have also considered options proposed in other countries, notably the NAVCAN system in Canada. We fully understand that there are advocates of those systems, but we have concluded that the public-private partnership set out in the Bill is the right way forward. We believe it essential to proceed with it. My hon. Friend has been a forceful advocate of the new provision and investment in her own constituency which will guarantee the two-centre strategy. We wholly endorse that, and the PPP will make possible the investment necessary to ensure that we take forward that commitment and have effective operations at Swanwick and Prestwick. That is our commitment, and I am sure that the House will, on reflection, recognise that it is the right way forward. I urge the House to reject the amendments.

Mr. Jenkin: Now that I have seen the difficulty with which the Minister defended this proposal. I understand why the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions did not want to be here. The House is entitled to express concern at the fact that we do not have at the Dispatch Box a Minister who has ever visited the London air traffic control centre or Swanwick or met air traffic controllers. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Minister, is playing the role of paid counsel rather than that of a policy-making Minister. That is unsatisfactory.

[Mr. Jenkin]

I speak with absolute authority over Conservative transport policy. *[Interruption.]* That may invite a wry smile from the Minister, but there is a clear contrast between his position and mine. I am a member of the shadow Cabinet, and the Secretary of State is the only Minister in his Department who is a fully fledged Cabinet Minister. He should have been here to discuss this matter.

I should pick up one minor point. I do not accept that the split will be unable to go ahead if the amendment is accepted. The operational split could certainly go ahead, although the split of ownership admittedly would not.

There is no need to rehearse in detail all the arguments against the proposed botched privatisation. Although Ministers pretend that it is something other than privatisation, it compels businesses to seek strategic partnerships that might result in a conflict of interest. Having heard a debate for the past month or so on the unnecessary complexity of a previous privatisation, I find it strange that the Government should inflict on us a privatisation with a structure that is so complex. That structure leaves open the question of who is responsible, as the management have a shareholding of only 5 per cent., the strategic partner has a shareholding of 46 per cent. and the Government hold the biggest shareholding of all. When push comes to shove and there is a fundamental disagreement between the Government and the strategic partner, how will that break down? It is not obvious, as there is no clear chain of command.

This privatisation is being delivered with assurances that cannot be kept. The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) pointed out that the assurance that the Government will constantly retain 46 per cent. of the shares is not in the Bill. Clause 48 offers the possibility of a reduction in the Government's shareholding to 25 per cent. and includes a Henry VIII clause, as that 25 per cent. can be altered by a simple order laid before the House, which can now be voted through by a paper ballot in the No Lobby on a Wednesday afternoon, separately from a proper debate on the issue. The Bill puts absolute power in the hands of the Government, subject to only one tiny parliamentary check, so that they can sell 100 per pent. of the business if they wish. As a result of that Henry VIII clause, nothing in the Bill is immutable.

There is also the question of the golden share, which is supposed to be of great comfort. When the Bill was in Committee, the Minister for Housing and Planning scoffed when I pointed out that BAA's golden share was subject to infraction proceedings. On 11 October, the European Commission issued a notice that stated:

> Commission decides to refer UK to Court concerning BAA.

The Commission is taking a stage further infraction proceedings against the UK concerning the golden share held in BAA. I do not want to rehearse all the arguments again, but it is clear from legal advice to the Commission that is freely available to Ministers that the golden share will not stand the test of a judgment by the European Court of Justice, so that is another assurance that cannot be delivered.

We have heard a lot about investment, but the preparation for privatisation has been heralded by a move to impose on the business an RPI minus formula that requires cuts in prospective capital investment. The NATS management response to the economic regulation group's second consultation paper points out that the Civil Aviation Authority's proposal in that paper requires

> savings of between 16 per cent. and 29 per cent. in capital expenditure.

The privatisation will be very strange, as it will be the first privatisation to have required cuts in capital expenditure to get going. Every other privatisation has been premised on the prospect of substantially increased capital expenditure. However, we have seen the matter in black and white, as set out by the hand of NATS management.

Finally, there has been discussion of the continued assurances that the Government are giving about the two-centre strategy for the United Kingdom. There must be uncertainty about that, as we have heard in the background that NATS management have a vision of a four or five centre strategy for the whole of Europe. One wonders why the Prestwick investment has been constantly delayed and never put on the table. The Government will not be in a position to deliver their current assurance, even though they are saying that it is in the plans. However, once the business is in the private sector, we must ask whether they will be able to deliver their assurance, even if they continue to hold 46 per cent. of the shares.

Ms Osborne: That is exactly why I asked the Government to amend the Bill to ensure that the new Scottish centre would go ahead, but I cannot cast any light on previous delays, which were caused by the Conservative Government calling into question the two-centre strategy and introducing a vastly expensive and unworkable private finance initiative.

5 pm

Mr. Jenkin: Well, at least we had a PFI. The Government scrapped the PFI and now we are on a wing and a prayer. The hon. Lady will have to believe the promise of an industry in the private sector. She must explain that to her electors.

Safety is a constant refrain in this debate. I wish to place it on record that I have 100 per cent. faith in the safety regime of NATS and the way in which it is supervised by the Civil Aviation Authority. I do not believe that we will face the difficulties caused by the change in working practices and relationships as occurred on the railways because the safety culture in aviation is much stronger than it ever was on the railways.

Concerns about safety bring up questions of public and staff confidence. Whatever the merits of privatisation, this privatisation is certainly the wrong scheme. I do not know whether we will include privatisation of air traffic services in our next manifesto. I say that genuinely and openly. The promotion of solutions that do not command public confidence is a serious matter, and one that should affect the Government at this stage. I give the Government an absolute assurance. Whatever our policy is for air traffic control, it will be in our manifesto. We will be explicit.

Mr. Raynsford: It was not in 1992.

Mr. Jenkin: Well, it was in 1997, when we planned to carry out the privatisation. To accuse us of not including in our manifesto something that we subsequently did not

do is not a strong point, if I may say so. The fact is that we included privatisation of air traffic services in our 1997 manifesto, and it is necessary to include a policy of such importance in one's manifesto.

We may well include the trust proposal in our manifesto. It seems to be an option that will provide the disciplines of private sector management without the alarm that would be caused by creating a profit-making company.

Mr. Raynsford *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: If the Minister wants to make fun of me for an apparent U-turn, let him go ahead, but I believe that the issues are much too serious to make fun of.

Mr. Raynsford: I have no intention of making fun of the hon. Gentleman or of indulging in the cheap and personal jibes that he has made such a hallmark of his speeches this evening. The point that I was making was that the criticism from the Conservatives that our 1997 manifesto did not contain an explicit policy commitment in relation to NATS comes a bit rich from a party that proposed the privatisation of NATS during the 1992–97 Parliament without having made any commitment in its 1992 manifesto. What it put in its 1997 manifesto is a different matter. The electorate certainly took a pretty dim view of the Conservative party's 1997 election manifesto.

Mr. Jenkin: That is a pretty double-edged sword. First, the Minister accuses us of not doing something that was not in our 1992 manifesto and then takes credit for the fact that we were beaten in the last general election, when privatisation was in our manifesto. Now, he proposes the privatisation of NATS when it was not in his manifesto.

I will come now to some of the comments that have been made. Fundamentally, these amendments are about only one argument—democratic accountability. It is always an exquisite irony—one that the hon. Gentleman seems unable to stomach—when the other place delivers a rebuke to this elected House about our democratic duties. The amendments offer just such a rebuke.

At the 1996 Labour party conference, the present Chief Secretary to the Treasury, then Labour's Transport spokesman, proclaimed to ecstatic Labour cheers:

> Labour will do everything we can to block this sell-off. Our air is not for sale.

There is not much cheering at present.

Later that month, the right hon. Gentleman issued a press release stating that the scheme

> will undermine confidence in Air Traffic Control . . . Labour is determined to safeguard quality public service. We shall raise this in the Commons and make it a General Election issue.

Why did Labour not make it a general election issue? Because Labour had a covert plan to privatise air traffic control.

In February 1997, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), now a member of the Government, but then a shadow Transport Minister, said:

> I would like to confirm that the Labour Party are completely opposed to the privatisation of the National Air Traffic Services and under a Labour Government they will remain in the public sector.

Nothing could have been clearer than that. There was nothing to suggest privatisation in the election manifesto.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My hon. Friend has alluded—entirely appropriately—to the views of the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley). Does my hon. Friend believe that the hon. Gentleman changed his mind on the subject before or after he was appointed Deputy Chief Whip?

Mr. Jenkin: Those are murky matters; they are best left to individual hon. Gentlemen and their shaving mirrors.

During the general election campaign, a little skirmish took place on this matter. A Labour spokesman said:

> What Andrew Smith said last October was criticism of the particular scheme offered by the government. John Prescott, Margaret Beckett and Andrew Smith have made clear that we don't rule out looking at the privatisation of air traffic control.

Will the Minister tell me where Labour made it clear that they were looking at the privatisation of air traffic control? I suppose he—

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman invites me to respond, but seems reluctant to hear the answer.

I have already quoted the Prime Minister's comments in our manifesto. On 4 April 1997, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made it clear that the Government would consider a scheme for the privatisation of NATS; his remarks were reported in *The Times*.

Mr. Jenkins: One quote in one newspaper hardly constitutes a mandate. What is significant is the comment made by the Prime Minister when he was fighting the previous general election as Leader of the Opposition. In typically opaque fashion, the right hon. Gentleman said:

> We would have to review this sale because we inherited it from the Conservatives.

I do not follow the syntax of that sentence, but it confirms just how double-dealing and two-faced new Labour can be; it certainly does not constitute a mandate for the privatisation that we are considering today.

We are now offered the choice of deferral of the proposed sale. The Conservatives set a precedent for such a deferral: the idea for the privatisation of British Telecom germinated during the 1979–83 Parliament, but the Conservative Government knew that they lacked a mandate for such a privatisation. The Minister has already quoted from a debate that took place at that time. So it was a case of "not in our manifesto, no sale."

As Lord Brabazon of Tara pointed out in the other place, that view appears to be reflected by the Deputy Prime Minister in connection with the sale of Railtrack. Last month he told the House of Commons:

> In fact, our argument was that the then Government waited to sell British Telecom until after the election, so they could have done the same with Railtrack.—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 151.]

What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander, and if the previous Government could have done it with Railtrack, the present Government could certainly do it with National Air Traffic Services.

This sale is every bit as controversial as that of Railtrack—possibly more so, as the election of the present Government was preceded by such explicit denials that such a sale could possibly take place.

This proposal should appear in a manifesto that wins the approval of electors before it goes ahead. The other place is right to make us think again about this matter,

[Mr. Jenkins]

and it has every right to do so. After all, it was the Labour leader in the other place, Baroness Jay, who said that, following the Government's reforms of the upper House, it

> will be able to speak with more authority . . . A decision by the House not to support a proposal from the Government will carry more weight because it will have to include supporters from a range of political and independent opinions. So the Executive will be better held to account.

She clearly did not envisage that Ministers would stand up at the Dispatch Box in this place and continue to demand fealty from the House of Lords as though it was some kind of patsy to be put back in its box at the first opportunity.

I wholeheartedly agree with Baroness Jay's comments, and I urge the House to reject the Government's motion.

Dr. Strang: I, too, oppose the Government's motion.

There are some very good practical reasons, some of which the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) mentioned, for delaying the transfer. As was pointed out, National Air Traffic Services is facing two major challenges at present. The first is to get Swanwick—the new en-route centre near Southampton—into action as soon as possible, and senior management time should be devoted to that challenge. The second is to press ahead with the new Scottish centre.

The private finance initiative was initially proposed by the Conservatives, and for some time we continued to try to make it work. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) that it would have been a mistake. It is a mistake, in air traffic control, for the whole centre, let alone the software and hardware, to be owned by one company while the controllers are employed by someone else, as would apply under PFI.

Therefore, top management in NATS should be preoccupied with getting on with bringing Swanwick on stream and getting ahead with the new Scottish centre, and they should not be diverted, at this of all times, by this complex privatisation. It is indeed complex and, as we all know, has been described by the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs as the worst of all options.

In addition, if the measure is driven by financial considerations—as we know it is—it does not make sense to sell off Swanwick when the whole place could have been operational in about a year's time. I emphasise that I am against privatising at any time but I ask the House to consider the following. Suppose that we are in the business of maximising capital receipts to get the best deal from the privatisation for the country and the Government. After all the trauma and all the problems, and whoever is to blame, whether NATS or the private sector—I am inclined to believe that both must accept some responsibility—if the Swanwick centre is going to be operational in the next year or so, surely it is sensible to wait until then before seeking a capital receipt for it.

On that financial issue, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning for recalling what the Government were saying on the subject just before I left the Administration in July 1998. I have no intention of breaching any of the confidential discussions that took place between Ministers before I left the Administration and, as I have said time and again, I accept complete responsibility for any answers that I gave or anything that I said on the issue, but let me place the matter in context. My hon. Friend will recall that the announcement was made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his comprehensive spending review; that was the significant thing. Of course, as the then Minister of Transport, it fell to me to set out, as I did in a written answer, that the Government would consult. I emphasised—I remember the words vividly—that we were going to consult not just on the practicality, but on the principle behind the proposal.

5.15 pm

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) took over from me as the Minister of Transport, but the post was no longer a Cabinet position. He duly published a consultation document that made it clear that the Government were examining alternatives. It was a genuine consultation and he made it clear that other options would be considered. However, the announcement was finally made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), who had taken over as Minister of Transport, and, as we were rightly reminded, it was made on the last sitting day in July 1999. Governments tend to make a clutch of important announcements on the last day before the recess, but—my right hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong—I think that she had to be summoned to the House to respond to a private notice question from the Opposition.

The history of the proposal is in the public domain, but the important point is that we all know that it has been driven by financial considerations. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning quoted what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said during the general election campaign. That shows that the proposal is all about finance. It is about the so-called "black hole" in the finances that the Labour Government inherited from the Conservative party's programme. It is important to understand that, for the Government, this proposal has been driven by financial considerations. There was the prospect of significant capital receipts and the Government wanted borrowing to be transferred from the public to the private sector.

NATS is profitable, and the Government still had the option of the Post Office solution if they wanted to choose it. Many people find it hard to understand how they accepted that option for the Post Office, but not for NATS.

We know that the proposal has been made for financial and not for safety reasons, and there is no point running away from the safety issue. To put it briefly, privatising NATS is not like privatising an airline. Make no mistake about it: the Government fully intend that the so-called private strategic partner will have complete strategic control of the service. With a privatised airline, such as British Airways, the private owners can maximise profits for their shareholders by improving the service. They can increase the frequency of the service, make it more reliable and improve comfort and in-house catering. That option does not exist for air traffic control. All that air traffic controllers do is keep planes apart and our skies safe. The only way a new private owner can obtain a

higher return on the capital deployed and make even more profit from the service for private shareholders than it is making in the public sector is to cut costs.

That is why there is a concern that—not immediately, but in the long run—the conflict between private profit, which means driving down costs, and safety standards could put safety in jeopardy. If anyone is any doubt about that, I remind the House of what has emerged. In preparing for privatisation, the Civil Aviation Authority has proposed major cuts in NATS' prices. That information was leaked over the summer, and NATS said that that would

> impose major operational difficulties on the business. NATS is not a standard utility—safety in the ATC industry is undoubtedly of a different order of importance. One simple distinction is that manning levels are absolutely critical to ATC safety and service delivery, whereas that is not nearly so true in other utilities.

That is what the management of NATS—probably the safest air traffic control system in the world—is saying about the threat of privatisation and the specific, complex partial privatisation scheme proposed by the Government. It will not wash to say that safety is not an issue, because it is, and that is why the scheme is opposed by airline pilots, air traffic controllers and the British people. On safety, let us not forget that, as far as the airlines are concerned, the crucial dialogue is between the airline pilot and the air traffic controller on the ground.

As for regulations in the public sector, the standards achieved by NATS are substantially higher than those laid down by the CAA as regulator. Everyone in the industry believes that if privatisation takes place, NATS standards will initially continue to be higher than those laid down by the regulator, who will remain in the public sector, but that, over time, they will inevitably come down to the level set by the independent regulator. That regulator will be responsible not just for NATS but for private airports and other groups that are in the business of air traffic management and control, although NATS is, of course, dominant. All the onward traffic—every plane in our air space—has to go through NATS. We should not get the exaggerated idea that because private airports are able to manage their inflow of planes, that is comparable to the national job that our nationalised, and therefore publicly owned, air traffic control does for this country.

Safety is an issue, but so is national security, and I believe that that is why no other country—certainly no major European country—has taken this approach. I have been told that the only country with a privatised air traffic control service is Fiji. The United States has not privatised its service because national security is involved. It is not just civil planes that have to be managed, but military planes—Royal Air Force planes and other military planes—that are based in this country. Our system is a model for Europe, if not the world. We manage to get RAF controllers and NATS civilian controllers to co-operate by working from the same premises. I, like most people, believe that that co-operation is best facilitated by having NATS and RAF controllers in the public sector.

There are other national security issues. What if there is a crisis? I do not want to be overdramatic, but we have to accept that we are planning for the long term. We are not merely concerned with what is going to happen in the first two or three years of privatisation. If we had information that a plane was coming into the country that had been hijacked or was carrying—dare I say it—a bomb or a substance that could be a threat to the civilian population, our Government, security services, police and military would have to take complete control and act as one with the air traffic control system. That is undoubtedly best facilitated by retaining NATS in the public sector.

We cannot rule out the possibility—we dealt with this in the Standing Committee—that the privatised company will eventually come under foreign ownership. The Minister confirmed that the Bill provides for the public stake in NATS to fall to 25 per cent., which means that more than 60 per cent.—two thirds—of the service will be owned by the private sector. The foreign-owned company could be based in a country where, in the event of a crisis in the middle east, the population and the Government might support, to put it crudely, a different side to that supported by the British Government. In such a situation, there could be a conflict of interest between the directions given by the Secretary of State, who has powers in the Bill to direct the new privatised air traffic control system, and the management—the foreign ownership—of the company.

We cannot run away from those issues. We are not legislating on a minor or inconsequential matter. We are not passing legislation that will have an effect just for the next two or three years. If the proposal goes through, the worry is that, in the long term, our people will pay a heavy price.

Mr. Jenkin: I did not refer to the threat of hostile foreign ownership in my speech, but the right hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important point on national security. Does he agree that the weak golden share provisions are not sufficient to withstand that threat? We would certainly not countenance any transfer to the private sector unless the golden-share provisions could be made absolutely watertight, which means insulating them from any threat from European Community law.

Dr. Strang: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; that is an important point. The Government would argue that we could rely on the golden share.

Mr. Raynsford *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Strang: My hon. Friend indicates that that is not true; I withdraw my comment. I thought that there was some protection. Presumably, he is saying that there is no protection. The golden share relates to the articles of the new privatised company.

Mr. Raynsford: I was shaking my head because I was disagreeing with the interpretation of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who implied that only the golden share provided the security. As my right hon. Friend will know, having studied the Bill carefully and been a member of the Standing Committee, specific clauses—clauses 86 and 87, I think—give the Secretary of State very clear powers to intervene in a national emergency to safeguard national interests. That is the proper safeguard.

Dr. Strang: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but that is a tangential point. Who is to say that there would be such intervention if the private company, which may be owned initially by some British-based company—I think

[Dr. Strang]

that a United States-based company is also in the frame now that the Government have got the list of potential private owners down to three—were sold to, for example, a Hong Kong-based company? Frankly, the Government of the day would not regard that as an emergency. The sale would go through and the worry would be over any subsequent national emergency.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a further, perhaps even more worrying, dimension? It is possible that part of NATS could be acquired not just by a foreign company but a company in the public ownership of a foreign country. Who is to say—I look forward to the response—that we can guarantee that another country's foreign policy will be at one with our own?

Dr. Strang: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. He will understand if I do not go too far down that road, although he enables me to make this point: there is all this talk about privatisation helping us to facilitate European co-operation, almost implying that the new privatised air traffic control system will take over some of the European systems, but does anyone believe that the French will privatise their air traffic control system or that a private British air traffic control company will be allowed to buy the nationalised air traffic control system in France? No one believes that France is at all likely—certainly not in my life time—to privatise its air traffic control system. The danger is the reverse.

Mr. Jenkin: The Minister's reaction to the right hon. Gentleman's comments cannot stand uncorrected. The provisions that the Minister says give the Secretary of State powers to intervene in a national emergency are not insulated from any European Community injunction either. The Government insist that the provisions are so insulated, but they will carry on losing their cases in the European Court of Justice on those matters, just as they have in the past.

Dr. Strang: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will recall some fun in Committee at the expense of his Euro-scepticism, but he is right that the golden share is threatened by the European Union. I have correspondence with the appropriate Treasury Minister confirming that. One only has to read Lord Lawson's book on the golden share of the British National Oil Corporation to understand that such provision is a very tenuous line of defence. That is what history shows—and it is even more the case for NATS privatisation given the statements that are emanating from the European Commission, which has plans for Europeanisation of air space. That strengthens the case for ensuring that the service provider is under the Government's complete control. The only way to do that is to retain it in public ownership.

I shall conclude, because many hon. Members want to speak in the debate. Let me be up-front: I support the amendment because I believe that delay means that privatisation will disappear. I stress to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, whose constituency includes Prestwick, that I distinguish between the Government's policy and the Labour party's manifesto for the next general election. I do not believe that the Labour party will fight the next election campaign on a policy of privatising our air traffic control system. The amendment would prevent the Government from selling off any equity in our air traffic control system before the general election. That would have the effect of preventing a future Labour Government from selling our air traffic control.

5.30 pm

Mr. Moore: I am glad to follow the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), who has again passionately presented the important arguments against privatisation from his perspective. From Second Reading last December and throughout the Bill's passage through the Commons, Liberal Democrat Members have opposed the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. Our colleagues in another place continued that vigorous opposition. Like the right hon. Gentleman, our preferred option is the abandonment of privatisation and the creation of a trust or an independent publicly owned company. However, we acknowledge that delay is currently the only option, and we believe that a virtue can be made of that.

We share the right hon. Gentleman's view that delay greatly enhances the chances of the whole process falling through. Regardless of that, there should be a delay not least because privatisation did not appear in the Labour party's manifesto at the last election. I did not nick the Enigma code-breaking machine, but one would need to have possessed it to interpret the Prime Minister's introduction to the manifesto as meaning that air traffic control would be privatised. Thousands of others took a similar view. To put it bluntly, we were told that our air was not for sale. More fool us for believing that.

NOP conducted a recent poll on behalf of a leading trade union, the Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists. It showed that 76 per cent. of the public remain opposed to a sale of air traffic control, and only 14 per cent. support the proposals. That says everything we need to know about wider concerns outside the Chamber.

As we have debated the privatisation at length in the Chamber, in Committee and in another place, we have gleaned more and more details of what will happen under privatisation. Those details have come out grudgingly or through leaks, rather than through Government openness. We have mounting anxieties about the way in which NATS will be regulated after privatisation. There are serious questions about the suitability of some of the strategic partners who have come forward for consideration.

At the outset, the Minister raised an issue that was a feature of broadcasts outside the House earlier today. He made it almost a point of principle that sending back the Bill would be an insult to another place. He said that the popular will should prevail. The popular will, as reflected in opinion polls, does not support the measure. Their Lordships rightly pointed out that there was no manifesto commitment to privatisation. However, the most important point is that this Government have done more than any other in the past 50 years to reshape the other place in a manner that suits their purposes. There is, therefore, a sweet irony in the fact that the other place is kicking stuff back for us to reconsider.

At the heart of this debate is the investment requirement of NATS, which must be satisfied if the paramount objective of ensuring safety in our skies is to be

maintained. Liberal Democrats have consistently accepted that investment is required, but we continue to deny that privatisation is the only way to achieve that. Our central concern, and that of many people throughout the country, is that privatisation could have a dangerous impact on safety.

Mr. Dalyell: My life, the hon. Gentleman's, and those of many of our constituents are constantly in the hands of the captains of British Midland and British Airways who fly us between Edinburgh and London. What is his view of their reaction?

Mr. Moore: The hon. Gentleman refers to the trips that he and I frequently make between Scotland and the House. I have sat beside him on many occasions, and he has carried out an informal poll of the pilots of British Midland and British Airways, which he kindly shared with the rest of the cabin. I agree with him in this instance—I have done so on many occasions previously—that there is strong opposition among pilots to the proposals. The Government should listen carefully to that message. I support the hon. Gentleman's comments.

I was drawing attention to the fact that financial considerations are at the heart of this debate. The most recent accounts for NATS show that the service increased turnover to £566 million in the past year and produced an operating profit of £63 million and a net cash inflow to the business of some £9 million. The point is that NATS has consistently paid for itself.

We believe that the investment requirements could also be paid for—a case could be made directly to the Treasury about the need simply to provide such investment. However, we do not believe that that is the only route. One could, through a trust or an independent publicly owned company, secure the financial regime that would allow the organisation to borrow against the strength of future cashflows. The Deputy Prime Minister and others have argued for months that they have advanced the only option, but it is increasingly clear that that is not the case. The Government's option does not bear much analysis.

Air traffic control after privatisation will remain heavily regulated. To all intents and purposes, it is a monopoly, and rightly so. As the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh said, demand and growth in that sector are severely constrained and outwith the control of NATS. The commercial concern that takes over the organisation must find its return and improve profits by focusing on costs. The public throughout the country are concerned about the matter to the extent that cost cutting will focus on areas that are essential to safety—as yet, they remain to be convinced.

Politicians on both sides of the House and elsewhere have argued about that matter for months, but we do not need to worry about who is right or wrong because we can turn to NATS itself, as hon. Members who spoke earlier have already done. Earlier this year, the economic regulatory group at the Civil Aviation Authority sent out a second consultation paper on setting en-route services charges in United Kingdom airspace for the first five years after privatisation. As has already been said, it contained significant average price reductions and real cost-per-flight reductions in the charges that would be allowed. It also opposed making massive capital expenditure reductions to obtain efficiency gains.

The response of NATS to that paper was, to say the least, rather blunt. Its response document in May contains a paragraph that gets to the point. It states:

> The cuts in cost and investment currently being proposed by ERG have little foundation in the reality of NATS' business and licence obligations, and so pose very serious risks to the delivery of services to NATS' customers. NATS could neither accept nor implement these proposals.

As recently as 16 October, in a presentation to the air traffic control work force, NATS management repeated those criticisms. They said that ERG was proposing a tougher average annual real price reduction

> than was set for any other utility at privatisation—this is especially inappropriate for a safety activity where service depends on adequate investment.
>
> Cost efficiency—ERG places too much emphasis on cost reduction and neglects the risks to service delivery.
>
> Incentives to invest: ERG's proposals send confusing signals to investors and do not provide the necessary incentives for capital investment.

NATS could not have been any clearer about its position. It concluded that the severe cuts in operating costs and investment were inconsistent with the proper carrying out of NATS functions.

Apart from the concern of NATS about how it will be regulated after privatisation, there is our serious concern about the nature of the strategic partners who want to be part of the privatisation process. One of the key players in the Novares consortium is Lockheed Martin, a huge American multinational. It is the prime supplier at Swanwick, it has the contract for the new Scottish centre, and it is greatly involved in telecommunications and other systems. It is not in the habit of running air traffic control services. Its only motivation in this instance can be to ensure that it controls the paymaster of a service which, through overruns and delays, has already cost it some £150 million at Swanwick. That surely represents a major conflict of interest—a fact which the Government have yet to see fit to countenance.

The Airline Group—one of the other significant players—has been set up as a not for profit consortium. Most of the important United Kingdom airlines, including British Airways and British Midland, are part of that consortium. They do not themselves believe that the profit motive is appropriate in the case of this privatisation. The other side of the coin, is the fact that there is naturally a conflict of interest, because they are far the most significant customers and it would be handy for them to control the whole operation to the potential disadvantage of competitors.

How can such conflicts of interest be overcome? A document sent out by the Government inviting tenders stated clearly that those with a real or perceived conflict of interest would be eliminated from the process, but the Minister and his colleagues have yet to explain how the Government have dealt with concerns about very real public sector conflicts of interest.

There has been silence in response to criticisms, even those from NATS. Just as worrying, however, is the silence from the other part of the CAA with a direct interest in the process—the safety regulation group. I can trace no public statement of the group's observations about the proposed structure, or about the serious points made by NATS and others. Does the group agree with the current approach, or does it disagree? We do not know. Checking the Department of the Environment, Transport

[Mr. Moore]

and the Regions website earlier today, I did not find even the NATS response to the economic regulatory group. I certainly did not find anything from the safety regulation group. The information concerned, however, goes to the heart of the debate, and until it is in the public domain the public are right to be suspicious.

When the Minister kindly gave way to me earlier, I had an exchange with him about the number of safety inspectors who will be employed after privatisation. He defended himself by saying that the Government would devote more resources to safety if more were asked for. That is a hugely complacent attitude. If the Government really believe in the safety case, which they have put passionately on many occasions, they should ensure that they—or at least the CAA—take steps to increase resources and, in particular, increase the number of inspectors who will be required to check what is going on after privatisation.

Ms Osborne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments. Does he agree that the number of safety inspectors should be increased whatever structure is adopted for NATS?

5.45 pm

Mr. Moore: I welcome the hon. Lady's intervention, especially as it gives me the opportunity to remind the House that we support another provision that will ensure the separation as between the CAA and NATS of the overriding responsibility for safety. That is welcome, regardless of whether or not NATS is in the public sector. Whatever the structure—whether it is that proposed by the Liberal Democrats or by other Members—additional inspectors are clearly needed, even if only to give the public the confidence that such matters are being treated seriously. Frankly, the Government's complacency undermines whatever fine words they may occasionally use to show that they believe in safety.

Mr. Dalyell: Is there not a related problem in that most NATS standards are above the minimum standards maintained by the safety regulatory group? Therefore, the SRG will have to extend its monitoring role to a huge range of activity that it does not have to inspect at present. Where will the resources come from?

Mr. Moore: It beggars belief that the Government have not asked those questions. The process is summed up by the suggestion that the Government are waiting for the CAA to ask them for more resources, rather than proactively investigating whether more resources should be provided or whether more inspectors should be recruited. More details are emerging about how the privatisation will take place and how the regime will operate afterwards, but the Government are failing not only to provide good answers but to provide any answers at all.

The public are greatly concerned about transport safety generally. The public, the pilots, the air traffic controllers and many Labour Members, as well as Opposition Members, do not support the measure. There are growing concerns about the ability of NATS to cope with the regulatory regime after privatisation and serious problems about the suitability of possible strategic partners. Privatisation raises more questions, not less. We want the process to be stopped, and we shall at least support its delay.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I have listened carefully to the contributions so far, and some valuable points have been made about the relationship between the CAA and any contractor that provides air traffic control services in this country. However, I want to turn first to the principle involved and then—to the misfortune of those hon. Members who heard my previous speech—return to how we should define the relationship with the private sector in delivering out safety services.

Air safety involves a complex web, comprising the design, manufacture and maintenance of aircraft, flight crew competence, and the operation of airlines and airports, as well as the management of traffic in the air. We allow aircraft to be designed, built, flown and maintained by private businesses. We allow them to be flown on behalf of private operators. We allow them to fly into privately run airports. I do not understand the qualitative argument of those who want to disbar the private sector from any role in the ownership or management of air traffic control. Of course, we do not even make that judgment consistently now—we allow private contractors to develop key systems for NATS.

It could be argued that NATS has not performed the task of managing those projects particularly well. We allow NATS to win contracts competitively, in a private sector environment, for a large proportion of its work. We also allow other contractors to operate air traffic control services in other parts of the United Kingdom, including at East Midlands airport. Although that airport is just outside my constituency, the aircraft fly over my home and many air personnel of various kinds live in my constituency.

In the previous debate in the House, it was suggested that a private sector owner—we must bear it in mind that only 46 per cent. of NATS would be sold in trade terms, the other 5 per cent. being sold to employees of the company—would seek to press operating savings on the service, impacting on safety, and that that would have an inevitable consequence for the safety record of the service. I worked in the private sector for 20 years before coming here. I recall an intervention that I took in the previous debate, implying that the private sector simply drove down costs and maximised shareholder value, and that that was the only interest it had in any business that it ran. No sound private sector business deliberately jeopardises its core activity through cost-cutting.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: I wonder what my hon. Friend would make of the statement by Gerald Corbett from Railtrack:

> We cannot actually keep our shareholders happy at the same time as fulfilling our public service obligations, and that tension is just massive.

He also said—I invite my hon. Friend to comment on it:

> In the early days after privatisation I think we probably did concentrate too much on shareholders and the profit agenda.

Mr. Todd: That is a fair point, which I anticipated might be raised. There is clearly a tension. We would be unrealistic if we did not recognise that, but that is why

we have a regulatory framework. One of the points that we must recognise about Railtrack—I think that there is reasonable consensus on it in the House—is that the regulatory framework for safety in the rail sector was poorly designed. Anyway, it was built for an industry where the safety impetus was of a lower strength than it is in the air sector. Therefore, the comparison, although well made—I take my hon. Friend's point—does not directly apply in this instance.

Mr. Dalyell: I am listening to my hon. Friend's thoughtful speech, as I listened to his speech last time, but what bothers some of us is the ability of the private owner that he talks about to finance investment that may be uneconomic but very important for safety reasons.

Mr. Todd: If that company's core business is the provision of safe services, it will have to factor into the basis on which it funds the company the acquisition of such systems—but let me counter the argument by an alternative line. The public sector is not immune from the discipline of cost-cutting. The equation that appears to be made sometimes is that the private sector is driven by the desire to drive down costs and the public sector has money spilling over to carry out new service development and uneconomic investments.

Those of us who have represented people—I have in the House and did so as a councillor before that; I have done it throughout my adult life, pretty much—are well aware that the public sector has the same, if not more, disciplines and has to find savings, often at the jeopardy of convenience, and, sometimes—dare one say it—at the jeopardy of the safety of the citizen. There is the issue of how the national health service is funded and the difficult choices—I buy into that—that must be made in a public sector organisation about who to help and who to save. We must face that sort of equation within the public sector, too. Drawing that line between the public and private sectors, saying, "Good on one side, bad on the other; it is cost-cutting on one side and affluence on the other" is simplistic. We need to set it aside.

Mr. Moore: May I return to the extract that I referred to from NATS submission to the CAA, based on the regulatory regime that is supposed to apply after privatisation? In that document, it says:

> NATS' prime duty is the safe provision of air traffic control.

Severe cuts in operating costs and investment are inconsistent with the proper carrying-out of NATS' functions. Surely, in those circumstances, it is not a question of public or private. The public sector is criticising its own Government's regime.

Mr. Todd: I think I am right in saying that that dictum has been set out regardless of the ownership framework of NATS. I stand to be corrected. I will willingly give way if the hon. Gentleman says that it is specifically premised on the basis that the ownership will change, but, as I understand it, that is a dictum regardless of the passage of the Bill. I may be wrong. I see some Ministers nodding, so I am probably correct. I have not heard anyone dissent.

I shall spell out the issue a little further. Direct public sector ownership does not equate to maximum safety provision. Nor, sadly—again, we must recognise it as public representatives—does it always equate to maximum accountability. There was a time—I have been in my party for a long time—when we probably had simpler views on the strengths of the public sector and the weaknesses of the private sector. Over years of exposure, I have found it to be more complex than that.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Patronising.

Mr. Todd: I will give way to my hon. Friend if he wishes to intervene. I think he wishes to speak later.

Mr. Salter: My hon. Friend will get to hear it all soon enough.

Mr. Todd: I am sure I will.

I return to the core point because I do not want to detain the House for long; many Members wish to speak. The case that I touch on in a little more detail is East Midlands airport. As I have said, it is owned by the private sector. The air traffic control system there is operated by the private sector. It is the largest freight airport in the United Kingdom. It was said in the previous debate that it was a small operation, but those who live near it would deny that.

The fact is that that airport has, out of its own funds, recently invested in a completely new control tower and systems which are the envy of most airports in this country. That was done by private finance. It was not forced on to the airport by a public sector body, nor was it carried out by a public sector contractor.

I see no logical basis for excluding the private sector from NATS ownership. We take no such stance in any other part of the air safety network. We do not even take a consistent position on that within the air traffic control system itself, as I have said.

I recognise the strength of some of the arguments that my colleagues have made; I heard the word, "Patronising". I am not wedded to the view that the proposal is the only possible solution to our air traffic control needs. There is consensus that massive new investment is required in the service and that there is a range of possible solutions, but I have sought to point out that the somewhat dogmatic position that has been adopted—that private sector means dangerous, unaccountable or higher-risk—is simplistic. Therefore, on balance, on the basis of the intellectual argument that I have heard, I will continue to support the Government—but I say "on balance". I understand the points that have been made by my colleagues.

Mr. Chidgey: I oppose the Government motion, but, before I make my contribution, may I refer to the speech by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), who spoke with great clarity? I recall earlier in the Parliament when he and I spoke on transport matters from opposite Benches. Listening to his speech, we got an insight into what the real policy was behind the proposal.

6 pm

I have a constituency concern in the issue. As some hon. Members may realise, my Eastleigh constituency borders the new Swanwick centre. Many of my

[Mr. Chidgey]

constituents work at the Swanwick centre and, on various occasions in past months and years, have contacted me to express their concerns about the plan for NATS. Not the least of their concerns is that they will not be able to do their jobs as well as they do now. They have genuine concerns about the safety of the general travelling public, whom they feel it is their fundamental task to protect.

The Minister knows what has happened at Swanwick. Although those facts are pretty much public knowledge, it is worth reminding ourselves of them. The new centre is forecast to be six years late, and it has already cost hundreds of millions of pounds more than it should. As we know, Lockheed Martin, which is a multinational concern, is both the prime supplier at Swanwick and a leading bidder in the Government's part-privatisation proposals for NATS. Those facts should suggest to the House and, I hope, to the Government that there is some variability of competence in the private sector.

As the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) said, there is more than one solution. The hon. Gentleman very eloquently and rightly pointed out that no particular part of our economy is perfect. However, neither the public sector nor the private sector is perfect. I say that with more than a quarter of a century's experience of working in the private sector on projects rather similar to Swanwick, although they may not have had the same outcome.

Ministers seem to have an almost childlike faith in the ability of profit-motivated private companies to cure the ills that we see in NATS. They seem to be claiming that only a public-private partnership can meet the necessary investment targets and deliver the modernisation programme that is necessary to cope with the growth in air travel.

Today, I was a little alarmed to hear the Minister say that the controversy in the debate—in which the House is rightly engaged—on when and how the proposals should be implemented are in themselves causing a decline in recruitment of trainee air traffic controllers. Although it may not have occurred to the Minister, perhaps the prime reason for declining recruitment is that potential recruits do not want to join an organisation that is no longer in the public sector or known to have as its fundamental aim the safety of the public whom it serves. Potential recruits may be concerned that a profit-driven company would not maintain the standards that they would wish to achieve. Either of those may be a key factor in people's decision whether to join NATS. Recruits who believe that the safety of the airways and of millions of passengers is paramount are perhaps particularly turned off by those considerations.

We should deal with NATS' response to the economic regulatory group's consultation. Does the Minister know of any organisation that has been able to achieve the type of targets set by ERG in its consultation paper? ERG proposes that there should be significant initial and subsequent price cuts leading to reductions of between 21 and 35 per cent. by year 5; assumed operating cost efficiency of the same order; and assumed savings of between 16 and 29 per cent. in capital expenditure. ERG is proposing that, in an organisation that is crying out for capital expenditure, there should be a saving of between 16 and 29 per cent.

ERG is also proposing not only that a 7.5 per cent. efficiency gain should be assumed in NATS' plan, but that NATS should make a profit. Where does safety come in in such a regime? I do not know of any organisation that has been able to achieve such targets and make a profit, let alone maintain safety levels. Let us face it—air travel is pretty risky. Aircraft do not stay up on their own. They are not like a No. 9 bus when its engine fails on the Clapham road and it just stops. Aircraft have a nasty habit of falling out of the sky, particularly if they are too close together and hit each other.

Ministers say that they have constructed a Bill that they believe makes safety the paramount issue in NATS' future, and I do not doubt their sincerity at all. I am quite sure that the Minister is absolutely convinced that he has done everything he can to ensure that safety is paramount. However, experience tells us that saying something does not make it happen.

I am sure that, when the railways were privatised, Ministers in the previous Government and Railtrack were equally sincere in their belief that they had created a structure that maintains as a paramount feature the safety of the travelling public. However, we do not have to be reminded of what happened at Paddington and at Hatfield to realise that one can get it wrong, and that saying it does not make it happen.

The official Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin)—who has left the Chamber—said that the railways have a different safety culture, but I have to correct him. Anyone who has been involved in the engineering side of the railways will know that, whatever faults British Rail had, it was determined to run a railway. In BR's culture, although passengers may have been a bit of a nuisance and had to be put up with, safety was absolutely paramount. Any BR regional engineer who allowed his section of track—his permanent way—to get into the state that caused the Hatfield accident would have been sacked on the spot. Safety is built into public transport systems.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I have complete trust in the Deputy Prime Minister's commitment to enhance maritime, rail, road and air safety. However, many of my constituents have a deep distrust of privatisation, private finance initiatives and other public-private partnerships. I fear that the Government have failed to win over constituents who have that distrust, which I share.

Mr. Chidgey: Such public perceptions should greatly concern us. Members of Parliament are, after all, the guardians of the public good and the public need. Clearly, the Government have failed to win that argument on the public's safety concerns.

The question is not whether privatisation is the solution, but whether we need a solution. The issue is not to decide whether public ownership is the only way forward, but to determine what is wrong with the current system and how to improve it without a wholesale sell-off. As the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh said, the issue is being driven by financial considerations, not by considerations of how best to develop and improve our National Air Traffic Service. That is the key issue.

The PPP has been debated at great length and with great clarity in the other place. Although I shall not rehearse those arguments, the point that has come through in

parliamentary debates on the issue is that we do not have to sell off a substantial chunk of NATS to get the things that Ministers rightly say are needed—such as project management skills and an investment stream, which are what the Minister said he is most concerned about.

Anyone who has been involved in the type of projects undertaken by NATS knows that it is possible to procure high-quality management teams who have experience not only in the United Kingdom but around the world. One can buy in those services. One can even buy in greater expertise than that which would be available to the particular bidder who won the contract to run NATS. One can also find the income stream necessary to finance improvements to NATS.

There is absolutely no reason why NATS—it is a rock-solid organisation with a substantial guaranteed income stream; last year, its profits were almost 15 per cent., which is not bad in most organisations—could not raise the money that it needs to reinvest and to develop. However, it needs the Treasury's permission to do that. That is the nub of the issue. If NATS could raise money in its own right, there would not be a problem. NATS could develop equally well as a not for profit organisation.

We do not have to sell off half of NATS to raise the necessary money. We can ensure that it remains in public ownership, which is what the public clearly want. Most important, we can ensure that NATS remains publicly accountable.

Given that in the House and across the country there is great controversy and concern about the Government's plans, and given the horrific example of rail privatisation and what happened when safety was disregarded because of the pursuit of other interests, including profit, surely the Government should take a step back. They should invite the National Audit Office to review the PPP plans. We in the House do not have an answer to every problem; we would be incredibly stupid and arrogant if we assumed that, just because we have the power to make decisions, our decisions are necessarily right. This is the time to step back and allow people with no vested interest to look deeply into what the Government are trying to achieve, no doubt with the best interests of the public at heart.

Unless the Government can make sure that their plans provide for the public a solution that is sound, safe and robust, and unless they can show that their proposals are in the interests of the taxpayer and, most important, those of the travelling public, I fear that they are going down a slippery slope. They should let the NAO look at the proposal carefully and come back with an answer in which the House can have confidence. Otherwise, I fear that in a year or so the Minister could well be back at the Dispatch Box, just as the Deputy Prime Minister was recently, having to apologise to the House and the public for a failed privatisation that compromised public safety, with all that that entails.

Mr. Salter: I have now spent the best part of two years examining the future of our country's highly acclaimed and widely admired air traffic control service. In that time, I have visited the biggest control centre in the world at Heathrow airport, only a few miles from where I was born and where I once worked. I have spoken to pilots, controllers, managers, union representatives, air safety experts, Government Ministers and airline executives—in fact, I have spoken to almost anyone and everyone connected with the industry. Above all, I have spoken to my constituents and the constituents of other hon. Members who live directly under a flight path. Our skies are already overcrowded and the lives of those people may depend on the decisions that we take tonight. I have also spoken with my hon. Friends, to whom, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this short contribution is primarily addressed.

Let us look back to just over a year ago. I was in the middle of organising groups of Labour Members who were desperately unhappy with what the Government were and still are proposing to do to air traffic control. The Paddington rail disaster had occurred. The wreckage was still being cleared from the tracks, and my constituents who survived that awful crash were trying to come to terms with the wreckage of their lives. I have lost count of the number of my hon. Friends who spoke to me at the time; the conversations were always the same. They said, "Surely the Government won't go ahead with the privatisation of air traffic control now. Surely they are bound to drop it. There must be a better way." As we all know, they will, they are not and there is, so long as Labour Members who remain unconvinced do something about it and vote with our consciences and not, as we usually do, with our Whips.

I can well understand the argument that is being put about by the Government's business managers that Labour Members should think carefully about supporting amendments proposed by the Conservatives in another place. It has a certain resonance; it appeals to the tribal core. But I would suggest that there is a more powerful argument that my hon. Friends should weigh in the balance: what on earth is any Labour Member doing supporting a Tory proposal that we vehemently opposed at the last election?

While the House of Lords, for as long as it remains unelected, has no political mandate, nor do this Government have a mandate to push through a privatisation that we opposed so publicly and that was the subject of that famous speech at the last Labour party conference before May 1997. Let us remember how we all applauded the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), and those carefully crafted arguments about commercial pressures compromising safety. We still hear those arguments from Government Ministers, but not today.

6.15 pm

Let me take a moment to praise not only the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary, but the highly efficient operation that has been mounted by the Government Whips Office. I have absolutely no doubt that the Government will win the vote tonight, but, as we all know, winning the vote and winning the argument are not necessarily the same thing.

The case has not been made for this part-privatisation—not remotely. The Government have three clear objectives: first, to deliver an investment stream that is essential for the modernisation of the operation; secondly, to take National Air Traffic Services out of the public sector borrowing requirement; and thirdly, to invigorate the project management by bringing in private sector expertise so that the service would be in a position to

[Mr. Salter]

compete for a possible single European sky. All those objectives are entirely laudable and supportable, and entirely achievable without resorting to privatisation. That is the tragedy of the situation—we do not have to be here.

A solution is at hand. It is tried and tested and it is the preferred option of the Select Committee. It has the support of everyone in the industry. It is, of course, a not for profit trust based on the Canadian model. Established in 1995, NAV Canada delivers the Government's objectives in spades.

Financially, under current arrangements there is a 7 to 8 per cent. growth rate in air traffic. It is a highly profitable industry. Those running air traffic control in this or any western European country would have to try extremely hard not to make a profit or a surplus. In fact, NATS currently returns to the Treasury a surplus of between £30 million and £40 million annually. In 1998–99—these are the most recent figures I have available—NATS returned a pre-tax profit of £64 million. We need to modernise and we need private sector involvement, but let us not forget that the private sector involvement in Swanwick, which led to the delays and the fiasco, was carried out by none other than the US defence corporation Lockheed Martin, which is on the Government shortlist as a preferred strategic partner.

Let me tell hon. Members that when Lockheed Martin was in the frame for the running of AWE Aldermaston, which is just upwind and upstream from my constituency, I received an e-mail from someone in the United States with the simple words, "God help you." Lockheed Martin was the corporation responsible for Three Mile Island, a famous nuclear disaster. Its defence establishments have been suspended and are under investigation by the federal Government in the United States for breaches of safety procedures. I would suggest that it is not so much a case of biting the hand that feeds you, as of feeding the hand that bites you.

Of course we want air traffic control to be taken out of the public sector borrowing requirement. That is an entirely laudable objective, and, as I have said before, entirely achievable. Why should air traffic control compete for hard-earned public cash with police officers, firefighters, the national health service and schools? No one wants that and there is no need for it. The Post Office investment plans are already outwith the Treasury rule. The borrowing requirements for some of our regional airports have already been exempted from the PSBR. The trust model delivers freedom from the Treasury's financial straitjacket. That point is not in dispute. In fact, NAV Canada was so successful that in its first year it raised from the market in the private sector $3 billion, twice the amount needed, according to Government calculations, to fund the UK's investment requirements for the next 10 years.

NAV Canada has a board of directors who concentrate exclusively on the safety regime of national air traffic control. People with private sector expertise are involved, but they are balanced by representatives from the Government, the airlines and the unions, and some members of the board are independent. NAV Canada delivers gain without pain. Its structure works. I must therefore ask, as the Transport Sub-Committee has asked, why the Government are so against adopting it.

I am aware that other hon. Members want to participate in the debate, but I want to commend to the House the report from my colleague Lord Brett. He took the time and trouble to examine the Government's very derisory response to the trust option proposed by the Transport Sub-Committee. The report comprehensively demolishes the objections to the trust model. I hope that Ministers will return to it.

As I said earlier, winning the vote does not necessarily mean winning the argument. Good politics is about taking people with us, but there is massive opposition in the Labour party to the proposals. The NATS PPP is not something that will appear on a pledge card, and no one who supports the Government in the Lobby tonight will be proud of proposals that no one will mention in an election manifesto or personal address. A vote will be taken, and many people will want to forget that they ever participated in it.

The opposition in the Labour party is replicated out in the country. The latest poll shows that 76 per cent. of the population is against the proposals—hardly surprising after what happened at Paddington and Hatfield. Only 14 per cent. of people are in favour of the proposals to privatise air traffic control, which makes them more unpopular than fox hunting. We know what passion that issue arouses among Labour Members and out in the country.

There is deep hostility to the proposals among pilots, who do not belong to a Marxist trade union and who are not a group of workers renowned for their militancy. There is implacable opposition from air traffic controllers—the men and women who have given us the safest, most efficient and best service in the world.

We in this House make bad laws and bad decisions when we do not listen. We must remember the 75p pension rise and the poll tax. It is not too late, but the consequences of not listening when it comes to the future of air safety in this country are extremely serious.

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Salter: My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not; I have sought no interventions and have taken none. However, my hon. Friend is allowed one heckle, if he so desires.

I make no apologies for drawing parallels with the reduction in safety standards directly caused by the privatisation of the railways. I am genuinely worried that history is about to repeat itself. It is still not too late, and there is still time for the Government to listen.

Ms Osborne: As the House will be aware, I am deeply worried about the future of the new Scottish air traffic control centre, and I want to concentrate mainly on issues related to that. However, I want to repeat concerns raised by several hon. Members earlier, most notably by the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore), about the cuts in capital proposed by the economic regulatory group. Those proposals are very worrying, and I should be interested to hear the Minister's response to them.

I cannot agree with the comments made by hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), who talked about a dogmatic response among those—myself included—who have set out other alternatives. Perhaps I

could buy his argument if people were suggesting that the status quo was the only option, but several alternatives have been laid out. Most notable among them are those set out by Lord Brett, whom I congratulate on his work. As far as I know, therefore, it is not true that any Labour Member is guilty of responding dogmatically.

The Tory proposal on deferral would delay the sale and the PPP for NATS until after the general election, and would have implications for the new Scottish centre. The Tories say that they made their proposal because the PPP was not part of the Labour manifesto at the last election. Like my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, I find that a bit rich.

The Tory proposal also shows the Opposition's contempt for the future well-being and security of air traffic control, for the urgency with which investment is needed, and for the 700 jobs in my constituency that would be jeopardised if the amendments were accepted. Previous Tory Governments can take the credit for getting NATS into the position it is in today. There has been a chronic lack of investment, and constant delays have cost an astronomical amount of money and caused ever-mounting pressure on the system.

The Tories now want to delay the PPP even longer, although they claim to have no safety concerns arising from privatisation per se. Their only possible motivation, therefore, is to make a pathetic attempt to reap political capital, whatever the cost to jobs and investment.

The Tory party's obvious aim is to delay the PPP, and it would bring in full-scale privatisation if it had half a chance. I note that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said earlier that the Tories would now consider adopting a trust framework for NATS. At this late stage, such a change of face is astonishing. They have always opposed and voted against that option in the past, but now they bring in the possibility purely for bandwagon reasons.

Mr. Jenkin: In fact, we supported a proposal for a trust tabled by a Labour Member on Report.

Ms Osborne: I accept that, but Conservative Members did not support the amendment relating to the trust option that was tabled in the Lords and which could have been considered in this House this evening. Tory Members have a strong record of supporting full-scale privatisation, not trusts.

I do not believe that the amendments would allow an alternative solution such as trust. In that, I differ from some of my hon. Friends. We have argued for three and a half years about the various options. I have played my part in those discussions, but it is clear this evening that the PPP is the only show in town. I fail to see what can be achieved by further delay. Accepting the amendment would only cause further delay, and it would play into the hands of the Tory party.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I understand that the hon. Lady, inevitably, has to be worried about the impact of the proposals on her constituents, but will she reflect on what has been said about safety by many hon. Members of all parties? Does she truly believe that the PPP will provide a safe way forward for air traffic services?

Ms Osborne: There has been much discussion about safety and about proposals alternative to the PPP, and I have taken part in that discussion. The amendment does not deal with those issues, but proposes delay. I do not see how delaying the matter further will aid safety.

My greatest fear is that further delay will jeopardise the new Scottish centre and 700 jobs in my constituency. I cannot stand back and watch that happen. The new Scottish centre has been subjected to years of procrastination, delay and speculation already. It was for that reason that I campaigned for the Government to accept an amendment ensuring that current investment plans would be honoured.

In the past week, the competition to design the new Scottish centre building was won by Gibb Developments. The winning design was the work of Ron Moncrieff, who hails from Prestwick and whose first job was at Atlantic house there. My local newspaper, the *Ayr Advertiser*, carried a picture of the winning design, but people in my constituency have seen many pictures before. I want work to begin on the ground now, and I challenge any hon. Member to guarantee that the new Scottish centre will go ahead if the PPP is delayed any longer.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend will recall, from times when she has raised this matter before, that my hon. Friend the Minister responded by saying that funding for the Scottish centre would come by the traditional route. Does she not agree that it cannot therefore be dependent on a PPP?

Ms Osborne: That is not entirely true: £60 million of public money has been put forward, but that amount is predicated on the fact that the PPP will fund the remainder of what is needed.

Last week, I asked the trade unions in my constituency what guarantees there were that the new Scottish centre would go ahead if the PPP were delayed any longer. Dave Carty, vice chairman of the local branch of the trade union to which NATS employees belong, told the *Ayr Advertiser* last week:

> If it gets underway, great. We have heard so many promises up until now. Seeing is believing. It will another five years with the present conditions. There is quite a lot of work going on. Our traffic has increased by eight per cent. every year. That's with no extra staff. The waiting is constant.

Yes, the waiting is constant, and Tory party policy in this House and in Scotland is for further delay and full-scale privatisation. For the sake of jumping on yet another political bandwagon, 700 jobs in my constituency would be lost for good. The Tories are joined by the Scottish National party, which also supports delay, no matter what the cost. Do not play politics with 700 Scottish jobs. They should keep their hands off those jobs or they will never be forgiven by the Scottish people.

6.30 pm

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) spoke earlier, and while I respect his every contribution—they are very considered—I have to say that there are others of us who also come from private and public sector backgrounds. Even when I was a chief executive in local government, I managed a commercial operation within the private sector. I bring to this debate that experience, as does my hon. Friend.

The issue for us is not about the dogmatic approach of "public good, private bad" but about the decision-making process of this dangerous policy. In the passage from

[Mr. McDonnell]

policy to legislation, I believe that politics, policy making, Government and Parliament have been shown at their worst. The development of the initial political commitment was based on a deceit. This is not just about the statement at the Labour party conference about the air not being for sale. Air traffic controllers in my constituency received letters from Labour party spokespeople saying that there will be no sell-off.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) did not divulge what went on when he was on the Front Bench, and I honour him for that. However, we all know what happened. During the election campaign, the Tories found a black hole in our Budget proposals, and every Labour Front-Bench spokesperson was supposed to come up with a proposal to fill that black hole. The air traffic control sell-off was brought back on to the agenda to plug the gap. It was panic selling as a knee-jerk reaction to an issue in the election campaign.

If this does not show policy making or politics being degraded, it is government by fix. We know that the Government have the resources to avoid making this sale but the Treasury is demanding that the Deputy Prime Minister go ahead with the policy. It is allowing him to swing in the wind. This is about high politics in Cabinet—it has nothing to do with the policy itself. The tragedy is that the determination and commitment for which we all admire the Deputy Prime Minister—his ability to see things through to the end, as he has done on so many occasions—has become a terrible weakness and liability. It has become a determination not even to countenance the possibility of being wrong.

This issue has shown Parliament at its worst as well, although some good speeches have been made. We used to say that ambassadors were honest men sent abroad to lie. Junior Ministers have come to the House and, although I do not want to be rude, it is a case of the production of bovine faeces. The statements that have been made time and again in a serious debate are unbelievable. They have not addressed the issues and concerns that have been raised.

I say to my fellow Back Benchers that there are issues of principle here. Tonight we cannot allow principles to be put up for sale as well as air traffic control: this is too important. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) said that we should have learned our lesson after what happened in the summer and the ensuing claims about arrogance. We are still affected by the 75p pension increase. I think that in some constituencies we are also still affected by the mayoral election stitch-up. We are still affected by asylum vouchers and lone parent benefit cuts. We must learn our lesson.

The Government have put forward three arguments. They are selling off NATS to introduce new management. They are selling it off because they need the capital. As for our counter-argument, they say that the sale will not affect safety. The last refuge of a defeated intellectual argument is that this is suddenly a constitutional issue.

As for the management argument, we know that NATS is an operational success story. Its annual report for 2000 shows a record number of flights being handled, with a record low number of risk-bearing airprox incidents. In other words, NATS has achieved the highest safety level in our history and across the world. Passenger delays have fallen over the past five years. NATS has also achieved the best level of customer satisfaction in our history.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): My hon. Friend talks about the safety record of NATS, which is to be welcomed and praised. I ask, in all innocence, whether there is a difference in the safety record of airports that use NATS as a public service, those which use it as a contract service and those which use private providers instead? If so, would he advise us to avoid certain airports?

Mr. McDonnell: That point has been made time and again. It relates to experiences in the mining industry. I was a full-time officer for the National Union of Mineworkers at one period in my career. We had private mines then, but they were relatively small and insignificant. We set the safety standards in them by ensuring that the major mines stayed in public ownership. Safety standards were dependent upon the scale of public ownership and regulation that set the standards for others in the nationalised industry.

We are talking about 2,000 air traffic controllers, of whom fewer than 200 work in the private sector. Safety standards are set by the 2,000—they are set to standards operating across the country. The other day, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) described Luton as a safe airport. Luton has just come back under NATS control. NATS is winning contract after contract based upon reliability and guaranteed safety.

The issue here is the failure of project management—we understand that. That is why we want to look for solutions for project management rather than simply selling off NATS. The argument is that project management in the public sector is particularly weak. Yet the channel tunnel was hardly a wonderful example of project management in the private sector. Lord Macdonald argues that there needs to be a shareholder. It did not work with the channel tunnel. There was a single shareholder in the dome, and it did not work there. The argument does not hold water.

We have looked at other forms of contractual arrangements in the public sector to undertake proper project management. They have not even been explored in this debate. If shareholders are required for project management, why is that logic not extended across the health service, the police service and the fire service? Are we really into the full-scale privatisation of public services on a scale not envisaged even by the Opposition?

Reference has been made to these wonderful potential shareholders. I do not even want to mention Lockheed Martin. Serco is just pulling out of Liverpool airport. Earlier in the year, a report was leaked from the Airlines Group in which it examined how contributors to the group could gain preferential treatment in the sky—a lunatic proposal, yet it was being considered seriously.

This takes me back to our experiences as a party when the Conservatives introduced compulsory competitive tendering. There was no market—it had to be invented in order for companies to come forward. That is what is happening here. Yet some companies—Boeing and others—have pulled away because they do not see it as a practical option.

Lord Brett's report is very interesting with regard to the NAVCAN proposals. When the NAVCAN board meets, the airlines press time and again for cost-cutting measures

and reductions in charges. In every paragraph of that report, the other partners reject those proposals because the trust binds them into a safety role.

Anyone who knows anything about the airline industry knows that this proposal is already an anachronism. It is a United Kingdom solution, whereas no one is interested in individual in-country solutions. There must be an integrated solution to air traffic control at least across our continent; otherwise we shall not be able to cope with the year-on-year growth of 5 to 6 per cent. A doubling of air traffic is predicted within 10 years. The argument within the industry is based on enhanced technological possibilities, of course, with a Europe-wide solution. Most of the European partners involved in the discussion argue for a public sector solution. We are alone in arguing for a private sector solution.

The International Air Transport Association has said that it looks to a solution through more co-operation between nations in managing pan-European air space. It says that there will be a rationalisation of air traffic control centres. It believes that there needs to be a co-ordinated strategy to create more capacity in the skies: liberalisation but not privatisation. That is the view of one of the organisations of which we are a constituent part.

There needs to be a general technological leap forward. Boeing is arguing for a satellite system. I do not fully understand the merits of that argument, because I believe that there must be a ground-based system at the end of the day. The investment needed to solve the problem goes far beyond the £1.3 billion maximum that we expect to raise through the Government's proposal. We are talking about £20 billion to £30 billion on a European scale. We are leaping ahead of the European discussions about how we arrive at that amount of investment.

It is interesting that the only opportunities for such a level of co-operation is to retain the public sector operation within the UK while the debate continues or to opt for the NAVCAN solution. At least others will have confidence that the priority is safety and service, not privatised profit.

As regards overall capital investments, the NAVCAN solution produces twice the amount of income in terms of the sale. It is bizarre that we are selling off the organisation cheap. We attacked the Tories time and time again for cheap sell-offs, yet we are doing exactly the same thing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) talked about the Scottish air traffic control centre. We were given a commitment that the traditional route would be taken. To me, that means money direct from Government. If that means borrowing on the market through a Government bond, for example, that is another form of the traditional route. If £60 million is required, the NAVCAN solution would provide triple that sum from a sale.

I live among people who work at Heathrow as technicians and at air traffic control centres. What motivates the controllers? My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister attacked me on this issue and said that industrial reasons lay behind the Government's proposals. My constituents may be passing up the opportunity of up to £50 million in a share-out. Why are they doing that? The issue is not confined to the protection of jobs; it is about doing the right thing for the community. None of them want to live in a community that they may have helped to put at risk. It is as simple as that.

What is the position of some of the ex-members of the Health and Safety Executive? Baroness Gibson, formerly of the TUC, made it clear. She said that when profit comes in, safety is always at risk of going out. That is why she argues so cogently for a not for profit trust.

The argument has been advanced that other parts of the airline industry have been privatised without a decrease in safety. British Airways has been privatised. A report on aviation safety was debated in the House and we found that pilots said that commercial pressures on them were impacting upon safety. The British Airports Authority has been privatised; it is like a city in my constituency, and I work well with it. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has twice called the chief executive of BAA to his office during the Government's term of office to reprimand him for security failures at Heathrow airport. They were the result of commercial contracts involving security. Privatisation lessons have been learned even in the airline industry.

6.45 pm

There is the argument about safety achieved solely through regulation. We seem to have overlooked the fact that, in this instance, safety through regulation is safety at the last stage. Safety must come from within an organisation. That is the lesson that we are learning from Railtrack. The HSE and others were incapable of bringing Railtrack to heel and making it accept its safety responsibilities. In NATS, everyone is trained to ensure that safety is the first priority. It is deep within the culture of the organisation. As soon as we try in any way to undermine that commitment by introducing the profit element, that culture, built up over the years, will be put at risk.

We were told that there would be a quadruple security lock. We were told that safety regulation would be retained in the hands of the state. We argued for that anyway. We have campaigned for that for ages. That does not undermine the argument that the safety culture must be retained within the organisation.

We have been told that there will be a golden share. That is being challenged in Europe. It is no longer effective and cannot be implemented. The argument has been lost. We were told that there would be a Government director on the board. We have said time and time again that, when the sale takes place, the Government will have only a 20 or 25 per cent. voting option. When we tried to introduce a share voting option in the other place—in other words, some form of majority option vote for Government shareholders—it was rejected. We are left with the licence, which is ineffective if a company is operating in a market and there is no confidence in it.

The Government's final desperate argument is that of constitutional confrontation. If it were up to me, there would be no House of Lords. However, we owe it to the electorate to be honest and straight with them. We need properly to engage in consultation with the NATS work force, who have never been balloted on this issue, except by their own union. As a Labour Government, we should ask the work force what they want. I thought that we stood for that—industrial democracy and a commitment to workers' rights. My hon. Friend the Minister has not visited air traffic control at West Drayton. I live near it. Almost 99.9 per cent. of the work force will be opposed to the Government's proposal. The only person we can

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find within the organisation who supports it is the chief executive, and he was brought in to carry out what the Government propose.

Some Members may vote with the Government. However, in my view and that of pilots, air traffic controllers, technicians and the public, the proposal will put my constituents at risk. Heathrow is in my constituency, and I must look after my constituents' interests. There were no apologies forthcoming—well, perhaps one—over the sale of Railtrack following the accidents at Hatfield, Paddington and Southall. There seems to be less pressure now for accountability over that sale. If the proposed legislation results in one member of my community being harmed, there will be no absolution from me, and no forgiveness from my community. I will come for those responsible. At the end of the day, as I have said, my job is to look after my constituents' interests. If the Government's proposals are implemented, I believe that their interests will be put at risk.

I am not alone in saying this. My view is shared by every expert in the industry. It is not acceptable to distort party discipline and loyalty by a demand for blind allegiance when the issue is one that puts my constituents at risk.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I support the Government on this matter, and I feel a chill wind from my own Benches as I say so. We must address some of the matters that have been raised tonight. Hon. Members should perhaps think about their qualifications and motivations for speaking in this debate. Many Labour Members will know that I am not a serial loyalist and am perfectly happy not to support the Government sometimes. I did not do so on freedom of information, and I probably shall not do so on local government, unless they do something about the poor performance they have given my local community recently.

The question is whether we should consider this matter in a different way to that portrayed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). What are my qualifications for talking about this matter? I cannot pray in aid the time that I spent making sandwiches in the crew canteen at Heathrow airport, although that does at least prove that I have known the airport for a long time. Indeed, many of my family and friends and members of my local community have worked there. I can pray in aid my experience as manager of an information technology unit. In addition, through the parliamentary armed forces scheme, I have had an opportunity to visit many naval establishments at which air traffic control functions are conducted. I had the chance to talk to many of those involved in that process.

I have also examined equipment used by air traffic controllers in the military sector. It is, to put it mildly, antiquated. To put it rather more strongly, it should clearly have been pensioned off long ago. Those systems are inherently dangerous, and people with first-hand expertise say that underinvestment and ancient technology characterise the current system. Yet that system is extraordinarily safe, and I pay tribute to the military sector for its contribution to a staggeringly good record. The people who operate the systems are marvellous. They deal with those systems in ways that counteract the defects. Sometimes, air traffic controllers have to display extraordinary judgment and an ability to deal with a huge number of factors at once. Sometimes, too, they must display real courage. Circumstances can threaten their own lives, and they know that if their decision brings about a crash, they must live with the consequences for the rest of their lives. They are fantastic.

The pilots who work with those controllers know how marvellous and reliable they are. There is a personal relationship between pilots and those on the ground and a confidence built on extraordinary competence. Each year, though, the system gets nearer to the point at which their competence and their adjustments and their capacity for dealing with inherently unsafe technology becomes increasingly necessary. An 8 per cent. annual rise in air traffic is putting ever more demands on the system.

If one asks air traffic controllers whether they want to change their systems, they will say no. They know the system and have been trained in it. They know what to do to keep planes safely in the air. Pilots, if asked to change their systems, will say no. They rely on a system that involves crucial personal contact with someone in whom they have confidence. As the volume rises, however, the dangers of decrepit technology become ever more severe.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my hon. Friend suggesting that under privatisation the national en-route centre that is about to come on stream and changes at the London air traffic control centre will be accelerated, changed or improved? There is no indication of that being so.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She, and everyone, surely accepts that we need radical change in how services are delivered, and that change is needed soon.

If a fairy godmother appeared before air traffic controllers and pilots and waved her wand to give them a new system that was much better able to control the ever-increasing volume of air traffic in our skies, they would say that they did not want it. They would be receiving something that they could not operate. Pilots would say that they did not want it. They would say, "I know the old system and can rely on it. You are putting me into the sky with something that I am not sure I can rely on."

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington talked about holding people accountable, and even about coming for them if there were some air catastrophe. Let us be blunt: in any change to an inherently dangerous and complex system, there will be danger during the transition. No matter what system is put in place, there will be a period of transition in which there are dangers. That applies whether the change is privatisation, a public-private partnership or wholly in the public sector.

We should not castigate those who must take difficult decisions at a time of risk. At the very least, they deserve our tolerance and understanding. We should all work to ensure that the decisions that we take are as well informed as possible rather than lining up to blame other people when a plane falls out of the sky.

Mr. Don Foster: The hon. Gentleman is keen to use the word "tolerant". Does he believe that air traffic controllers, whom he has praised to the hilt, should be

tolerant towards having to cope with an 8 per cent. increase in the number of flights, towards being required under the new regime to make cost savings of between 21 and 35 per cent. over five years,' and towards contributing to the profits that the organisation must now make? Should they be tolerant towards all that?

Mr. McWalter: If the description given by the hon. Gentleman is accurate, no.

Mr. Foster: It is.

Mr. McWalter: The issue, in part, is what level of investment will be appropriate, relative to need. I share the feelings expressed by some hon. Members that the plans are insufficiently ambitious, given the huge difficulties that the system will face. Beginning to negotiate that and adjusting it as it goes along are two different things.

7 pm

Earlier, I mentioned that my background is partly in information technology. We could tell air traffic controllers, not that we are going to wave a magic wand, but that we are going to give them a new system for which they will be trained and appropriately skilled, over, say, a three-year period. If, however, that IT system is entirely from the public sector, will they feel that they had been given the safest system imaginable? Labour Members know the history of IT projects that are entirely in the public sector and are aware that those projects have a lamentable record, partly because of problems with underfunding and under-investment. When we employ people in IT in the public sector, we underpay them by a factor of three or four and then wonder why we often get a poor product.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Did Siemens do a good job for the UK Passport Agency?

Mr. McWalter: Siemens did a terrible job for the Passport Agency, partly because the commission that it was given was drafted by civil servants who failed to understand the most elementary facts when dealing with the process of commissioning IT projects. There is an important issue that relates directly to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). If one contracts out an IT system and pulls in a product from Siemens, the Electronic Data Systems Corporation or whoever and says, "Thank you, very kind of you to have done this, now we will operate it," it will go bottom up. As we all know, systems so delivered are virtually useless. When one commissions an IT project, one must not simply draft a spec and get people to deliver it, but must get them to operate it so that when it starts to fall down they are responsible for fixing it.

Trying to have that kind of relationship with the appropriate IT provider pushes one in the direction not of old-fashioned commissioning but of involving IT providers and other appropriate providers in matters on a continuing daily basis. That relationship should not be about giving the private sector the job and taking delivery of a product that we operate ourselves, as that would be unsafe and taking heinous, unnecessary and culpable risks. Instead, we should try to ensure that we learn from our mistakes in IT projects in the public sector and have a new management structure that reflects the fact that, for some years to come, the public sector will not have the appropriate IT expertise to commission products or take them and run with them as appropriate.

Some hon. Members have said that there are no arguments in favour of the Government's proposals. However, I have suggested that there are such arguments and that people must think about safety first. Delivering safety involves looking out for the best possible expertise and availing oneself of it at an appropriate cost. If it eventually becomes clear that the relationship between the Government's cost projections, their ambitions and the expertise that they seek to commission involves a mismatch in plans, I will join my colleagues who are going to vote against the measure tonight. However, I will not do that on the basis of the plans that are before us.

Mr. Don Foster: I shall be brief, as I know that other Members wish to speak. The hon. Gentleman has just said that if he is not happy with the funding arrangements for the measure, he is prepared to reconsider how he will vote. May I assure him that the cost reductions of 21 to 35 per cent. in the first five years that I asked him about are the figures in the economic regulation group's recommendations that are currently being talked about.

Mr. McWalter: Tonight's vote is about whether or not to defer the proposals. Issues regularly arise on whether or not projects are effectively funded. I have already said that there is an IT expertise shortfall in much that goes on in such circles. I will be as vigilant as many other hon. Members in ensuring that there is not a shortfall at any stage when those matters are dealt with. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for his comments and shall bear them in mind as the project unfolds.

Mr. Dalyell: As our debate ends at 7.29 pm and as so many important points have been made by my colleagues, I feel that, on reflection, it is more important that the Minister for Housing and Planning has time to reply than that the House has a speech from me.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I am going to be almost as brief as my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and make one or two quick points.

The Secretary of State has presented the issue as a constitutional one. However, for Labour Members who are deeply unhappy with the PPP proposals, it is not a constitutional issue—indeed, that is a smokescreen. It is an issue of safety and corporate governance, on which the PPP arguments have unravelled day by day, with further powerful darts being slung in tonight. If the Secretary of State wants us to go into the Lobby, not in support of the PPP—which would be difficult—but to support the Government against a motion for deferral, he must give us an assurance on safety. That assurance must not just be about saying that safety is in public control when regulation is in public control, because the operation is equally crucial.

There is no reason to say that if the PPP does not go ahead, there will be terrible consequences, which the

[Dr. Desmond Turner]

Secretary of State has laid out. That is unnecessary, and there is still time to go down alternative routes, such as that of a trust. If the Secretary of State will say that he is prepared to do that, we shall by all means vote for what he proposes. However, if he does not do that, we have a real problem on the Labour Benches.

Mr. Raynsford: We have had an interesting debate with contributions from both sides of the House. However, it is noticeable that there has been a surprising dearth of Members on the Conservative Benches, despite the fact that we have been debating Lords amendments that were tabled by their colleagues. There has been a fairly significant attendance on the Liberal Democrat Benches and large attendance on the Government Benches, but the House will note that the Conservative Benches have been largely empty for most of our debate.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), speaking for the official Opposition, started out with a rather curmudgeonly series of personal attacks, and then became prickly when it was suggested that his position might not be that of the absolute arbiter of Conservative party policy on the subject. His reluctance to recognise that he is part of a team led by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) has become familiar to us. It reminded me of the line from Shakespeare—Richard II, I think:

> Man, proud man,
>
> Drest in a little brief authority.

We welcome the hon. Gentleman's presence, but I hope that he will recognise that he has to prove himself by his performance rather than his stated claim to a particular status.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of questions. He took the view that the operational split could go ahead without the change of ownership. I disagree with him. Only if we implement the transfer schemes will we be able to take NATS out of the ownership of the CAA. It is essential, therefore, to proceed with the legislation to enable that to happen.

The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about shareholder dilution, and claimed that the power of the Secretary of State to amend clause 48—a Henry VIII clause—would make the safeguards worthless. I have to remind him that the power to amend the Crown shareholding section can be exercised only by affirmative resolution and is thus subject to parliamentary approval and the full parliamentary process. The Government take that seriously, even if the hon. Gentleman does not.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) started by giving a fairly detailed explanation of the circumstances leading up to his written statement to the House on 11 June 1998. He expressed concern throughout his speech about safety issues. It was in that very statement on 11 June 1998, whatever his concern may have been about the background to it, that he said:

> This package, taken together,—

he was referring to the PPP proposal—

> will guarantee the highest safety standards as air transport increases in the future.—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 637W.]

He said in a press release issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions:

> Safety will remain the overriding priority with NATS subject to independent safety regulation to a very high standard.

He was right in that statement, and that remains the case today.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: In 1997, I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), who was then Minister of Transport. I recall vividly his saying to me, "We should not be doing this." He mentioned it to me a number of times. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to accept that as the truth.

Mr. Raynsford: That may well be the case, but if so, my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh will have to explain why he made it clear on the record in the House that the package would guarantee the highest safety standards, and explain his other comments that I have quoted. If he believed that that was not the case, we would all have to say that he should not have put his name to that statement.

Mr. Winnick: Does my hon. Friend accept that, even if my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) was in favour of what is being proposed, it would not make the slightest difference to my views and the way in which I will deal with the matter when it comes to voting? Although I can understand my hon. Friend quoting my right hon. Friend, the fact remains that what matters is the substance of the matter, as I said when the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) was talking about the absence of the Deputy Prime Minister, not who said what or when. What matters is whether the proposal is right or wrong, and I happen to believe that it is wrong.

Mr. Raynsford: The substance of the matter is clearly whether we believe that the PPP delivers the highest possible safety standards. We happen to believe that it does. We have strong evidence to support that case, which I shall outline in my speech. Those who do not believe it have to provide evidence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh was clearly confident enough to say on the record in the House in June 1998 that safety would be guaranteed fully under the PPP. I support that point. When a statement of that nature is given to the House, the Member who makes it usually thinks carefully and seriously before giving it. I hope that my right hon. Friend reached a fully informed view which led to that statement. I have certainly looked into the matter carefully before coming to the House to give the statements that I have given tonight on behalf of the Government. I do not make those comments loosely or casually.

7.15 pm

Mr. McDonnell: It is demeaning to have tittle-tattle between members of our party, not least because the Minister came to the House to tell us that the Mayor would be selected on the basis of one member one vote, and then supported the alternative system. Let us get on with the debate.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Mayor is nothing to do with the matter before us.

Mr. Raynsford: I will come back to my hon. Friend later.

Dr. Godman: I have said on numerous occasions that I have every trust in my right hon. Friend the Deputy

Prime Minister's commitment to maritime, rail, road and air safety, but I share many of my constituents deep mistrust of privatisation, and the PPP in this case. It is a question not of safety but of ideology and mistrust of privatisation, whether part or whole.

Mr. Raynsford: I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes. He made it in an earlier intervention, and I intended to respond to it later. I do not believe that safety is a matter of ideology. Safety is a matter of safety, and we should consider it on that basis. I shall explain why in a moment. My hon. Friend is right to emphasise that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is absolutely committed to the maintenance of the safest possible regime in respect not only of air traffic control but other transport modes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh referred to issues of national security. It is important to put on record the fact that the proposal for the PPP has been discussed in detail with the Ministry of Defence. There has been a great deal of discussion about how the arrangements will work in practice, and the MOD is satisfied that the arrangements will provide an utterly satisfactory guarantee of national security. We should expect nothing less.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh also raised the question of foreign ownership. We do not rule out the possibility. It would be odd and slightly illogical to do so, given that we believe that air traffic services throughout the world will change in the years ahead, and there may well be a consolidation crossing national boundaries, in which case there is bound to be some element of foreign ownership. However, there must be absolutely satisfactory frameworks in place to secure the national interest in the event of a national emergency—clauses 87 and 88 provide that—and proper safeguards to ensure that whoever is selected as a strategic partner is an appropriate and safe person to entrust with this important service.

In Committee, we went at length through the detailed safeguards that are in place. I will not detain the House by going through them again because time is short; we have only 10 minutes left for this debate. However, I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House that a series of interlocking safeguards will ensure that only an appropriate and safe person can be appointed to the important role of the strategic partner.

The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest. The Government have given that matter considerable and careful attention. We have made the necessary arrangements to ensure that any perceived or actual conflict of interest will be addressed and will be resolved during the bidding process. We have built a two-stage check—each bidding group has been required to identify and suggest remedies that will resolve to our complete satisfaction any conflicts of interest that may have existed as the groups submitted their initial, indicative bid—[HON. MEMBERS: "How?"] Only bidders who gave us that satisfaction have been allowed to participate in the next stage.

The second check comes into play in the final stage. It will require an exhaustive and detailed account of how each proposed strategic partner would demonstrate to us that any remaining conflict issues could be handled. No group would be appointed as the strategic partner if there was any doubt as to how conflicts would be neutralised.

The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale mentioned the attitude of the safety regulatory group. I assure the House that the Civil Aviation Authority—including the SRG—firmly supports the PPP. The SRG has assured the Government that it is wholly confident of maintaining safety under the PPP. I repeat that the amendments that we shall discuss later make safety the No. 1 priority; they will require the maintenance of the highest safety standards, whether or not they are above the statutory minimum.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the SRG have the resources to undertake that work with the few inspectors it currently has at its disposal?

Mr. Raynsford: I assure my hon. Friend that if the SRG believes that it needs more resources, it will put that to the Government; we shall consider such a request very sympathetically indeed. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that there is a safety regime that ensures that safety is the No. 1 priority. We will not deny the SRG the resources to deliver that regime. I give that assurance clearly.

The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale also suggested that there might be a problem with the charge cap in relation to the PPP company. Ministers will set the cap and will take account of CAA advice in doing so, but we shall also take other factors into account—including the comments of NATS. On no account—again, I can give the House an assurance—will we set the cap at a level that will create operational difficulty for NATS, or that will raise the slightest question of a risk to safety.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) made a thoughtful speech in which he rightly highlighted the complex issues. He also stressed the importance of avoiding the stereotyping of the public and private sectors. I very much agreed with his views, which were based on detailed experience—not least of his local East Midlands airport.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) misinterpreted my comments about the possibility that recruitment to air traffic control was being adversely affected. To make the matter absolutely clear, I said that, if there was a further period of delay and uncertainty, it would be likely to have an adverse effect on the ability of NATS to recruit the necessary staff. Uncertainty is wholly undermining to services such as those provided by NATS.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we needed the proposed solution of the PPP. Surprisingly, he made that point after noting in his opening remarks the regrettable delays and the cost overruns that have occurred at Swanwick near his constituency. As I shall emphasise at the end of my comments, it is precisely such problems as delays and overruns that make it essential that we establish a structure that will ensure efficient and effective operation of the service, including the procurement of the new technology that is vital to its future success.

I was a little surprised by the claim of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) at the beginning of his speech that he had spoken regularly to Ministers; neither the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), nor I have held any detailed discussion with him on this issue.

Mr. Salter: Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Deputy Prime Minister and

[Mr. Salter]

other Members who are high up the ministerial ladder do count as Ministers? Many of us have engaged in intensive discussions on this matter for a long time.

Mr. Raynsford: I am delighted to know that my hon. Friend moves in such illustrious company.

My hon. Friend referred to the NAVCAN model. The Government have set out the view that the future of NATS is best assured through the creation of a PPP; that remains our view. The NAVCAN experience may well suit Canadian circumstances, but we do not believe that it is necessarily the best solution in this country. However, a number of frameworks similar to those in the NAVCAN model will apply in the PPP; there will be Government-appointed directors; there will be consultation on any charging regime; safety regulation will be carried out by a public sector authority; and there will be Government emergency powers of regulation and direction. Those aspects are shared with the NAVCAN model.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) rightly highlighted worry about the 700 jobs in her constituency that could be put in jeopardy by any delay. She dealt most effectively with an intervention from the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) when she clearly made the point that safety is not part of this amendment. The amendment is about delay, and my hon. Friend has every reason to feel worried about the risk to the jobs of her constituents and to the two-centre strategy if the whole venture were to be delayed for no good reason—which would be the effect of the amendments we are discussing.

My hon. Friend also referred to the views of the economic regulatory group on capital expenditure. I make it clear that the advice from the ERG did not propose cuts in NATS capital spending. The group questioned NATS' track record in achieving its capital expenditure targets—as well it might. The real question is about what the strategic partner can achieve with effective project management experience. We shall address that question in taking decisions on charge control. Whatever decisions we take will facilitate the investment that is so desperately needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) described the proposal as potentially dangerous, but he offered no evidence whatever for that allegation. Without objective evidence that there is a threat to the safety of air passengers, I regard such comments as unhelpful; they inflame fears without sound grounding. My hon. Friend gave a rather fanciful interpretation of the way in which the Government have approached the project and took—if I may so—an uncomradely view of Ministers' handling of it. He, too, spoke about NAVCAN, and I have already responded on that matter.

My hon. Friend expressed the view that private company interests inherently threaten safety. He said that when profit goes in, safety goes out.

Mr. McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I contrast my hon. Friend's very ideological view with the measured and well-informed view of my—

Mr. McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister does not seem to be giving way.

Mr. Raynsford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am coming to the end of my remarks—there is only half a minute left for the debate.

The views of my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington are in contrast with those expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), who rightly based his remarks on his practical experience of IT and highlighted the importance of good and successful procurement.

Our proposals have been considered carefully; they place an absolute emphasis on safety as the No. 1 priority and they will provide the necessary investment. I urge the House to reject the amendments.

It being three and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Ways and Means resolution, MR. SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [this day], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 321, Noes 228.

Division No. 335] **[7.29 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Church, Ms Judith
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia

Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*

Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dobbin, Jim
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godman, Dr Norman A
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Greve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McDonnell, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stevenson, George
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wood, Mike
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 28 and 29 disagreed to.

After clause 61

Lords amendment: No. 31, to insert the following new clause—*Pension entitlement of present and former employees of NATS*—

".—(1) In this section—

"NATS employer" includes NATS, any designated company which succeeds to the business of NATS and any employer other than a designated company which succeeds to or acquires any part of the business of NATS;

"NATS" is National Air Traffic Services Ltd whose air traffic services are to be transferred under the provisions of this Act;

"protected beneficiary" includes—

(a) any person who, on the transfer date, is employed by NATS and is an active member of the Scheme;

(b) any person who is employed by NATS on the transfer date, but is then too young to join the Scheme, and who subsequently joins;

(c) any person who is not an active member of the Scheme on the transfer date but who is subsequently entitled to rejoin as a NATS employee without a break in their continuity of employment;

(d) any person who is not an active member of the Scheme on the transfer date, but who is entitled to accrued pension rights under the Scheme at that date; and

(e) any person who is prospectively or contingently entitled to benefit under the Scheme on the death of a person covered under (a) to (d) above;

"relevant scheme" means the Scheme or any other scheme of a NATS employer that covers protected beneficiaries, and that provides benefits in respect of the protected beneficiaries which are at least equivalent in value to those applicable to the protected beneficiaries as at the transfer date;

"Scheme" means the Civil Aviation Authority Pension Scheme;

"transfer date" means the date of the transfer of NATS to the public-private partnership.

(2) NATS (or, if appropriate, the designated company) shall, subject to the consent of the Pension Schemes Office of the Inland Revenue, participate in the Scheme as a non-associated employer.

(3) If NATS (or the designated company) does participate in the Scheme as a non-associated employer, a proportion of the total assets of the Scheme shall be segregated for the benefit of the protected beneficiaries and the share of assets so segregated shall be equal in proportion to the proportion that the Scheme's liabilities in respect of the protected beneficiaries bears to the Scheme's liabilities as a whole.

(4) If NATS (or the designated company) is unable to participate in the Scheme, that NATS employer shall instead make available a relevant scheme for the benefit of the protected beneficiaries.

(5) If the shares or business of NATS (or the designated company), or any part of that business, is transferred to a NATS employer other than NATS or a designated company, that NATS employer shall become a non-associated employer in the Scheme and if that is not possible that NATS employer shall instead make available a relevant scheme for the benefit of the protected beneficiaries.

(6) For the purposes of subsections (4) and (5), if a NATS employer is to make available a relevant scheme other than the Scheme, a share of the assets of the Scheme (or of the previous relevant scheme if not the Scheme) shall be transferred to the receiving relevant scheme, calculated on the basis described in subsection (3).

(7) If a protected beneficiary transfers to the employment of another employer that also participates in the Scheme but which is not a NATS employer, that beneficiary shall remain a protected beneficiary for the purposes of the benefits to be provided to and in respect of him under the relevant scheme and if that beneficiary subsequently transfers back to the employment of a NATS employer he shall still remain a protected beneficiary.

(8) For so long as a NATS employer remains as a participating employer of the Scheme in respect of protected beneficiaries, one trustee of the Scheme shall be a member representative selected from amongst the protected beneficiaries, and one trustee of the Scheme shall be an employer representative of the NATS employer.

(9) The NATS employer shall contribute to the relevant scheme at no less than the rate recommended by that scheme's actuary as being sufficient to secure the accrued rights from time to time of the protected beneficiaries in full by the purchase of annuities and the NATS employer shall not be entitled unilaterally to suspend or terminate its contributions to the relevant scheme except upon its insolvency.

(10) On the full winding-up of a relevant scheme, or on a partial winding-up which involves protected beneficiaries, any shortfall in the assets required to buy out the accrued rights at that time of the protected beneficiaries shall be met in full by the relevant NATS employer and shall be treated as a debt on the employer.

(11) If, on the full or partial winding-up of a relevant scheme, as described in subsection (10), the trustees wish, rather than securing benefits by the purchase of annuities, to pay a bulk transfer to another scheme, that other scheme shall be a relevant scheme and the transfer value payable in respect of the protected beneficiaries shall be sufficient to secure a buy out of their accrued rights if the receiving scheme were to be wound up immediately following the transfer.

(12) The NATS employer shall provide future benefits in the relevant scheme which, in respect of the protected beneficiaries, are at least equivalent in value to those available under the Scheme at the transfer date.

(13) No amendment may be made to a relevant scheme which would result in a reduction of the accrued or future rights of protected beneficiaries, nor in an increase in the contributions payable by protected beneficiaries who are active members."

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

First, let me reassure the House that the Government regard the matter of pensions protection for air traffic control staff as one of great importance. Pensions affect us all, and I can well understand why it is a matter of such importance to NATS employees. I must therefore make it clear that we would not act in any way that would put them under threat, and we are not doing so. We have considered in some detail the adequacy of protections for NATS employees. We believe that the necessary protections are in place without the need for this amendment. I shall attempt to explain, as briefly as possible, what the protections are.

7.45 pm

First, the Civil Aviation Authority pension scheme, to which NATS staff currently belong, is to be amended to make it possible for staff employed by the public-private partnership to remain members of that scheme. That will involve NATS becoming a non-associated employer within the scheme. This arrangement will prevent cross-subsidy between the new NATS section of the scheme, which will relate to a company classified to the private sector, and the CAA section of the scheme, which will remain in the public sector. It will enable NATS staff to continue to enjoy the benefits that they currently enjoy.

Perhaps I can digress briefly to explain the position of current pensioners and deferred pensioners within the scheme. I assure the House that the position of these two groups will remain unaffected by the PPP. They will remain in the Civil Aviation Authority pension scheme, and they will be in the CAA section of that scheme, which will also include current CAA staff. This section will, as I have just mentioned, remain in the public sector. Both groups of pensioners will continue to receive benefits in exactly the same way as they do now.

Returning to the position of existing NATS staff, we have made it very clear to all those bidding to be our strategic partner in the PPP that securing the continued participation of current staff in the scheme is a fundamental condition of being considered for that role. In addition, we will put into the strategic partnership agreement a binding commitment—enforceable by law—that guarantees the continuation of that right on terms at least as favourable as those that exist now.

Mr. Don Foster: Will the strategic partnership agreement be made public?

Mr. Raynsford: As the hon. Gentleman will recall, a draft of the strategic partnership agreement was made available to all members of the Committee considering the Bill. The matter was discussed in detail in Committee, and that is a sign of our absolute commitment to open government in this respect.

Mr. Foster: I asked the Minister that question because the issue was raised in the other place when Lord Brabazon asked Lord Whitty whether the strategic partnership agreement would be published. Lord Whitty replied:

A straight "yes" or "no" answer is not appropriate.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 November 2000; Vol. 618, c. 1708.]

Why did Lord Whitty say that?

Mr. Raynsford: Lord Whitty said that for the obvious reason there will inevitably be some confidential elements in the document. The key point is that we have made a commitment on the provisions relating to the guarantees for pensions, and we made available the draft document to the Committee, so that there could be a thorough consideration of all the basic principles behind the strategic partnership agreement.

The commitment that I outlined is a very significant safeguard, underpinned by the Government's continued participation in the PPP. NATS staff will also enjoy the protections on pensions that exist under the law of the land, including the provisions in the Pension Schemes Act 1993 and in the Pensions Act 1995. They provide, among

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other things, protections for accrued benefits and funding levels. Yet another level of protection exists in the scheme's trust deed and rules. These are unusually restrictive and highly protective of members' interests. It is not uncommon for the sponsoring employer of a pension scheme to have the ability to reduce the level of benefits for future service, which are known as "prospective" benefits. However, no employer who participates in the Civil Aviation Authority pension scheme has that particular power, because the restrictive power of amendment in the trust deed provides that amendments cannot be made to reduce prospective benefits. That is another very valuable and important protection.

I am sure that some hon. Members will draw attention to the precedents for statutory protection in past privatisations. I shall focus on the most recent case where a comparison is made—that of the underground railway staff in London. The London Underground case is much more complex than that of NATS. In the case of NATS, we are arranging a once-and-for-all transfer of the company to the private sector. There is no subdivision of the company and there is no reorganisation of the industry into a number of parts, so there is no need for provision to deal with the subcontracting that occurs in the railway industry. There is no provision for the return of some parts to the public sector, nor are the trust deeds of the two schemes or the arrangements for changes to those deeds comparable—prospective benefits could be changed under the London Underground deed. The two cases cannot, therefore, be regarded as comparable.

Before 1997, the range of outcomes of transfers to the private sector, in terms of pension protection, was highly variable. In 1997, this Government set out to reform the protection of pensions. In 1998, interim new guidance was issued by the Cabinet Office under the title "Better Quality Services". It emphasised the importance of protecting staff pensions in any restructuring that involved private sector partners, and required the quality of that protection to be a factor in assessing bids for partnership. Then, in June 1999, the Treasury issued definitive guidance under the title "A Fair Deal for Staff Pensions", which was incorporated into broader guidance on treatment of staff issued by the Cabinet Office at the beginning of the year.

The objectives of those reforms were simple: to take the fear out of public sector reform and sales as far as pensions were concerned, and to set a common standard of protection that all projects should pass. We now have a comprehensive framework of protections in the standard of treatment of staff. It is a fair deal not only for the staff but for private sector businesses that bid to enter into partnership to deliver public services.

Mr. Dalyell: Can the Minister confirm—I hope that he can—that IPMS lawyers have agreed to that?

Mr. Raynsford: If my hon. Friend bears with me, I shall come to the fairly detailed discussions that my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have had with Members of the other place who were instrumental in moving the amendments that we are debating and who have close associations with the IPMS.

I hope that I have given sufficient assurance to the House that a comprehensive package of safeguards is in place to protect NATS staff pensions without the need for statutory provision. However, if some hon. Members still feel that there is a case for agreeing to the amendment, I would add that it contains a number of unhelpful provisions that may not be of benefit either to the scheme members or to the scheme trustees. Let me give a few examples that illustrate the difficulties in amending this complex area.

Subsection (3) of the amendment deals with the split of the fund to take account of the establishment of NATS as a non-associated employer. There is a real concern about a provision that provides for the share of the fund being a simple proportion of protected beneficiary liabilities to all the scheme liabilities. The protected beneficiaries may well receive an unintentionally and inappropriately large share of the assets, to the possible detriment of current pensioners. The arrangement would be so rigid that the trustees would have no flexibility to consider the apportionment in relation to actual needs and circumstances.

Subsection (6) of the amendment rather ignores the principle that, as part of the basic regulation of occupational pension schemes, the pension schemes office is required to give its consent to bulk transfers between schemes.

A problem with subsection (7) of the amendment is that it is possible for an entity wholly unrelated to NATS to become a participating employer in the Civil Aviation Authority pension scheme, once it has non-associated status. It is not clear why protection should continue to be conferred in that circumstance.

There may also be real difficulties in squaring the provisions of subsection (8) of the amendment with existing primary legislation under the Pensions Act 1995, as it relates to member-nominated trustees. In particular, there could presumably be more than one NATS employer, which would lead to a disproportionate number of NATS trustees, even assuming that the basic principle of reserved trusteeships by primary legislation is acceptable.

I have tried to demonstrate that we have delivered strong protections for NATS members of the CAAPS, and that the position of pensioners and deferred pensioners in that scheme is not affected by the PPP.

We continue to be of the view that statutory protection is not needed for NATS members of the CAAPS, and I have to say that we have not been able to see what further benefit the statutory protection sought in another place would bring to those members. None the less, this is an important matter and of key interest to staff. Accordingly, while I must ask the House to disagree with the technically flawed amendment that was made in another place, I can inform it that discussions have been continuing with those people who are most interested in the matter, including representatives of the trade union mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell).

Mr. Dalyell: One problem is that people cannot fully understand the objection to statutory protection. The Government may be right in saying that it is not entirely necessary, but why do they not give the protection the benefit of the doubt and agree to the amendment?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend will immediately recognise that the form of statutory protection proposed

in the amendment could result in entirely inappropriate provisions because it is of a generality that does not necessarily take account of the particular circumstances of the CAAPS and the other factors that I mentioned. I have made it clear that if we had any evidence that members of the pension scheme—existing or deferred pensioners—would be prejudiced in any way by the transfer to the PPP, we would be extremely concerned and keen to act to remedy that. So far, we have no evidence that that is likely to be the case.

In a meeting only yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister again appealed to those in the other place who are concerned about this matter to come forward with evidence if they really believed that there was a problem. My right hon. Friend assures me that no evidence was made available, but as a key member of the group that was responsible for initiating the amendments was not able to be present, he issued an invitation for further evidence to be submitted subsequently if it was available.

Mr. Don Foster: I am grateful for the information that the Minister is giving to the House, but will he say whether representatives of the IPMS were present at the meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, or was it merely a meeting of Members of another place?

Mr. Raynsford: It was merely a meeting of Members of another place, but it included individuals who have a close association with the IPMS. I have no doubt that they were well briefed by that union.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I do not doubt for one moment the sincerity of what the hon. Gentleman is saying about this complex subject. The problem is that he has not convinced air traffic controllers of the virtues of his scheme. A constituent who is an air traffic controller telephoned me this morning to say that he did not think that the Government realised the strength of feeling among air traffic controllers. He said, "I am not a union man, but I know they have been talking and talking and they are going to find out soon that there is a threat of industrial action, not on the general issue of privatisation, but on the pensions issue. Please tell the Minister." Well, I have done that. Will the negotiations continue right up to the wire and, indeed, beyond?

Mr. Raynsford: I am happy to say that the Deputy Prime Minister made it clear during the discussion yesterday that he is still open to propositions if it can be demonstrated that there is a genuine risk that the benefits that are afforded to current pensioners, deferred pensioners or current NATS employees might be prejudiced in any way. We have made that offer clear. We remain open to representations, right up to the wire, so that when the matter is reconsidered in another place, we will be more than happy—assuming that the House agrees with our motion to disagree—to contemplate alternative amendments if there is real evidence that they are necessary.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that it would be odd to seek to put statutory provision in the Bill if there is no evidence of any adverse effect on employees, existing pensioners or deferred pensioners. That would simply be otiose. However, we hear the message that there are concerns. We want to overcome them and I assure the hon. Gentleman that, if evidence is submitted to show that there is a problem, the Government stand ready to address the issue seriously and with resolve.

Mr. Jenkin: I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is vital to maintain staff confidence, but I am entirely unconvinced by what I have heard and by what I read about the debate in another place. I think that that is why the Government—perhaps unexpectedly—lost the vote. They convinced less than half of their peers to support them. Will the Minister confirm that there is full agreement among pension fund trustees, including representatives of the employees, on how the pensions issue should be resolved? No amendment should be required to resolve differences that should properly be resolved by agreement. Will the hon. Gentleman also confirm that the Minister for Transport received a letter from the chairman of the trustees of the Civil Aviation Authority pension scheme about these matters, dated 31 August? I shall read him some extracts from that letter.

8 pm

The letter warns:

> the Trustees are concerned about the risk of challenge by disaffected members—

a risk they consider to be high. The letter continues:

> the Trustees are reluctantly making preparations to take the matter to court—

to take pre-emptive action. The letter goes on:

> proceedings might cost one million pounds, such costs (which you have confirmed the government will not contribute towards) being paid out of the Scheme assets. The Trustees regret that any court action is likely to considerably delay the timetable for PPP.

That appears to be very serious.

The letter concludes:

> Whilst we continue to prepare for a possible court application, we urge the government to reconsider its position on legislation even at this late stage. We are advised that if legislation were introduced in a form satisfactory to the Trustees, there would be no need to take pre-emptive court action.

Thus the desire to have something in the Bill to avoid future conflict is not just that of a few disgruntled employees and union representatives. The letter is from the chairman of trustees of the scheme. The Minister has not dealt in any shape or form with the trustees' complaint, and nor did the Minister for Transport in the other place.

Lord McIntosh of Haringey merely said of the impending court action:

> they are entitled to do it.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 554.]

He sounds happy that there should be a round of pensions litigation leading up to the PPP. Have the Government learned nothing from the experience of previous pensions rights transfers in both the public and private sectors?

Many hon. Members will recall how often the Labour party has called for statutory protection of public enterprise staff pension rights in transfers to the private sector. In this case, the pension fund trustees themselves are calling for clarification in the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and I raised the issue of pensions both on Second Reading and in Committee—now 10 months ago. The issue has also been raised by the

[Mr. Jenkin]

staff union, and there is every reason to believe that National Air Traffic Services management and the CAA have made representations to Ministers on the question.

It does not feel as though the issue has been properly resolved. This House might not be the place in which to resolve it; the issue has the feel of one that is more likely to be resolved in the other place. Faced with all the evidence, is it not massively complacent of the Government to use their majority to plough on regardless? The Lords amendment was tabled in good faith as a solution to the problems. If it is not the right amendment, let the Minister say that he will table the right one. We shall support the Lords amendment because, so far, we are completely unconvinced by the Government's arguments.

Dr. Strang: The purpose of the amendment is to ensure that, if privatisation goes ahead, it will not have an adverse effect on the pension entitlement of past or present employees. It is intended to provide helpful assurances to National Air Traffic Services employees and to put into law the assurances that Ministers have given in Committee and in both Houses. I recall the debates in Committee to which the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) has referred.

The Government say that the amendment is not necessary, and give assurances that staff pensions will be protected. In Committee, I tabled an amendment with that objective, and I was pleased that the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), was able to give me verbal assurances that pensions would be protected. Of course we welcome Ministers' assurances, but, however well meant, they do not have the same strength as protection in a Bill. There is a clear difference between an obligation in law and a statement made by a Minister. We know that Ministers and, indeed, Governments come and go.

I remind the House that there is a schedule to the Greater London Authority Act 1999 dedicated to protecting the pension rights of tube workers who are transferred to private infrastructure companies under the Government's plans for the underground. The Government saw the merit of including pensions protection in that Act. It is clearly right that NATS staff should have similar protection.

My hon. Friend the Minister has suggested that the amendment might be flawed and might not achieve all its objectives. We debated the matter in Committee way back in February and the Government have had a lot of time since then to work on their own amendment. If the Lords amendment is flawed, the onus is surely on the Government to table an alternative to achieve the objectives. The way forward should be to retain the Lords amendment. That would give the Government the option to amend it with a better amendment in the other place.

Mr. Don Foster: Time is relatively short, so I shall be fairly brief.

I begin by paying tribute to the Government for introducing one set of measures that has done great service to many people. The whole House will recall that, in the early days of privatisation, employees often suddenly found themselves doing exactly the same job but for lower wages, under worse conditions of service and with worse pension arrangements. Although we had the benefit of the introduction of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981, which ensured that at least employees' pay or salary and conditions of employment were protected, they still did not have protection in respect of pensions.

As the Minister rightly said, the Labour party addressed the matter when it came into government, introducing a number of proposals, particularly through the Cabinet Office, that go a long way to improving the situation. However, I remind the Minister that, on the whole, the documents make recommendations and do not in all cases have statutory effect. Nevertheless, I pay tribute to the Government for the improvements that have been made.

Whatever our views on the nature of the new National Air Traffic Services, we are all agreed that there should be separation of NATS from the Civil Aviation Authority. Whatever form NATS was to take, significant implications for pension arrangements were inevitable—changes would have had to be made. I suspect that many hon. Members who have studied the issue in some detail will be aware of the complexity of the new arrangements, and, indeed, the significant cost that will be incurred as a result of them.

The Minister has described in some detail his view of the necessity or otherwise of the amendment, which was moved by Lord Brett and supported by a majority of peers. He has argued in some detail that some aspects of the amendment may be technically flawed. It is interesting that, for each of the five clauses to which he referred, he indicated that there may be technical difficulties. At no point did he say that categorically; he merely implied that there may be difficulties, so there is clearly some doubt.

Much more important, it was revealing that the Minister kept saying that, following the meeting to which he referred, the Government would be prepared to consider tabling their own amendment to address the concerns that have been expressed. He chose many different words to say that. On one occasion, he said that he would be convinced if there was real evidence; on another occasion, he required real evidence of the adverse circumstances that may apply; and on yet another occasion, he said that real risk must be demonstrated.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge that the definition of "if necessary" is significant. Regardless of whether in his view it is necessary to include such a provision in the Bill, the vast majority of those who will be affected certainly think that such a provision is necessary.

In view of the Minister's comments, I hope that he will be prepared to continue those discussions to which he referred and that, in conjunction with Ministers in another place and representatives of those who are affected by the measure, it will be possible to devise an amendment that will enable the issue to be included in the Bill. There is no genuine argument against that. The Minister argues that it is not necessary and the protection already exists; no harm will therefore be done by putting it on the face of the Bill.

The Minister and I spent many hours in Committee. On many occasions he said that it was not necessary to include safety in the Bill, yet he now accepts that it would be a good idea. As soon as we have divided, if necessary, we shall consider a series of amendments that will enable us to ascertain whether we accept amendment No. 1 and

the others in that group. All are about putting safety on the face of the Bill. The Minister has been prepared to listen on one occasion—I hope that he is prepared to do so again.

Ms Osborne: I am somewhat comforted by the Minister's comments. However, he knows that the public-private partnership has not found favour with the NATS work force, who are worried about various aspects of the proposal and would have preferred a trust model.

Terms and conditions, especially pensions, under a strategic partner are by no means the least of employees' concerns. I understand from the Minister that discussions are continuing in order to reach a conclusion that can fully satisfy them. That is the crux of the matter: will the result deal fully with their concerns?

Given the controversial nature of the change to NATS' structure, as well as the years of constant speculation to which the work force have been subjected, does my hon. Friend agree that everything possible should be done to give them the reassurance that they seek on pensions? If including such a provision in the Bill makes no difference, why not do it, if only to provide that much needed reassurance? If there are problems with this amendment, why do the Government not table another, which would provide that reassurance to the NATS work force?

What is good enough for the workers on the tube is good enough for my constituents. Will my hon. Friend guarantee on the record that no member of NATS staff will be worse off in terms of accrued benefits than at present, and that employees' prospects will be roughly comparable? If I do not support the amendment on the basis that further progress can be made, will my hon. Friend assure me that there will be a further opportunity to assess the position on the Floor of the House, if agreement cannot be reached when the matter is reconsidered in another place?

Mr. Dalyell: I do not believe that there is an opportunity for the Government to table an amendment. In those circumstances, would it not be better to accept this amendment? There is genuine anxiety about the matter.

Our deliberations on the amendment end at 8.29 pm, and it is important that the Minister answers the points that have been made. I shall therefore simply ask a factual question: have the CAA and NATS made representations?

Mr. Raynsford: The debate has been short but useful. It has focused on one key issue: whether there is merit in placing on the face on the Bill some reassurance to cover the anxieties that have been voiced. Let me put the matter simply, in the manner that I used in Committee. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) will recall that we did not believe it would be helpful to incorporate an otiose provision in the Bill. If there is no need to do something, including detailed provisions in a Bill appears unnecessary. However, having said that, genuine anxieties have been expressed.

I have referred to meetings of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor with the representatives from another place who were instrumental in tabling the amendments that we are considering tonight. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made it clear to them and to me—I did not take part in the discussions—that he was perfectly willing to respond positively and constructively if clear evidence of a problem could be produced. *[Interruption.]* I shall deal with the anxieties of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) shortly because they are slightly different, although he may not realise it.

8.15 pm

So far, no evidence has been presented to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to suggest that existing pensioners, deferred pensioners or existing NATS employees would be adversely affected by the new arrangements after the establishment of the PPP. I hope that that reassures my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne). I reiterate that there is no evidence that any existing pensioner, deferred pensioner or existing NATS employee will suffer any financial disadvantage through the proposals. If there is clear evidence that individuals might be adversely affected, we have emphasised that we shall be happy to respond positively to deal with the problem. So far, no such evidence has been produced.

Mr. Dalyell: The Minister says that he has not taken part in the discussions. May I say, in an old-fashioned way, that on such an important matter, the House of Commons is entitled to hear from a Minister who has taken part in the discussions, and not to get second-hand information?

Mr. Raynsford: As my hon. Friend knows only too well, individual Ministers who answer to the House are often not party to all discussions that lead to a conclusion. There is a clear understanding that Ministers act collectively, share information about relevant meetings and report to the House in the full knowledge of relevant information from meetings that they did not attend. That is normal procedure in government, and I am sure that my hon. Friend acknowledges that. It is simply not possible for us to be present in all discussions and negotiations.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Will my hon. Friend explain what he has just said?

Mr. Raynsford: I was explaining to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that, although I was not present at the discussions that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister held with Members of another place who were instrumental in tabling the amendments, he gave me a full report so that I was in a position to inform the House this evening. I hope that that is clearer.

Let us consider the issue that the hon. Member for North Essex raised. I can confirm that a letter has been received from the trustees and that, of course, we are considering it. However, the trustees are seeking protection not for staff, but for their decisions about splitting the assets. Such splits are common in the conduct of pension trusts, and seeking court action in such cases is unusual. There is no question of such court action delaying the PPP because steps could be taken in the sale documentation to allow for any outcome. However, I am sure that the trustees' view of the right allocation of assets is based on logic and reason. If they acted logically and reasonably, they would almost certainly receive the support of the court in the case of an action.

[Mr. Raynsford]

As I said earlier, a potential difficulty arises if a formula—as specified in the amendments that we are considering—for splitting the assets is applied. That could result in one group being disadvantaged. That is one of the reasons for our reluctance to accept the amendments.

Mr. Jenkin: I am genuinely mystified. If, based on the agreement trustees believe that they have struck with employees' representatives, they fear potential litigation, which will cost money and, they say, delay the PPP, surely that is the sort of evidence to which the Minister referred. I shall quote the trustees' letter again:

> We are advised that if legislation were introduced in a form satisfactory to the Trustees, there will be no need to take pre-emptive court action.

Perhaps the Minister will answer the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who asked about the views of NATS management and the CAA. They are represented on the trustees. Do they disagree with the trustees?

Mr. Raynsford: That is essentially a matter for the trustees, who, of course, have a special role in relation to the pension fund. Clearly, other representations will be received, and we shall consider them. We will carefully consider responses and representations from the trustees and we shall do so, as I said previously, in relation to our response to the Lords amendments.

Mr. Jenkin: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. The letter was written on 31 August. It is a sorry state of affairs if the Government have still not decided how to respond to the representations. It is staggering that, in the death throes of our consideration of the Bill, the matter remains unresolved. I am afraid that I agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow—these proceedings are farcical. We have had to debate the Bill with the Minister for Housing and Planning who has had absolutely nothing to do with the development of the policy or with aviation.

Mr. Raynsford: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has once again reverted to the rather curmudgeonly approach that he adopted earlier, when he criticised me because I happen not to have been the Minister responsible for particular negotiations. He knows only too well from his experience that we accept the principle of collective responsibility and that we act with fellow Ministers in that spirit. As I said earlier, I am more than happy to respond in the House on the basis of the discussions that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister had with Members of another place.

The key point, which we have already clarified, is that if evidence is forthcoming that shows that existing pensioners deferred pensioners or existing employees face a serious problem that could have an adverse effect on their financial prospects under a pension, we are ready to respond quickly and positively.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow raised the question of timing. If the House decides tonight that the amendments should be removed from the Bill—I hope that it will—it will still be open to Members of another place, when the Bill returns to them, to consider whether alternative amendments might be appropriate. In that context, we would sympathetically consider proposals that gave effect to measures that were designed to cope with any such deficiencies that might be identified. However, to date, we have not seen evidence implying that there are weaknesses in or problems with the existing arrangements.

I conclude by confirming that the Government remain prepared, even at this late hour—

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend said something that we may interpret as very important. He said he would consider proposals, which would save a great deal of difficulty, if they arose in the other place. Are those Government proposals, or would they come from another source?

Mr. Raynsford: We would be perfectly happy to consider proposals from any source, including the group of Members from another place that has been particularly concerned with the amendments. If we believed that such proposals were necessary to deal with a genuine problem, and if evidence were produced to show that there was a problem, we should be happy to entertain proposals that might remedy it, even though, as I said earlier, we are not convinced that such a problem exists. At the same time, we could continue to discuss the issue relating to the position of trustees, which was raised earlier. As I said, those concerns are slightly different. However, we are currently not convinced that there is such a need, and we therefore do not believe that it would be right to agree to the Lords amendments, which are in several respects defective and which could have adverse consequences on the position of some categories of pensioner.

Mr. Jenkin: Despite my being curmudgeonly, the Minister is being generous in giving way, and I am grateful. Was he aware of the letter before I raised it with him this evening?

Mr. Raynsford: I was well aware of the fact that there had been communication from the trustees, and that the issue was under continuing discussion. That is clearly on the record.

On the basis that the Government remain open to further representations and have not closed their mind on the issue, the House should disagree with the Lords amendments. If real evidence can be produced to suggest that there is an unresolved problem, an opportunity should be found for further discussion in another place.

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 337, Noes 203.

Division No. 336] **[8.25 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*	Banks, Tony
Ainger, Nick	Barron, Kevin
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Battle, John
Alexander, Douglas	Bayley, Hugh
Allen, Graham	Beard, Nigel
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*	Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Begg, Miss Anne
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary	Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Ashton, Joe	Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Atherton, Ms Candy	Bennett, Andrew F
Atkins, Charlotte	Benton, Joe

Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Eliman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire

Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godman, Dr Norman A
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McDonnell, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wood, Mike
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Clause 1

SECRETARY OF STATE'S GENERAL DUTY

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 1, line 10, at beginning insert—

("(A1) The Secretary of State must exercise his functions under this Chapter so as to maintain a high standard of safety in the provision of air traffic services; and that duty is to have priority over the application of subsections (1) to (4).")

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2 to 10, 26, 40 to 43 and 61 to 65.

Mr. Raynsford: We spent a great deal of time on the previous groups of amendments, so I shall be very brief on this and the subsequent groups that relate to part I, as there is little of great substances in them.

These amendments relate to safety. They will oblige the Secretary of State, the CAA and the Competition Commission, in exercising their functions under the Bill

to ensure that a high standard of safety is maintained before taking into account any other consideration. Therefore, safety levels cannot be compromised, even if they are above the statutory minimum, as is the case in some areas of NATS operations. The effect will be to give safety priority over all other considerations in part I. I am sure that that will be warmly welcomed by the House.

Mr. Don Foster: The Minister is absolutely right. This group of amendments will be warmly welcomed by the House. The Liberal Democrats raised the issue in Committee, in the House and in another place. As we were rebuffed on numerous occasions and told that our proposal was otiose—a word that the Minister was very keen on at the time—we are absolutely delighted that he and his noble Friends now think that it is not otiose after all. It is necessary. I hope that he will give the same consideration to pensions, as I have said; but the amendments are welcomed by Liberal Democrat Members.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I rise briefly to support these amendments. As some Members will know, I have more than a passing interest in the activities of NATS, having been a pilot for 35 years—albeit, in a private capacity. Having completed my instrument meteorological conditions rating this summer, I am only too well aware of the fantastic job done by our air traffic controllers. I should like to pay them a personal tribute for the service that they provide to military and civilian air traffic and especially to those, such as me, who are involved in general aviation in this country. They enjoy a reputation second to none in the world.

I recently returned from Spain with the Select Committee on Home Affairs. I travelled on an Iberia flight and spent some time on the flight deck. The captain of that Iberia flight had nothing but praise for the sheer professionalism of our air traffic controllers.

Everyone involved in aviation in this country has safety as their No. 1 priority. Nevertheless I feel that if the House decides to accept the Lords amendment, which states that safety will be the No. 1 consideration, that can do no harm whatever in underlining what the priority should be.

Having listened to the arguments adduced in Committee and earlier this evening by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), I have a great deal of sympathy with what he says. He drew attention to an extremely important fact: our air traffic services combine military and civilian roles. It is absolutely vital for the security and safety of air transport in the United Kingdom that that close liaison between the military and civilian worlds continue. I share his reservations about the risk to safety if air traffic control services were to be run by a private company that was not owned by a company in this country. If it were owned by a foreign company that was perhaps controlled by a foreign Government, there would be serious implications that could impact on air safety.

I am sorry that I was not in the Chamber to hear the Minister respond to the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh. I was detained elsewhere. However, I look forward to reading his reply in *Hansard*, because the right hon. Gentleman made some very important points about air safety, and I hope that the Minister was able to address them. I am delighted to support the amendment, in a sense speaking on behalf of those in the general aviation community in this country. I know that they will welcome it, too.

8.45 pm

Mr. Raynsford: I appreciate the remarks of the hon. Members for Bath (Mr. Foster) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). I shall not be tempted to move into territory that is outside the remit of these amendments, as you would immediately call me to order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I assure the hon. Gentlemen that I fully share their views, especially the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Aldershot to the calibre and commitment of NATS staff. All hon. Members share his admiration for the service that they provide, and we are of course determined to give them the tools to provide an even better service in future. Safety is the No. 1 priority. These amendments are designed to make that clear, and I shall be delighted if the House agrees to them.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 2 to 10 agreed to.

Clause 3

RESTRICTIONS ON PROVIDING SERVICES

Lords amendment: No. 11, in page 2, line 42, leave out from

("area") to end of line 43

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 12, 34 to 39, 44 to 60, 66, 67 and 141 to 144.

Mr. Raynsford: These amendments are largely technical, so I hope that hon. Members will not seek an explanation of each amendment individually. I shall make a few general remarks. The amendments deal with the application of relevant provisions of part I to the Crown, and with provisions relating to the disclosure of information and the air navigation and charging regimes.

Amendments Nos. 11, 12, 66 and 67 list the provisions that apply to the Crown and provide that the Crown may not be criminally liable and that the armed forces are not required to hold a licence to provide air traffic services. Provision is made that nothing in those Crown application provisions may affect Her Majesty in her private capacity.

Amendments Nos. 34 to 39 and 44 allow the Secretary of State, in addition to nominating a member of the CAA to perform air navigation functions, to nominate another member of the CAA to consider the relationships between air navigation functions and national security. That may be of interest to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who referred to the dual function of air traffic control providing the service to civilian and military users.

The meaning of the phrase "chargeable air traffic services" as currently drafted in clause 73 would not include all the CAA's services provided in performing its chapter III air navigation functions, nor would that provision allow recovery of the CAA's chapter IV

[Mr. Raynsford]

costs of specifying, publishing or recovery. Where those services are properly recoverable through Eurocontrol, the CAA should be allowed to do so. That is what amendments Nos. 45 to 57 will achieve. Amendments Nos. 58 to 60 place further duties on the Secretary of State to ensure that, as far as practicable, the licence holder is paid the charges due from Eurocontrol.

Finally, amendments Nos. 141 to 144 are technical improvements, designed to ensure that an inability to disclose information obtained under part I does not frustrate either the functions of the Competition Commission, or those of the Independent Television Commission under specified legislation, or the European Commission in respect of Community competition law.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I am a little reluctant when we get on to the subject of Eurocontrol, given the many happy hours that we had discussing such issues in Committee.

There is the issue of passing fees on from Eurocontrol via the Secretary of State to, eventually, NATS. In terms of economic regulation, when there is an RPI minus X formula, how does that relate to the charges? We were given assurances in Committee that all the money would be passed to NATS; in which case, do we have a formula to increase efficiency? There has been some debate about the amount of money that the new organisation would have to find in savings and efficiencies. Perhaps the Minister can say a little more about that.

The Minister mentioned national security. Are we still sure about that matter? The argument was advanced that Europe would not impinge on issues of national security and that we are still able to ensure that that is a legitimate issue—when what we understand to be national security is at stake, the Government can get their way.

Mr. Raynsford: I will take the second point first. The key consideration in the provisions relating to security is the Secretary of State's ability to appoint a second member of the CAA, who will have the specific role of overseeing the appropriate arrangements for ensuring satisfactory allocation of air space between military and civilian needs. It is in no way affected by the European provisions.

I turn to the issue of Eurocontrol. I am not surprised that the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) found it impossible to fail to rise to the bait. That was a cause of much amusement in Committee. If we had had more time tonight, no doubt we could have had a lengthy journey through the more obscure schedules of the Maastricht treaty and other such matters, but lest my remarks tempt anyone to pursue the subject, I will hastily move on.

The RPI minus X framework sets limits. The CAA will be careful to ensure that charges are set within those limits. The specific provision relating to Eurocontrol is an arrangement under which the sums that are paid by individual users and collected through Eurocontrol are disbursed appropriately to all the members. As the hon. Gentleman will recall from our discussion in Committee, that involves quite a complex process: a rough estimate is made of the appropriate apportionment at the beginning of a period and that is subsequently adjusted when further detail has become available, but those procedures will continue. There is no intention to change them. I hope that I can set the hon. Gentleman's mind at rest. There is no secret European plot to prevent the air traffic control system from receiving its necessary dues.

Mr. Syms: I want to raise just one further point to do with licences. The Minister explained that the provision exempted the military from having to have a licence. In the Bill, the term was "licence or licences". I presume that one licence will be issued under the contract and the new arrangement, and that the inclusion of "licences" in the Bill was, as we thought, perhaps for future arrangements, where there might be a split.

Mr. Raynsford: I am happy to confirm that. We envisage only one licence being operated initially, but there could be circumstances where other licences might apply in future. That is the reason for the word appearing in the plural.

If there are no other points, I will urge the House to agree with the Lords in their amendments, so that we can move to the next set.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I warmly welcome Lords amendment No. 36, which deals with the appointment of a national security adviser. Again, putting that in the Bill is important, but may I ask the Minister a question? Subsection (4) of the amendment, which is effectively a new clause, says:

> The national security nominee may authorise a member or employee of the CAA to perform on his behalf the functions which he is to perform by virtue of this section.

That suggests that the important appointment of that national security nominee could, in a sense, be reduced by that person being allowed to nominate an employee. I wondered in what circumstances the Minister envisaged the CAA nominee appointing someone else for such a crucial matter. I want to give him time to reflect on that point, but he will agree that it is important. It is a delegated power in an important area.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) for explaining his point in such detail as to allow me to reflect on it before being required to respond. The provision is included only to make allowance for emergency circumstances—it may be necessary because of force majeure—but it is not intended that the provision would apply in normal circumstances. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 12 agreed to.

Clause 4

EXEMPTIONS

Lords amendment: No. 13, in page 3, line 38, at end insert—

> ("(e) may be granted subject to such conditions as may be specified.")

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 14 to 25, 30, 32, 33 and 133 to 140.

Mr. Raynsford: You will be relieved to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is the last group that I shall be presenting.

This group of amendments concerns regulatory and licence-related matters, as well as the transfer schemes. The amendments are largely technical, and the bulk of the group—Lords amendments Nos. 16 to 21, which concern the powers of the Competition Commission to veto licence modifications proposed by the CAA—is merely bringing our Bill into closer alignment with other utility legislation.

Lords amendment No. 15 is important because it allows the CAA to relieve the licensee of his clause 8 duty in respect of services that he is not providing. NATS, which will be the licensee, will not be the sole provider of services in licensed airspace, and it would be unduly onerous if NATS were to be bound by statutory duties for services provided by others. That is the purpose of Lords amendment No. 15.

Lords amendment No. 30 seeks to clarify and strengthen the objective of clause 48(3), which reaffirms the Government's commitment to the two-centre strategy for the development of air traffic control. Lords amendments Nos. 133 to 140 provide clarification to the drafting of paragraph 25 of schedule 6—it contains detailed provisions on transfer scheme arrangements—and make consequential amendments to schedule 7, which deals with taxation matters and transfers.

Lords amendments Nos. 32 and 33 provide a definition of the term "Northern Ireland Minister" for the purposes of the transfer scheme provisions.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 14 to 26, 30, and 32 to 67 agreed to.

Clause 104

QUALITY PARTNERSHIP SCHEMES

Lords amendment: No. 68, in page 63, line 43, leave out from

("strategies") to end of line 4 on page 64

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 69 to 80, 92 to 94, 96 and 145 to 147.

Mr. Hill: This group of amendments is concerned with the new powers in the Bill for quality partnership schemes, ticketing schemes and bus information, and with better bus lane enforcement. The amendments respond to various representations made during the Bill's passage in another place.

I wish to deal specifically with the provisions on bus lane enforcement. Lords amendments Nos. 80 and 192 provide that local authorities with decriminalised parking enforcement powers outside London may apply to the Secretary of State to enforce moving bus lane offences. In so doing, the amendments fulfil an undertaking given in Committee by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, on 17 February, when he said that it was our intention to extend local authority camera enforcement of bus lane offences to outside London.

The new clause also provides the Secretary of State with powers to repeal the current camera enforcement regime of bus lane offences in London, under the London Local Authorities Act 1996, and to make regulations to enable Transport for London and London local authorities to operate under the new powers as well. Trials of camera enforcement in a number of London boroughs have shown that where the system is operated and resourced properly, it is very effective in reducing bus lane offences by up to 70 per cent.

9 pm

We very much hope that the take-up of these powers on a wider scale will substantially reduce the offences. However, the powers will be available only to local authorities with decriminalised parking enforcement powers. That will ensure that local authorities are able to enforce both waiting and driving offences in bus lanes. The new clause does not give local authorities the power to stop vehicles.

The new clause provides for the Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales to make regulations in connection with allowing approved local authorities, Transport for London and London local authorities to impose penalty charges for moving bus lane contraventions, and the payment of penalty charges. Regulations can specify the person by whom a penalty charge in respect of a contravention is to be paid. As we said in Committee in the other place, we intend, at least initially, to make regulations for areas outside London on the basis of driver liability. However, the matter will be kept under review.

In London, the current system operates on the basis of owner liability. We consider it prudent to allow owner liability to continue to apply in London for the foreseeable future, but this will be kept under review. If necessary, any changes to liability can be made by regulations, which would be subject to the negative resolution procedure—and I emphasise that.

As the new clause does not remove the power of the police to enforce moving traffic offences, it has been necessary to include the provision that motorists should not be subject to double jeopardy and prosecution by the police and local authorities for the same offence or contravention.

I hope that the House will welcome all the amendments in this group. They will allow the benefits of statutory quality partnership schemes to be extended to a wider range of circumstances, extend the scope of through-ticketing powers, clarify the scope of bus information under clause 128 and provide for better enforcement of bus lanes. They are a further demonstration of our desire for a more effective and joined-up transport strategy.

Mr. Syms: I have just one brief point to raise. In Committee, we had a lengthy discussion on the impact of the Competition Act 1998. I note that since that legislation came into force in March a number of bus companies have been raided in order to discover whether they were involved in cartels or any other problems. A number of the amendments in the group relate to improved text on through ticketing. At one stage there were concerns that if bus companies had agreements on through ticketing or even ticket prices they might be caught by competition law. Can the Minister reassure the House that the Bill will

[Mr. Syms]

work in the way that was intended and that the concerns about competition are just concerns and are not likely to impact on the strategy for buses?

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the amendments. Before pressing the Minister on one particular amendment, let me say that it was a pity that there was nothing in the pre-Budget statement about fuel duty rebates for buses, community transport or express coaches.

The amendment on which I want to press the Minister relates to quality partnerships. I understand that when the matter was discussed in another place Ministers said that fares and frequency could not be included in quality partnerships, yet I understand that that has happened in Scotland. Does the Minister now think that fares and frequency can be included in quality partnerships or does he still maintain that they cannot?

Mr. Hill: I begin my response by congratulating you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your elevation to your distinguished office. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all hon. Members present in extending those congratulations and felicitations.

Let me deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), with whom I expect to have a number of exchanges until a relatively late hour this evening. He raised the ability of quality partnership schemes to stipulate minimum frequencies. The matter has been debated thoroughly, and the hon. Gentleman would certainly have known that, had he been present during those long but stimulating 87 hours in Committee. The matter was debated at length during proceedings on the Bill in both Houses. I can only say that nothing has persuaded us to change our views.

If the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive have reached a different conclusion on the matter, so be it. That is democracy and, dare I say it, devolution. We believe that it would be a mistake to go down that road. As I have said repeatedly, it would blur the distinction between quality partnerships and quality contracts and it would give rise to potential legal and practical difficulties.

I turn now to the question of competition issues, which was raised by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). I hope that he will forgive me if I read the words before me with some care, as these are delicate issues with many implications. It is therefore necessary to get the matter exactly right—not something for which I am always noted.

The Government believe that there has been unnecessary anxiety about the potential impacts of the Competition Act 1998. Officials have discussed the point with the bus industry and local government representatives, and have sought to give reassurances. However, if it will help the hon. Member for Poole, I am happy to put the matter on record, although I fear that it may prove to be a little technical.

In short, the issue is whether, in spite of the special competition test provided for in schedule 10, a strategic quality partnership scheme could constitute an agreement that could be prohibited under section 2(1) of the Competition Act 1998. Our considered view, which is shared by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Office of Fair Trading, is that, in making a quality partnership scheme under the Bill, a local authority is not engaging in economic activity and is therefore not acting as an undertaking for the purposes of section 2 of the 1998 Act.

In such circumstances, the authority would simply be exercising public law powers in the public interest. We know of no case where the exercise of public law powers of that nature has been held to amount to economic activity.

In addition, to argue to the contrary, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the 1998 Act is not disapplied by the Bill. However, in the event that I am wrong in my interpretation—and that the 1998 Act would otherwise apply—it is our belief that the effect of schedule 10 is to disapply it. That schedule expressly gives the Director General of Fair Trading powers of investigation and decision in respect of quality partnership schemes, in circumstances where the 1998 Act would otherwise apply. It would be odd indeed if the general provisions in the 1998 Act were to operate alongside the special provisions in schedule 10.

The Office of Fair Trading, whose view that is, has made it clear that it does not expect to proceed under the Competition Act 1998. All things considered, therefore, we believe that any fear of duplication can effectively be discounted.

The hon. Member for Poole asked about through ticketing. I can tell him that the Office of Fair Trading is still taking forward its examination of block exemption on ticketing agreements between operators. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman, and deals with his concerns.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 69 to 80 agreed to.

Clause 133

MANDATORY CONCESSIONS OUTSIDE GREATER LONDON

Lords amendment: No. 81, in page 80, line 25, leave out from ("Any") to ("subsection") in line 36 and insert

("person to whom a current statutory travel concession permit has been issued by a travel concession authority and who travels on an eligible service on a journey—

(a) between places in the authority's area, and

(b) beginning at a relevant time,

is entitled, on production of the permit, to be provided with a half-price travel concession by the operator of the service.

(2) A travel concession authority must, on an application made to it by any person who appears to the authority to be an elderly or disabled person residing in its area, issue to the person free of charge a permit, in such form and for such period as the authority considers appropriate, indicating that he is entitled to the concession specified in subsection (1).

(2A) In this section "statutory travel concession permit" means a permit issued pursuant to subsection (2).

(2B) The Secretary of State (as respects England) or the National Assembly for Wales (as respects Wales) may issue guidance to travel concession authorities to which they must have regard in determining for the purposes of subsection (2) whether a person is a disabled person.

(2C) Before issuing guidance under subsection (2B) the Secretary of State or National Assembly for Wales shall consult—

(a) the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee,

(b) associations representative of travel concession authorities, and

(c) such other persons as he or it thinks fit.

(2D) A person entitled to be issued with a statutory travel concession permit by a travel concession authority may agree with the authority that he is not to be entitled to the concession specified in")

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 82 to 91, 95, 148 and 149.

Mr. Hill: These amendments concern the statutory minimum concessionary fares scheme under clauses 133 to 139. The main effect is to extend the half-fare concessions to people defined as disabled, and to empower the Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales to issue guidance in connection with eligibility, to which authorities must have regard.

The Bill, as originally introduced, applied the statutory minimum scheme to elderly people only. Amendments were agreed in another place to extend the mandatory concessions to disabled people, and that extension has been widely and warmly welcomed. It will mean that up to 1.5 million disabled people will benefit from concessions, in addition to the 5.5 million pensioners who were previously eligible.

In extending the scheme to disabled people, the amendments do two things. First, they refine previous statutory definitions of the various categories of disability, in the interests of consistency and clarity. Secondly, they provide for the Secretary of State to issue guidance on eligibility for concessionary fares, to which local authorities must have regard. This provision follows representations from both local government and members of DPTAC—the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—to the effect that such guidance would be helpful to those implementing the new requirements at the local level. The amendment requires that guidance should be subject to prior consultation, and we shall be circulating a draft in due course.

It may be helpful if I say a word about the funding implications and about bringing these provisions into force. During our discussions with the local government associations, it was put to us that the amount of funding we proposed to provide was inadequate to cover the likely costs of the scheme. We have listened to what was said. We have looked again at the figures and in the light of those representations, we are now proposing an annual injection of £54 million into the revenue support grant, which will be distributed to local authorities in the normal way.

We believe that this is a fair settlement, based on the best information available. It represents a further £7 million a year on top of our previous estimates of £47 million a year to offset the additional costs to local authorities. However, I assure the House that we will keep these matters under review in the light of early experience with the new scheme.

We also recognise that there are timing constraints in bringing this new scheme into force, not least for those local authorities that have no concessionary travel scheme at present or will need to make changes that require them to give the statutory four months' notice to the bus operators. Our present intention, therefore, is that the requirement outside London to offer half-fare concessions should not be commenced until 1 June 2001. Again, we expect to be consulting local authorities on that very shortly.

We believe that that should allow sufficient time to put the necessary arrangements in place. Equally, many authorities should be in a position to bring in the concessions sooner, and we would encourage them to work with bus operators to do so. The funding adjustments to revenue support grant will be in place from 1 April.

I should stress that we have sought throughout to take into account representations received from local government and DPTAC, and to respond to what all those people have said to us. We believe that the result is a better, more generous scheme, and I commend the changes to the House.

Mr. Syms: Passenger transport authorities, among other organisations, always complain that, with regard to concessionary schemes in the past, Governments have never fully compensated them, pound for pound, for the additional people riding on various forms of public transport. They have always felt a little short-changed.

The Minister spoke of £50 million for local authorities, and I presume that that includes passenger transport authorities. Has he discussed with them whether they are happy with the resources given to them to do the job? In meetings that I had leading up to the introduction of the Bill, a number of PTAs made the point that governmental organisations always assume that these are extra riding passengers and that sometimes the authorities were not fully compensated for the additional costs.

Mr. McDonnell: My point is on a related issue, specific to London. The Association of London Government has welcomed the Lords amendments, which clarify the approach to criteria for eligibility and the issuing of guidance and consultation. The ALG is grateful for the consultations that have taken place with the Minister.

The London boroughs are already funding the freedom pass concessionary travel scheme, which offers 100 per cent. discount to those eligible. There are no plans to change this level of concession. However, the ALG is concerned that the broadening of eligibility will increase costs for boroughs. The current estimate is that the proposals could result in an additional cost of £14.7 million, which would fall on the boroughs. We welcome the additional money that has been allocated. In the negotiations between the London boroughs and the Government there has been some enhancement, specifically in relation to the acknowledgment that the census data are unrelated to the real needs of Londoners.

There is still a funding gap, and a range of issues needs to be addressed in the continuing discussions—particularly those which arise from double counting and take-up rates, which we believe will be enhanced as a result of the additional publicity. There is no provision currently for administrative costs. The boroughs believe

[Mr. McDonnell]

that there is little choice but to have a full-fare scheme for London, bearing in mind equity in terms of existing schemes. On that basis, the ALG has asked for assurances that the extra resources that the Government provide will be re-examined in the current negotiations. It is keen that the resources should be passported through to the boroughs rather than lost in the vagaries of the rate support grant system.

As the Minister has said, there will be further discussions and consultations. It would be welcomed if the matters that I have raised were taken into account. Rest assured that, the London boroughs are committed to the extension of this excellent scheme.

9.15 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): My point is similar to the one raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). Having considered the Association of London Government brief, I took the opportunity this morning of speaking to the chief executive of the London borough of Havering. A rough estimate is that the cost of the proposals to that borough will be between £300,000 and £500,000 a year. If the additional funding to take account of these welcome amendments is not passported, local authorities will be left in a worse position. At a time when local authorities are struggling to implement a welcome range of initiatives, funding is extremely important. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Mr. Brake: I echo the points made by the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) about a possible funding gap in the travel concessions schemes. Local authorities are concerned about the tightness of the definitions that are being used, in relation to the partially sighted, for example. Perhaps there is scope for that to be considered more widely than a definition would suggest. There are concerns about cost implications. Perhaps the Minister be able to offer some reassurance.

I ask the Minister to clarify when he expects guidance to be issued. I know that he has said that it will shortly be forthcoming, but local authorities need to plan and they need more precise information than that.

Mr. Hill: Departmental officials and I have had long and detailed discussions with local authorities, the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government on these matters. I was left with a powerful impression that their chief anxiety related to issues surrounding the definition of disability, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) spoke. I think that we have been able to offer them considerable reassurance, both in terms of the changes in definition in the Bill and the specific commitment to provide guidance.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) asked about tightness of definitions. It will be the job of my Department and local government associations to consult and discuss as guidance is being drawn up. As for when the guidance will be issued, the answer is certainly shortly. The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) asked about the allocation of funding to PTAs. They will benefit from the new money via the metropolitan districts. We have increased the money by an extra £7 million, which is good news for the PTAs.

On the other issues raised by London Members, I can offer an assurance that London boroughs will benefit from the extra money. We are still discussing the details with them. On passporting, which was referred to by my hon. Friends the Members for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) and for Hayes and Harlington, we are still talking and are happy to continue to do so until we reach a satisfactory resolution.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 82 to 96 agreed to.

Clause 162

EXTENSION OUTSIDE UNITED KINGDOM

Lords amendment: No. 97, in page 96, line 43, leave out ("unlawfully interfered with") and insert

("interfered with with intent to avoid payment of, or being identified as having failed to pay, a charge")

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we may discuss Lords amendments Nos. 118, 120, 123 to 132, 150 to 160, 164 to 168, 170 to 188, 193 to 196, 198, 200 to 219, and 221 to 235.

Mr. Hill: The amendments cover a wide range of changes to parts III, IV and V of the Bill, none of which, I suggest, is controversial. Some of them are essentially technical. I shall draw the attention of the House to just two of them.

Amendment No. 123 is a valuable measure in support of the Government's road safety strategy. Existing legislation provides the power for school crossing patrols to help school-age children to cross the road. The amendment provides that patrols can assist children of any age to cross, and extends the powers so that patrols can help any adult who needs assistance, such as the elderly. The clause also removes restrictions on the hours when school crossing patrols may operate. That will complete the package of measures to which the Government made a commitment in the 1998 "Integrated Transport" White Paper. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), whom I am pleased to see in his place, because his earlier amendment on school patrols made it possible for us to develop this more comprehensive measure, which I know he warmly welcomes.

Amendment No. 125 deals with freight facilities grants for shipping. It, too, is a thoroughly useful change, which will extend the existing freight facilities grant to coastal and short sea shipping, as well as extending the scope of inland waterways grants. I hope that it will be welcomed.

Mr. Syms: I welcome what the Minister has said, particularly on grants to coastal shipping. Given what the Dutch and the Belgians do with small, family owned ships that carry a lot of cargo around the coast, and given that we have many ports around our coasts, congestion on our roads and some difficulties with rail, I believe that much more could be done through coastal shipping. Our waterways are heavily underexploited, and everyone in politics should do far more to encourage use of those facilities.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 99 to 110 agreed to.

After Clause 234

Lords amendment: No. 111, to insert the following new clause—*Substitute services to be suitable for disabled passengers*—

".—(1) This section applies where—

(a) a person who provides services for the carriage of passengers by railway provides or secures the provision of substitute road services, or

(b) the Authority secures the provision of such services (under an agreement entered into in pursuance of section 202).

(2) In doing so the person or Authority shall ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the substitute road services allow disabled passengers to undertake their journeys safely and in reasonable comfort.

(3) In the event of any failure by the person or Authority to comply with subsection (2), he or it shall be liable to pay damages in respect of any expenditure reasonably incurred, or other loss sustained, by a disabled passenger in consequence of the failure.

(4) The Secretary of State may by order grant exemption from subsection (2) to—

(a) any class or description of persons who provide services for the carriage of passengers by railway, or

(b) any particular person who provides such services,

in respect of all substitute road services or any class or description of such services.

(5) Before making an order under subsection (4) the Secretary of State shall consult—

(a) the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, and

(b) such other representative organisations as he thinks fit.

(6) An order under subsection (4) shall be made by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(7) In this section "substitute road services" means services for the carriage of passengers by road which are provided where railway services have been temporarily interrupted or discontinued.

(8) For the purposes of this section a passenger is disabled if he has a disability, or has suffered an injury, which seriously impairs his ability to walk."

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment is designed to ensure that when substitute road services are provided in place of railway services, the substitutes will be suitable for passengers with mobility problems. The amendment meets an undertaking given in Committee, and I commend this new duty as an honourable advance.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Before Clause 241

Lords amendment: No. 112, to insert the following new clause—*Charge for whole duration of works*—

.—(1) In the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, after section 74 insert—

"*Charge determined by reference to duration of works.*

74A.—(1) The Secretary of State may make provision by regulations requiring an undertaker executing street works in a maintainable highway to pay to the highway authority a charge determined, in the prescribed manner, by reference to the duration of the works.

(2) The regulations shall not require charges to be paid to a local highway authority unless the Secretary of State has approved it for the purposes of the regulations by order made by statutory instrument.

(3) The regulations may prescribe exemptions from the requirement to pay charges.

(4) The regulations may prescribe different rates of charge according to—

(a) the extent to which the surface of the highway is affected by the works,

(b) the place and time at which the works are executed, and

(c) such other factors as appear to the Secretary of State to be relevant.

(5) The regulations may—

(a) prescribe more than one rate of charge in respect of the same description of works, and

(b) provide that charges are to be paid in respect of any works of that description at the rate which appears to the highway authority to be appropriate in relation to those works.

(6) The regulations may make provision for the determination of the duration of works for the purposes of the regulations.

(7) And they may, in particular, make provision for works to be treated as beginning or ending on the giving of, or as stated in, a notice given by the undertaker to the highway authority, in the prescribed manner, in accordance with a requirement imposed by the regulations.

(8) The regulations may make provision as to the time and manner of making payment of charges.

(9) The regulations shall provide that a highway authority may reduce the amount, or waive payment, of a charge—

(a) in any particular case,

(b) in such classes of case as they may decide or as may be prescribed, or

(c) in all cases or in all cases other than a particular case or such class of case as they may decide or as may be prescribed.

(10) The regulations may make provision as to—

(a) the application by local highway authorities of sums paid by way of charges, and

(b) the keeping of accounts, and the preparation and publication of statements of account, relating to sums paid by way of charges.

(11) The regulations may create in respect of any failure to give a notice required by the regulations a criminal offence triable summarily and punishable with a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.

(12) The regulations may require disputes of any prescribed description to be referred to an arbitrator appointed in accordance with the regulations.

(13) The first regulations under this section shall not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament; subsequent regulations shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

Regulations under sections 74 and 74A.

74B. Nothing shall be taken to prevent the imposition of charges by both regulations under sections 74 and regulations under section 74A in respect of the execution of the same works at the same time."

(2) The reference to the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 in Schedule 1 to the National Assembly for Wales (Transfer of Functions) Order 1999 is to be treated as referring to that Act as amended by this section and section (*Charges where works unreasonably prolonged*).")

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 113.

Mr. Hill: The issue of disruption caused by street works is of increasing concern to the public and

[Mr. Hill]

road users. Several measures are already in place, or are being introduced, which are aimed at minimising that disruption. In particular, we announced in April our intention to activate section 74 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, which allows highway authorities to charge utility companies for street works that are unreasonably prolonged.

We have recently finished consultation on draft regulations that set out the detailed arrangements for operating a scheme under section 74. However, we recognise that it may be necessary to introduce further measures if that does not result in a sufficient reduction in the present level of disruption. We will therefore review the situation to see whether further measures may be required on, for instance, powers for highway authorities to levy a charge on undertakers who carry out street works from the first day of works—so-called lane rental.

New clause 112 allows for regulations to implement such a scheme, but it does not try to set out every last detail in the Bill. Should we activate that power, we will consult extensively with relevant parties. The amendment sets out some issues that we want to cover in regulations, such as the level at which charges should be set and the way in which they would vary according to the location and timing of works. The regulations would be subject to affirmative resolution as I have already confirmed, so the House will be able to scrutinise the proposals in detail.

New clause 113 modifies the existing power in section 74 of the 1991 Act for the Secretary of State to issue regulations that require undertakers to pay a charge to the relevant highway authority where their works exceed the deadline that had previously been agreed with the authority. In preparing draft regulations, it became apparent that highway authorities would need clear evidence of when works began and ended in order to be able to charge undertakers.

Following discussion with the relevant parties, it was agreed that the best way of achieving that would be for the regulations to allow notice to be given by undertakers to the highway authorities stating the start and close of works. As the 1991 Act does not allow for such notices, the new clause provides for them to be given and for their content to be prescribed in regulations. As with lane rental, the amendment allows for several areas relating to the levying of charges to be dealt with in regulations, over and above those prescribed in the 1991 Act.

9.30 pm

Mr. Syms: The Conservative party agrees with the general thrust of policy. All of us have suffered; many of our constituents have suffered not only because roadworks have been carried out, but sometimes because they have not been finished—parts of roads have been dug up and left for some considerable time. That has caused difficulty.

There has always been a requirement for people to tell the highway authority before they dig up roads. If we move towards a charging regime, setting precisely when work starts and finishes will be important. I wonder whether it will be possible for local authorities to engage in more co-ordination so that when one utility digs up a road another can take advantage of the fact and the same piece of road is not dug up three times in a period. If we can give incentives to local authorities, if they have to dig up the road, to do it quickly, and allow all the utilities to take advantage of that, a great deal of grief could be avoided for the travelling public.

Mr. Don Foster: I endorse the comments made by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and I hope that the Minister will consider his suggestion seriously. All hon. Members present tonight, and hundreds who are not, could cite many examples of problems that have occurred in their constituencies. They may regret that they were not here tonight. This is one example where hon. Members on both sides of the House could obtain popular support back home by saying how desperately keen they are on the amendment.

While I accept the importance of, as the Minister puts it, consulting widely, does he accept that he should also consult quickly? What is his current estimate of when the regulations will be introduced—as I was delighted to hear, by affirmative decision by both Houses. This is the first occasion that I can recall in my nine years in Parliament that we have had two affirmatives to one negative resolution, and I welcome that.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I welcome the change. We hear a lot of calls nowadays for deregulation. This is one of the wonderful examples of deregulation that has been an unmitigated disaster. Those of us who have served on councils can wax lyrical about the problems that deregulation has caused. I will not go on about that because the other place has done us proud and I hope that the amendment will be universally acclaimed. As the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said, we will all be acclaiming it in our press releases.

One of the biggest problems is caused when statutory undertakers have already done the work and apply retrospectively to the local highway authority to complete it. I wonder whether that can be examined. There is certainly a call for some universality in compensation, especially where businesses are affected. I never cease to be amazed by the difference between what undertakers offer. The same people are often affected, and it causes nothing but disagreement when they go to the same undertaker at different times and the sums offered are very different.

Another reason that the state of the roads is so bad is the number of previously dug trenches. That is one of my greatest bugbears. I hope that inspections are not only carried out immediately, but that a regime of long-term inspection can be set up so that extremely poor work can be dealt with.

Mr. Don Foster: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, when roadworks such as he describes are carried out, not only is it important to carry out later inspection, but, as the initial covering of a hole or filling in of a trench will drop after a while, it is important that the contractors return to finish the job? That may be some time afterwards; that is why it is so important to carry out such checks.

Mr. Drew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention. The matter relates to time; I entirely agree. I was considering the longer term, when the whole road surface decays because the trench has been dug

inappropriately for the surface. It is important that there is a mechanism to check the state of the trenches months and years later, so as to ensure that the appropriate sums are spent. Then, we shall have a decent road surface on which we can ride our bikes.

Mr. Brake: This is real pavement politics—or at least roadway politics. The businesses in Beddington lane will be overjoyed at the Minister's news.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): My hon. Friend the Minister is no stranger to the graceful, sweeping boulevards of Northolt, but those broad avenues that he last saw framed and shaded by noble London planes—and other strange suburban growths—have suffered grievously of late: the same section of road has been dug up not once, not twice, but thrice, in the name of cable television—whatever that may be.

I know not whether cable television is a utility, or whether it comes under telecommunications legislation, but, in order that I may transmit the information to my constituents—not, in the manner of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), in the form of a million "Focus" leaflets, but in a more intimate focus group, perhaps in licensed premises—could my hon. Friend, who has many admirers in the Northolt area and is known as a great friend of the suburban street scene, let me know whether there is any hope for those of us who have seen our roads thrice dug up in the name of cable?

Mr. Hill: Given the reputation of my Streatham constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) should not tempt me on the matter of the street scene in our constituencies.

It is rather a relief that the House is so thinly attended this evening, as clearly we all have our stories about street works. Had more Members been present, this part of the debate would have continued for much longer. The issue evokes enormous passions and interest. I am delighted that we are beginning to take action on the matter.

Mr. Don Foster: Will the Minister help me? I cannot recall whether I mentioned the problems in the London road in Bath.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman did not mention them, but he has done so now. I am willing to take further constituency references before I continue my remarks.

Several important issues have been raised in this brief but lively debate. The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) referred to co-ordination. Co-ordination has two aspects: co-operation between the utilities and the co-ordination of traffic movements when street works are being carried out.

Regrettably, it seems that in practice the latter is more achievable than the former. It certainly seems to be achievable to ensure that, where street works occur, traffic is not prevented from taking easy diversions around that route. Here in the centre of London, the so-called Central London Partnership, which brings together the central London boroughs and several utilities, has devised such a programme for next year, which will come into effect from the beginning of January. Obviously, traffic movement will be considerably eased as a result of such traffic co-ordination.

A more intractable problem is the issue—oh so obvious but oh so difficult to resolve—of utilities co-operating. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North mentioned cable television companies. I am told that competition between cable companies is so intense that when local authorities, with the best will in the world, broach with the utilities the issue of co-operation, they are met with sneers of derision at the thought that commercial secrets could be divulged in that fashion.

We, as Members of Parliament, are very fortunately placed. Hon. Members will recall that, a few months ago, Parliament square was subject to considerable disruption as a result of street works, and there one did have an example of several utilities working together, actually carrying out work at the same time. I suspect that in that case there were special considerations because of the location. We were—although we should not have been—very privileged.

I reassure the House that in various ways we are bearing down on this issue, and that we shall be looking for a more effective effort at co-ordination by utilities.

Mr. Syms: Perhaps when the pricing regime is considered, there might be a beneficial pricing regime for utilities that co-operate. That might be a positive way of encouraging co-ordination. I am not sure whether it could be done, but the option should be investigated. If utilities did co-operate, there might be a financial benefit for them in doing so, or even an award of best practice so that we could all know which people were the best at co-operating.

Mr. Hill: I welcome those two suggestions, which are now on the *Hansard* record. I hope very much that when we carry out our consultation on these matters, the hon. Gentleman will respond. We shall then carefully consider what I dare say will be his more detailed proposals on these matters.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) asked for my current estimate of the implementation of the lane rental regulations. We have emphasised that we do not expect the immediate implementation of lane rental. Indeed, we have clearly said that we are taking reserve powers with regard to lane rental, and obviously we shall be working and consulting on regulations.

However, let me issue a fairly clear warning to the utilities: as from now, the writing is on the wall. We certainly propose to implement, at an early opportunity, the section 74 penalties for overstaying conditions. We will review the effect of those powers and the use of those powers by local authorities, but if it remains the case that they are unsatisfactory, we will certainly consider, very seriously, moving rapidly to the introduction of lane rental.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) paid tribute to the other place for having brought in this measure. I am actually willing to go further and pay particular tribute to Lord Peyton. In the same breath, I should pay tribute to Lord Macdonald of Tradeston, who responded so positively to Lord Peyton's proposals. My hon. Friend mentioned three problems. He spoke about the issue of the retrospective application by utilities for

[Mr. Hill]

street works. I agree that that is a scandal. We hope that the effective development of software to ensure better co-ordination of notification will enable local authorities to be more insistent that they get proper notification on these matters.

9.45 pm

My hon. Friend asked about compensation for those discommoded by street works. I can make no offers on that subject, but we need to think about it in a broader context. He also referred to the phenomenon of the inadequate repair of previous trenches, and I remind the House that a two-year liability was established by a recent court case.

I very much hope that the writing on the wall that we have provided in the reserve powers for lane rental and our activation in the near future of the overstaying provisions in section 74 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 will stimulate local authorities to be more proactive on the issue of street works. I think that there has been a certain amount of demoralisation historically, but we want local authorities to be proactive and to provide resources at a local level, so that they can scrutinise developments more carefully.

It is worth bearing in mind the fact that the returns from the penalties will be able to go to local authorities. Central Government have taken several positive moves and we are looking for a constructive, positive and effective response from local authorities.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 113 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 114 to 120 agreed to.

After clause 244

Lords amendment: No. 121, to insert the following new clause—*Quiet lanes and home zones*—

.—(1) A local traffic authority may designate any road for which they are the traffic authority as a quiet lane or a home zone.

(2) The appropriate national authority may make regulations authorising local traffic authorities who have designated roads as quiet lanes or home zones to make use orders and speed orders of such descriptions as are prescribed by the regulations in relation to any roads designated by them as quiet lanes or home zones.

(3) A use order is an order permitting the use of a road for purposes other than passage.

(4) But a use order may not permit any person—

(a) wilfully to obstruct the lawful use of a road by others, or

(b) to use a road in a way which would deny reasonable access to premises situated on or adjacent to the road.

(5) A speed order is an order authorising the local traffic authority by whom it is made to take measures with a view to reducing the speed of motor vehicles or cycles (or both) on a road to below that specified in the order.

(6) The appropriate national authority may make regulations specifying procedures for the making, variation and revocation of—

(a) designations, and

(b) use orders and speed orders,

including procedures for confirmation (whether by the appropriate national authority or any other body).

(7) The appropriate national authority may give guidance to local traffic authorities about matters to which they must have regard in determining whether or not to designate a road as a quiet lane or home zone.

(8) In this section—

"the appropriate national authority" means—

(a) the Secretary of State as respects England, and

(b) the National Assembly for Wales as respects Wales,

"cycle" has the same meaning as in the Road Traffic Act 1988,

"local traffic authority" has the same meaning as in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984,

"motor vehicle" means a mechanically propelled vehicle intended or adapted for use on roads, and

"road" has the same meaning as in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.

(9) Regulations under this section shall be made by statutory instrument and may make different provision for different cases or areas.

(10) A statutory instrument containing regulations made by the Secretary of State under this section shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.")

Mr. Hill: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 122.

Mr. Hill: Both the amendments are new clauses. One deals with quiet lanes and home zones, and the other with rural road speed limits. Both were introduced by the Government in response to Liberal Democrat amendments that were withdrawn.

Amendment No. 121 will give legal status to the concepts of quiet lanes and home zones, by enabling local traffic authorities to designate them. It will then give the appropriate national authority power to make regulations which, in turn, will enable local traffic authorities to make two new types of order in quiet lanes and home zones: use orders and speed orders. The appropriate national authorities are the Secretary of State in England and the National Assembly for Wales.

Use orders will be particularly valuable in home zones, because they will give legal status to uses of the road for purposes other than the traditional one of "passing and repassing"—for example, purposes such as children's play, or simply standing around and talking. Safeguards will ensure that rights of passage, and access to premises, are protected.

Speed orders will enable the local traffic authority to introduce measures in individual quiet lanes and home zones to reduce traffic speeds below levels specified in the orders.

The amendment does not provide for pedestrians, cyclists and horse-riders to be given formal precedence over motor vehicles, which was included in the Liberal Democrat amendment. The Government have thought carefully about that and I am glad to say that we are entirely at one with the Liberal Democrats on the objective, but we believe that it can be achieved within the existing law. We would not want to duplicate existing provisions.

Amendment No. 122—the rural road hierarchy clause—is less complex. However, I believe that it embraces the essence of the amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats. The clause commits the Secretary of State to undertake a review of all the considerations

required to implement the rural road hierarchy, to engage the devolved Administrations and to publish a report within 12 months.

Mr. Brake: I am obviously disappointed that the Government have not chosen to allow precedence to be given to walkers, cyclists and horse-riders. However, I seek clarification on one aspect of the amendment. Am I right in thinking that the Secretary of State will be required to authorise each home zone scheme? I hope that the Minister will confirm that that is not the case because it would be extremely impractical.

Mr. Drew: I very much welcome the changes. Believe it or not, the subject of speed is the hottest topic in my neck of the woods. Next week, as I seem to do every week, I shall meet constituents to talk about speeding, which is a nuisance in their lives and threatens, in particular, younger people.

I am concerned about the need for strategic planning to make the most effective use of home zones, speed control and changes in use. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be categorically stated in local transport plans and the partnership agreements that arise from them? Does he also agree that we should be making it clear to local authorities that they have an obligation not just to roll such schemes forward one at a time, but to ensure that there is cohesion and definite strategic thinking as regards their operation?

Mr. Don Foster: I join my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) in welcoming the amendments, and thank the Minister for generously acknowledging that they are based on amendments that were proposed by my noble Friends in another place.

It is fair, therefore, that I should pay tribute to the Government, and I acknowledge that they have already provided the opportunity for a number of home zone schemes to take place on a trial basis. It is interesting that the Government have agreed to the schemes taking place on a wider basis before we have had the results of the trials. Will the Minister say how those trials are proceeding?

Does the Minister agree that one problem is that local authorities have not given adequate attention to preparing the public for the introduction of home zones? They have not done enough to get the signs right to ensure that people can find their way around the areas covered by the schemes. Will he ensure that the Department provides advice on that to local authorities?

Has the Minister had an opportunity to see the recent work in Bradford? The local authority has introduced new speed limits as part of a home zone-type scheme. I was extremely impressed, as I am sure he would be, to see that it has not only used the traditional 20 mile-an-hour sign with a red circle around it, but—for whatever reason and by whatever authority I know not—ensured that the signs include illustrations by local school children of the benefits of cars travelling at slow speeds. If the Minister is not aware of that scheme, will he find out about it and let me and other interested Members know by what authority Bradford did that, so that I can at least get my local authority legally to pick up what is a very good idea?

Mr. Hill: I shall begin by responding to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). He asked for confirmation that each home zone would not require authorisation by the Secretary of State. That is the case. The Secretary of State will need to authorise use orders and speed orders, but not home zones as such.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) asked about strategic direction in the planning of home zones. He is absolutely right to identify local transport plans as the appropriate vehicle for the development and proposal of home zones. We certainly expect home zones and quiet lanes to be included in local transport plans where appropriate. By way of anecdote, I had a meeting recently with Wiltshire county council, which has some very exciting proposals for quiet lanes as part of its local transport plans. We shall certainly consider my hon. Friend's suggestion that we might include some guidance on the matter. At the moment, however, we do not insist on either the inclusion of home zones and quiet lanes in local transport plans, or a strategic plan on the matter.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for his kind words on this subject. He is perfectly right; I think that there are 11 pilot home zones at the moment. He asked how they were going. The home zone in my constituency, which I hasten to add was designated prior to my elevation to this high office, is not going at all, and I am bearing down on my local authority on the matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), who as we all know has been a great proponent of home zones, was telling me that the one in Peterborough at least is going splendidly. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall be following up his reminder that one needs to track progress of home zones.

I shall certainly follow up the hon. Gentleman's suggestions about signs in Bradford. He asked by what authority Bradford had engaged in what sounds like a splendid initiative—especially the involvement of local schoolchildren. I shall write to him on the subject. I suspect that his point that the public are often not prepared for home zones is right, but that is of course the purpose of pilot schemes. We shall be garnering the experiences of the pilot schemes and, I dare say, providing advice in due course.

I am delighted that we have been able to conclude our proceedings on such a note of joy and unanimity.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 122 to 235 agreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments Nos. 27, 28, 29 and 31: Mr. Robert Ainsworth, Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Mr. Phil Hope, and Mr. Robert Syms to be members of the Committee; Mr. Nick Raynsford to be the Chairman of the Committee; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Connex South Central

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

10 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): It is appropriate to follow a transport debate with a debate about Connex South Central and its franchise. The Minister knows that the debate on Connex is one of Parliament's regular features; it happens every couple of months. I am sure that commuters in Carshalton Beeches, Carshalton, Wallington, Waddon and Hackbridge and the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) would have it no other way.

The chronology of the franchise is well known. It was awarded in the dying days of the Conservative Government, and taken away from Connex and given to GoVia on 24 October. The period immediately before and after that date is of interest to my constituents. With a great fanfare, the contract was awarded to GoVia, but there were many similarities between the GoVia bid and that of Connex. I hope that the Minister can reveal the decisive factor in opting for GoVia rather than Connex. I am sure that he has had discussions about that with the shadow Strategic Rail Authority. Perhaps he can also explain how awarding the contract to GoVia fitted the Government's railway strategy.

Since the announcement that the franchise has been awarded to GoVia, there has been a deafening silence. In an attempt to get the ball rolling and to ensure that commuters know where they stand, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam and I have asked GoVia to commit itself to a 10-point action plan. Before outlining its content, I shall set out Connex's current position. The way in which Connex deals with the matter is crucial because it officially runs the franchise until 2003. In the past, the Minister has confirmed that there is little that the Government can do in practice if Connex chooses to hang on to the bitter end.

I understand that the chief executives of Connex and GoVia have met, and that GoVia wants the handover to happen early in 2001, although it is anticipated that it may take longer. I am pleased that Connex has said that it will be as co-operative as possible, but that various matters need to be tackled before the handover can take place. Does the Minister have a view about the likely handover date? Has he set a deadline, even if it is only in his mind, by which it must happen?

Connex has confirmed to GoVia that it wants the franchise to be passed on as a going concern so that the staff are transferred in an orderly fashion. Clearly, I want that, as do local commuters. A protracted handover could lead to staff departures, which would cripple GoVia's ability to run the service. What measures are in place to ensure an orderly transition? Will the Minister confirm that he expects Connex staff to be transferred to GoVia under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981?

Clearly, staff morale at Connex cannot be good since the loss of the franchise. Staff will seek reassurances about terms, conditions and pensions—a subject that we discussed earlier in relation to National Air Traffic Services—after the handover. Connex has stated that it is a big company and that it is in its interest to maintain its reputation by not allowing standards to go downhill between now and the handover. It has also confirmed that planned investment will go ahead. I am afraid that that is not necessarily the view of its customers.

Before I came to the House for the Adjournment debate, I heard a message that had been left on my office answering machine by someone who travels from Redhill on Connex. He said that he was already seeing deteriorations in the service and that such problems were caused not so much by bad weather as by the lack of train crew. Obviously, his concern is that the problems will worsen as the handover date approaches.

What does the Minister think Connex needs to do if it is to bid successfully for a rail franchise? As I said, there was relatively little difference between the Connex and GoVia proposals for the Connex South Central franchise. During the recent bad weather and disruption, Connex staff acquitted themselves fairly well in difficult circumstances. I have spoken with their representatives and know that some staff have been attacked by stressed passengers in the past few weeks.

I shall not discuss in detail all the points in GoVia's action plan because my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam also wants to speak, but it touched on the need to ensure that a proper plan of all intended works is displayed in stations so that passengers know exactly why they will experience disruption, and on the need to improve punctuality and closed circuit television systems.

The items that we listed in the 10-point action plan had been raised with us by commuters. If GoVia can guarantee to deliver those 10 points, commuters will believe that the end of their troubles is in sight. GoVia responded to our action plan by specifically saying that it would seek to keep customers as fully informed as possible of its plans and of progress, and that it envisaged displaying material in stations and on its website. It is also keen, apparently, to keep local Members of Parliament informed.

A key point is to make such information available, because customers—commuters—need to know that the service will probably get worse before it can improve. Investment is required and disruption may result from that. GoVia intends to introduce a new fleet of trains and to redevelop all stations. The fact that it will provide investment led it to assure us that it will deal with poor maintenance and cleaning. What are the Minister's views on how high levels of cleanliness can be enforced?

GoVia guarantees to replace its slam-door rolling stock by December 2004 at the latest, but says that that programme will be gradual and reliant on the delivery of new stock. I hope that the Minister will give an assurance that GoVia does not have an opt-out clause—it must deliver replacements for the slam-door rolling stock by that date, irrespective of any reliance on the delivery of new stock. It will spend heavily on improving communications systems and will improve punctuality and run longer trains. That will be extremely welcome in the London borough of Sutton, where we all too often suffer from overcrowded trains. Has the Minister or the shadow SRA made a specific requirement to reduce overcrowding as part of the franchise deal to which GoVia will sign up?

GoVia will improve its customer services department. What does the Minister expect the turnaround time for complaints to be in that enhanced department? It will run more trains later, especially at weekends if there is

sufficient demand. Does the Minister agree that, with leisure use booming, train companies should provide services that run much later on Fridays and Saturdays? That would allow people who go up to town for shows to get home at a reasonable hour.

Apparently, station security will be improved. What commitment does the Minister think the company will have to make to ensuring that all its stations are safe, and how soon will that have to happen?

The final point that we raised with the company related to orbital services. The company said that it would commit itself to providing the services outlined in its franchise, and that any other suggestions would be considered. Have the Government any plans to work with the Greater London Assembly and the Mayor to develop orbital rail services? That is surely one of the key ways of reducing traffic congestion. More orbital rail services will enable commuters who currently cannot travel into London and leave London by train, because it takes too long, to cut out a lot of car commuting in our part of London.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam a few minutes, so I will make just one final point. It was not included in our 10-point plan, but I want to put it on the record now. Lord Cullen's inquiry into the Paddington rail crash revealed that Thameslink—owned by GoVia—had a poor record in driver training, and a poor record in regard to scrutinising new recruits. What assurances have the Minister and the shadow SRA sought, in relation to training standards and the vetting procedures that will be employed by GoVia once it is running what is currently the Connex South Central service?

I apologise to the Minister. Once again, I have bombarded him with a series of questions. I see that he is on his own—there is no one in the Box to assist—but I hope he will be able to respond to those questions in detail in the near future, in writing if he cannot respond immediately. If he can respond, he will give commuters in Carshalton and Wallington a sense of security and some hope about the future of their train services, at a time when a sense of security and hope for the future of local rail services is distinctly missing.

10.12 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The Minister is probably almost as much of an expert on the services our constituents receive as we are. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) rightly observed that on this occasion there might not be anyone in the Box to assist the Minister, the Minister has participated in a number of debates on Connex South Central, and has been helpful in responding to concerns that my hon. Friend and I have raised. I think that, as a result, the Minister has become familiar with those concerns. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter again this evening, given the way in which the franchise process has proceeded. It is quite appropriate at this point, with the award of the contract to GoVia, for us to raise the concerns outlined by my hon. Friend, as well as one or two points that I want to raise. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate; I also thank the Minister for the opportunity to speak.

Many of my constituents are pleased that Connex South Central has lost the franchise and that GoVia will take it on. They see it as a new beginning, and hope that that new beginning will bear fruit—that they will receive a better service than they have experienced over the past few years. I fully support the 10-point plan outlined by my hon. Friend, on which he and I worked together, and I think that many of the hard-pressed commuters with whom I have shared train journeys to this place from Cheam will support it too.

The franchise system that Members inherited after the general election seemed to many to be about rewarding poor service. It was all about saying that if a train was run on time, it was all right to run it overcrowded and short. It is that sort of service that has made travelling a misery in London. That is why all the indicators suggest that Londoners feel let down by Connex and others, and it is why my hon. Friend and I have raised these issues on a number of occasions in Adjournment debates over the past year or so. We feel very strongly about them.

My hon. Friend and I have taken a close interest in rail services and have followed the franchise and refranchising process step by step. I want to place on record my gratitude and that of my hon. Friend to both companies for their participation in the process, especially the way in which, in June, they took up our invitation to attend a public meeting—a public rail question time—and directly engage with their commuters about their plans. My hon. Friend and I and the 100 or so commuters who attended that meeting found it very useful in informing our views. It has certainly shaped the development of the 10 points that my hon. Friend outlined this evening.

I touched on this issue in a previous Adjournment debate, but especially now that the award has gone to GoVia, it is absolutely crucial to ensure a smooth transition from Connex South Central to GoVia—the new train operating company. As my hon. Friend has rightly said, Connex has a commitment to delivering planned investment. It must be delivered across the network for which Connex is currently responsible, especially for the services and infrastructure in our constituencies about which we have campaigned for some time.

From travelling on the trains and talking to constituents, I know that the fear is that the standards are already slipping and that they will slip further during this interregnum. Therefore, information about the timetable and how long commuters must wait until GoVia takes over needs to be clearly put on record as soon as possible. As my hon. Friend has said, there has been a deafening silence about the timetable.

It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us what the safeguards are and how the transition period will be monitored to ensure that Connex continues to deliver at least the current standard of service and, better still, starts to make improvements. Connex has been running on a pretty ropy timetable for months on end, and it is about time our constituents and other rail users who rely on Connex South Central started to see some improvements.

Planned investment brings me to my final point: investment in the stations in the area. The Minister will know that I have campaigned for some time for improvements to Sutton and Cheam stations. I am grateful to the Minister for his interventions, which have helped to get Connex off its backside and investing in Cheam station. That has borne fruit; we have a canopy on the London-bound platform, so we no longer get wet when waiting for trains in the morning.

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

I hope that the rest of the programme will be delivered and that the Minister will ensure that the Strategic Rail Authority will continue to keep Connex to its promises. Sutton station still appears to be in flux. Hoardings are still up, and it is not clear whether the company will honour the timetable that it said it would. I hope that the Minister can deal with that—if not tonight, perhaps he could write to my hon. Friend and me.

The 20-year franchise must transform the services that my constituents receive. Rail users have had a lousy service for the past few years, and they expect better. I hope that the Government can assure us that the service will be better in future.

10.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate and providing a further opportunity for the House to discuss the Connex South Central rail franchise. He secured an Adjournment debate on this very subject on 11 April. I welcome this opportunity to update him on the progress made with the replacement of the south central franchise and to assure him that the issues that he and his hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) have raised are, or will be, considered as part of the replacement franchise process.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington commented on my knowledge of the issue. My knowledge has been developed by the educational experience of debating Connex South Central with him and his hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, but I also have a keen interest in the matter, both as the Minister for Transport in London and as the Member of Parliament for Streatham, two of whose stations—Streatham Hill and Streatham Common—are currently served by Connex South Central rail services.

The House will be aware of the rail network's continuing problems, which have been caused by adverse weather conditions and temporary speed restrictions imposed by Railtrack in the aftermath of the tragic accident at Hatfield. Connex South Central services to and from London are suffering severe delays and cancellations resulting from 20 mph emergency speed restrictions. The company is not operating an emergency timetable, but has planned a series of cancellations about which passengers have been informed. Flooding and embankment damage was the greatest concern on the Brighton main line, which was blocked between Haywards Heath and Brighton. However, I am delighted that the line reopened on Monday afternoon.

It is clear that both the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam welcome the franchising director's announcement on 24 October that the shadow Strategic Rail Authority had signed heads of terms with GoVia, the current operators of the Thameslink franchise, as the preferred counterparty for the new replacement south central franchise.

GoVia plans to brand the services, which run to south London, Gatwick airport, Brighton and the south coast, the New Southern Railway. It is expected to run the business for 20 years and, over that period, to implement an investment programme valued at up to £1.5 billion. That will include the introduction of new rolling stock, upgrading key routes and all stations to raise standards, improving train service performance, and providing additional capacity.

A new franchise agreement will be signed with GoVia once detailed negotiations and funding plans have been developed. GoVia may take over the franchise earlier under the terms of the existing franchise agreement with Connex, subject to agreement of terms for the early transfer of the franchise, which is due to expire in May 2003. It is for the parties to agree the date on which the change will come into effect, in consultation with the franchising director. I have no powers in that regard.

GoVia will continue to work up the investments, which will be delivered as soon as possible after the new franchise agreement comes into force, taking account of Railtrack planned works and Thameslink 2000 works. In the meantime, Connex is required to continue to meet the requirements of its franchise agreement, including service provision, performance regimes, station standards and customer satisfaction requirements, until the transfer has been made. Failure to comply may put it in breach of its current contract. That may be taken into account by the franchising director when evaluating proposals for future franchises in the replacement process.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked how the newly announced franchise fitted in with the Government's strategy for franchising. The objective of franchise replacement is to secure the earliest possible delivery of better railway services for passengers, including many of the aspirations raised by the hon. Gentleman, while providing demonstrable value for money for the taxpayer.

It is envisaged that that objective will be achieved on the basis of long-term replacement franchises that will seek to commit to a continuous improvement in safety; to deliver improvements in the quality of service to passengers; to ensure expansion of network capacity and high investment; to treat franchisees and train operators as partners, sharing the risks and rewards that the industry offers; and to encourage operators to build brands, develop markets and provide innovative customer service initiatives

This is intended to achieve demonstrable benefits to passengers, covering the whole door-to-door journey experience. To focus attention on that, interested parties have been asked to take account at an early stage of service quality and customer care issues.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to his 10-point action plan. I confess that my briefing indicates that it is merely his action plan. I am delighted to hear that it is a joint effort and that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam has also evolved that plan.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I agree with it, too.

Mr. Hill: I understand it now receives the endorsement of the Liberal Democrat transport spokesman—that is endorsement indeed. Hon. Members have made some specific points to which they would like GoVia to sign up, to ensure that their constituents receive the standard of service that they need. GoVia is already committed to some of the points. I shall deal briefly with the main ones.

All stations will be brought up to secure station standard, with investment in lighting, CCTV, help points and appropriate staff presence. GoVia will work with the British Transport police and the civil police to crack down on crime. Punctuality will be improved. There will be improved information and additional retail staff, customer assistance and revenue protection staff.

Slam-door rolling stock, to which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred, will start being replaced by late 2001, and all mark 1 stock will be replaced by the end of 2004 at the latest. GoVia will be introducing new trains each year through the life of the franchise. We expect GoVia to deliver those commitments, and it is the franchising director's job to monitor delivery and to ensure that it is secured.

Additionally, trains will have automatic passenger-load monitoring facilities to help GoVia to provide the resources to meet demand. GoVia is also committed to investment in depots, which includes improved cleaning facilities. All train interiors and stations will be cleaned daily.

I am aware that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington has written to GoVia's group marketing director, who I am sure will give due consideration to all the concerns put to him. The hon. Gentleman has also sought assurances on safety. GoVia has undertaken to support all forthcoming industry safety initiatives and to comply with all relevant recommendations of current inquiries.

I should like to deal with the early benefits expected from the new franchise, and have already mentioned new rolling stock. It is intended that 396 vehicles will be delivered by the end of 2002, a further 334 by the end of 2004, and a total of 1,000 new vehicles throughout the term of the franchise.

The infrastructure on the Arun valley line will be upgraded in 2004, and the Brighton main line in 2006, to provide greater capacity.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does my hon. Friend know whether GoVia has agreed to take on Connex's obligation on the Hastings to Ashford upgrade? That is a particularly important route to Europe for my constituents in Hastings and Rye.

Mr. Hill: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has asked that question, as I know that he is eager to represent his constituents' interests. I am therefore delighted to add that, also in 2004, there will be upgrading of infrastructure facilities to allow faster trains to overtake stopping services on the south coastway, and the electrification of the lines between Ashford and Hastings and between Uckfield and Hurst Green, providing through electric trains between London and Uckfield.

I tell hon. Gentlemen that £200 million will be invested on station improvements over the duration of the franchise, and 37 stations will be developed as community and retail centres. There will also be improved access for disabled passengers, new car parking, and rail/bus integration in conjunction with local authorities, to form quality partnerships.

I shall deal now with the essential issue of the Sutton and Cheam stations. I understand that, on 10 November, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority wrote to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam to reassure him that existing and planned work on Sutton and Cheam stations should not be adversely affected by the change of franchisee. I hope that that will be of reassurance to him.

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Gentleman also ensure that the Strategic Rail Authority takes on board the 10 points that my hon. Friend has made to him today?

Mr. Hill: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the *Hansard* record of this debate will be sent to the Strategic Rail Authority. I also assure him that the Orbirail concept is the subject of current investigation and discussion between the Mayor of London and the Strategic Rail Authority.

I trust that the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington and for Sutton and Cheam will be reassured that selecting GoVia as the preferred counterparty for the replacement south central franchise was done after full consultation and will reinforce the higher standards that we want to establish across the industry. If there are any questions with which I have not dealt, I shall write to hon. Gentlemen in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 November 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER PLC

Ordered,

That the promoters of the Alliance & Leicester plc Group Treasury (Transfer) Bill *[Lords]* shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next session of Parliament, provided that notice of their intention to do so is lodged in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present Session and that all fees due up to that date have been paid;

That, if the bill is brought from the Lords in the next session, a declaration signed by the agent shall be deposited in the Private Bill Office, stating that the bill is the same in every respect as the bill brought from the Lords in the present session;

That the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay upon the Table of the House a certificate, that such a declaration has been deposited;

That in the next session the bill shall be deemed to have passed through every stage through which it has passed in the present session, and shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having passed those stages;

That no further fees shall be charged to such stages;

That no petitions against the bill having been presented within the time provided for petitioning, no petitioners shall be heard before any committee on the bill save those who complain of any amendment as proposed in the filled-up bill or of any matter which arises during the progress of the bill before the committee.—[*The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

BSE and Scrapie

1. **Mrs. Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): If he will make a statement on his Department's risk reduction strategy for BSE and scrapie. [137130]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The risk of BSE is reduced by a range of measures, including the ban on meat and bonemeal in feed, specified risk material controls, the destruction of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy suspects and, in cattle, the over-30-months scheme, the selective cull and the offspring cull.

Since becoming Minister, I have pursued research into improved disease control measures, which enabled the development of the current proposals for the national scrapie eradication and control plan. I have also, on a precautionary basis, put in hand preparation of a contingency plan setting out actions that might be taken in different scenarios if, in future, BSE is found to be present in sheep.

As the House is aware, food safety is of course a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Mrs. Lawrence: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, but can he confirm that any scientific advice that he receives will be made public, and does he accept that that principle is essential to protect the livelihoods of our farmers and the interests of the public in general? Unfortunately, that fact appears to have been forgotten by Ministers in the previous Tory Government.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When scientific advice that will inform the Government's policy decisions becomes available to me, I put it in the public domain as a matter of policy so that everyone can see what that advice is and draw their own conclusions. I do that to inform debate. If I had doubts about such a policy—I do not—I would find that the current policy was being urged on me by Lord Phillips in his report.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister agree that, however great the temptation to indulge in vicarious pleasure at the problems currently being experienced in France, a major BSE outbreak in that country and the collapse of consumer confidence will do nothing to help the British beef industry? Will he therefore do all that he can to assist the French in combating their problems—if not to help their farmers, at least to ensure that our farmers can export the safest beef in the world?

Mr. Brown: I have sent Lord Phillips' report to my French counterpart, Jean Glavany. I hope that the thorough examination that Lord Phillips undertook will help other European Union member states and others world wide better to understand this appalling condition in animals, which has implications for human health, and ways in which to get it under control and eliminate it.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I thank my right hon. Friend for all the measures that he has taken, but, given that protein has been found in liquid condensate and that the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee recommended that that should not be spread on land, will he explain how MAFF can guarantee that placing untreated liquid condensate in, on, or under the ground is safe?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend asks, essentially, a question about food safety. As she will know, that is a matter for the Food Standards Agency and the Secretary of State for Health, rather than for me, although, of course, agricultural practices are a matter for my Ministry. The lead advice in that regard comes from the Food Standards Agency, and the Ministry will follow such advice.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): What steps, if any, are the Government taking to ensure that any meat imported from France, and derivatives from it, are free from contamination?

Mr. Brown: This country's public protection measures, which are very powerful, include a ban on selling any beef product derived from animals that are over 30 months. I cannot go further than that because the hon. Gentleman's question is essentially about food safety, which is now outside my ministerial responsibility. The Secretary of State for Health, not me, takes the lead in that regard, but we in government act on the advice of the Food Standards Agency, which is carefully considering those matters. So far, it has not recommended to the Government a ban on produce from France.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): On the question of French beef, has my right hon. Friend seen a report in today's *Financial Times* that the Commission will spend up to 60 million euros on providing private storage facilities for the purpose of intervening in the market and, presumably, buying French beef, which, sadly, might be infected with BSE? Does he agree that that is, to say the least, a rather bizarre use of public funds?

Mr. Brown: The use of private storage aid in these circumstances is something which I understand the Commission has under consideration. The food safety implications will of course be considered by the Commission, but they will also be considered in the United Kingdom by the Food Standards Agency. It is important that these policy matters are dealt with in terms of protection of consumers and protection of food safety, and not in terms of market competition or, indeed, of trade rivalries.

Mr Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Is French beef safe for British consumers?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman was the Opposition spokesman when the Food Standards Agency was established. Underpinning the establishment of that agency was the fundamental decision to take Agriculture Ministers out of the decision-making process so that the decision would be made—*[Interruption.]* Let me finish the answer. Ministers were to be taken out of the process so that decisions would be made by the Food Standards Agency in its advice to Government. Subsequently, that advice goes to the Secretary of State for Health.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's question directly, the recommendations from the FSA are clear: there are no health reasons to ban the importation of French beef. That is what the agency is currently saying to us; that is its professional advice to Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants to dispute that advice or has some extra-scientific evidence of his own, he should put it in the public domain. Has he anything to put in the public domain? No, he has not.

Mr. Yeo: On the contrary, this week, in the light of clear increases in the BSE level in France, the French Government have started to take the measures that in Britain were taken four years ago. In view of that, is it not clear that, as a precaution to protect British consumers, it would be wise to stop potentially BSE-infected French beef coming into Britain—particularly as, because the Government have refused to introduce honesty in food labelling, British consumers do not know whether they are eating safe British beef or dangerous French beef?

Mr. Brown: Let me remind hon. Members that, in 1996, the hon. Gentleman said to the House that the public protection measures that have been put in place or are now under consideration in France were a waste of money. I cannot believe that any hon. Member would take advice on food safety from Ministers in the previous Conservative Government—who incompetently presided over the BSE crisis in this country, and now seek to advise on what should be done in France.

Veterinary Products

2. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): When he last reviewed the costs of veterinary products available to farmers. [137132]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): On 30 March, we announced as part of the Government's strategy for agriculture an independent review of dispensing of prescription-only medicines by veterinary surgeons. Additionally, the Office of Fair Trading is conducting an investigation into certain aspects of the supply of veterinary medicines in the United Kingdom, including whether there is any evidence of anti-competitive practices that breach UK law.

I think that the House will also want to know, although the decision is not finally made, that I am considering commissioning a review of the costs and utilisation of all agricultural inputs, including veterinary products and interventions. I hope to have more to say about that next week.

Mr. Todd: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, particularly the latter part of it. Farmers in my constituency regularly draw to my attention the price discrepancies between the veterinary products that they themselves can purchase and those that their competitors and colleagues in France can purchase there. Is it not another example of how British regulatory environments fail to support the competitiveness of British agriculture? It is another example given by the better regulation taskforce, which published its report yesterday on the environmental regulation of farming.

Mr. Brown: I think that my hon. Friend is on to a very strong point—although not so much the regulatory framework as the trading framework is at the heart of it. That is why I am considering taking a longer look at it with others who represent the different interests in the industry, including the interests of farmers. I welcome what my hon. Friend has had to say on the better regulation taskforce's work, and I commend Lord Haskins on the job that he has done.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Minister will be aware of the onward march of the varroa jacobsini mite through the beehives of England. Is he aware that, under the veterinary medicines directorate rules, only the German-created drug Bayvarol may be used to fight varroa jacobsini—whereas, in the old days, we used to use good old-fashioned talcum power, which was more or less free. Bayvarol costs £10 per hive per year. That cost

is putting bee farmers out of business and is having a significant effect on arable agriculture. Will the Minister pay particular attention to beekeeping in his review?

Mr. Brown: In fact, we have a research programme designed to help beekeepers. There is some money in my Department's research budget for precisely that purpose. The use of an intervention in one part of the European Union and doubts about whether it can be used in this country are precisely the matters that I want to be thoroughly examined.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the cost of veterinary services can be crippling, particularly for the deer industry. The deer farm in my constituency—Round Green farm—told me this morning that the cost of a qualified vet being present at the abattoir when animals are dispatched is £43 an hour, while that of a meat inspector is £14 an hour. The time at the abattoir is split between the meat inspector and the qualified vet, but the industry is fearful that, as from next April, the regulations will change and a vet will be required to attend the abattoir all the time that animals are being dispatched. Will my right hon. Friend therefore look at that issue and ascertain whether it would be possible for a qualified meat inspector to be present at the abattoir, rather than a fully qualified vet?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. I have already considered whether we could use meat hygiene inspectors, rather than qualified vets, under the EU directive, which is more than 30 years old. I have managed to convince my ministerial colleagues in the EU that we should review the directive, but of course that will take some time. In the meantime, the cost of the veterinary services represents a heavy burden on the small abattoir sectors. The Maclean report is now being considered in government and I hope to announce a response to that soon. I think that it is a response that my hon. Friend will welcome.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): We are all well aware that the high cost of veterinary products in Britain represents a heavy burden on British farmers. As has been said, those costs are higher than in the rest of Europe, but is not the real problem the over-zealous red tape of the kind highlighted by Lord Haskins in the better regulation taskforce report, published yesterday? That report paints a nightmarish scenario of farmers struggling against some of the strictest animal health and welfare controls in Europe, with hordes of pestering inspectors descending on them daily. When will the Government get off farmers' backs?

Mr. Brown: We have already had the red tape reviews, and the Government have accepted the overwhelming bulk of their recommendations, but we need to be careful because the culture of deregulation and the ferocious assault that was made on the Meat Hygiene Service in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the BSE disaster that overwhelmed our country and had the most tragic implications for human health. So those who simply call for a bonfire of the regulations are wrong. Lord Haskins has adopted the right approach: he aims for better regulation, not no regulation.

Milk Consumption

3. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What steps he is taking to encourage the consumption of milk. [137134]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): We drafted, and Parliament approved, the necessary legislation to enable dairy producers to fund their own promotional activities via a statutory levy. They are now doing so via "The White Stuff" campaign, in conjunction with processors.

I am also pleased to announce to the House today that we intend to make good the reduction in EU subsidy for the school milk scheme from 1 January. The Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment are joining MAFF in funding England's contribution to bridging the funding gap.

Mr. Kidney: That is excellent news about the scheme for school milk, especially about the free school milk for those children who might otherwise not get that nutrition and energy in school. I am glad that the label "milk snatcher" stays firmly attached only to the Conservative party. Does my right hon. Friend accept that some schools are still reluctant to take part in the scheme to deliver milk to their schoolchildren? Will she do her part in encouraging a better take-up of that excellent scheme around the country?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I thank him for welcoming my announcement. It is important to work with local authorities and schools around the country. Obviously, the scheme is voluntary, in the sense that local authorities and schools can choose to take it up. However, I am keen that they should look at the scheme and the variety of products that can be given to schoolchildren, including lower-fat milk, yoghurts and so on. I am keen to ensure that the take-up of the scheme is as good as possible.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I agree with the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and welcome the Minister's announcement. She knows that I have supported the generic marketing campaign. Does she agree that there is little point in increasing the volume of milk consumption unless we can also increase the profitability at the farm gate for dairy farmers? To that end, is she as disappointed as I am with the report on supermarkets by the Competition Commission, which, although it received evidence, seemingly had nothing to say? Will she institute a series of supply chain studies in the various sectors—starting with milk—publish those reports and allow us to see how we can maintain a sustainable increase in the price of milk to help dairy farmers?

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman makes a number of interesting points. I welcome the support that was given by both sides of the House to the order that we proposed, which allowed the levy to be raised to promote milk consumption. I welcome the Competition Commission's commitment to developing a code of practice for the food supply industry, including the dairy sector. That built on the work that MAFF had undertaken in the food chain initiative. We are keen to take the work forward and we hope to make further announcements in due course.

Obviously, there has been some increase in the price of milk, which helps producers, but we take seriously the importance of good communication across the food chain and of initiatives to add value to milk products.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): One issue that will help consumption is the continuation of the doorstep delivery. We are used to seeing a decline in such deliveries, but it is important for older people. In my constituency, three dairy rounds in Dursley were told, at less than a week's notice, that they had to pick up their milk from Stroud, an additional 13-mile journey. Is it not fair that we allow older people in particular to have their milk made available to them by making sure that the doorstep delivery continues into the future?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend makes a good point: the doorstep delivery service has been much valued by consumers. We are keen that the dairy industry is able to supply consumer needs. Obviously, it has to evolve to changing consumer tastes, but the doorstep delivery system is a valued part of milk supply.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I hope that the Minister is able to support doorstep delivery. In certain villages where the local shop has closed, the delivery is the only regular supply of food. When I am in Ribble Valley, I get my pinta delivered to my home. It is a superb service. We are trying to encourage milk consumption, but I am concerned with the plight faced by dairy farmers. A farmer came to see me last week and said that the amounts he was getting for milk had halved in a couple of years, and he felt that he was unable to continue in the dairy industry. What encouragement can the Minister give to dairy farmers in Ribble Valley and throughout the country that they will have a future in dairy farming?

Ms Quin: There has been a recent firming of prices of milk. We welcome that trend, and feel that the previous low prices were not sustainable. In addition, we have taken a number of measures to help the dairy industry—not only our efforts to boost consumption, but the agrimonetary payments for dairy producers and a number of specific measures regarding the removal of charges that dairy farmers would otherwise have had to face. On dairy farming, we have responded effectively to the concerns of producers over the past year.

Flood Prevention Scheme

4. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on progress of the flood prevention scheme for Edgware and Burnt Oak. [137135]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I understand that the Environment Agency submitted a planning application for the Silk stream flood alleviation scheme at the end of October and that consideration is currently being given to when the work might commence.

Mr. Dismore: My constituents very much welcome that scheme, but are concerned about the time that it is taking. After the floods in 1992, the previous Government did nothing about trying to sort out the flooding problems in my constituency. My constituents are concerned that after planning permission is given, it could take up to nine months for the scheme to be approved by the Ministry, and a further year before construction work can start, with a planned finish date of 2005. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will do all that he can to make sure that that time scale is shortened, if that is practical?

Mr. Morley: The fact that the scheme has been submitted for planning permission is an important milestone in its development. In due course, it will come to the Ministry, where its environmental and technical merits will be evaluated, as I am sure my hon. Friend understands. Following the announcement of an extra £51 million for flood defence, it is possible for the Environment Agency to make decisions on prioritising schemes. Those decisions are made locally in relation to the agency's own programmes.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May I, on this one occasion, endorse the call of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) for the speediest and most efficacious action on that front? I am making that request and going across party lines to endorse the hon. Gentleman's call because my mother is a constituent of his. Although she lives in Mill Hill, not Edgware or Burnt Oak, she is extremely apprehensive about the matter, which is the one subject on which she is vociferous in her support for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman's mother is fortunate in being so well represented. As we have heard, my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who is her Member of Parliament, is assiduous in making sure that the scheme is brought forward.

CAP Dairy Regime

5. **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South): What his priorities are for the next reform of the common agricultural policy dairy regime. [137136]

8. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on his policy for the future of the dairy industry, with special reference to milk quotas. [137140]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): May I tell my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman that I regard this as a matter of fundamental importance for the dairy industry and the future of the common agricultural policy? My priority is to bring about an orderly phasing out of the European Union milk quota system on the basis that I and other like-minded EU Agriculture Ministers advanced in the recent Agenda 2000 negotiations. My aim is to ensure that UK milk production should not be unreasonably constrained by quotas, and that through liberalisation UK producers should have the opportunity to participate in high-value export markets.

Ms Taylor: In thanking my right hon. Friend for his answer, may I urge the Government to keep pressing for the orderly and speedy end of milk quotas, as lowering prices will have the most effective benefit for efficient

dairy farmers. Does my right hon. Friend believe that phasing out those quotas relies heavily on building alliances with European partners?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right, as we will not be able to phase out quotas in the European Union by quarrelling incessantly with the other 14 member states. I am enormously encouraged by the fact that Ministers from other countries who take an interest in the reform proposals advanced by the UK Government and I met recently as guests of the Italian Minister to discuss further reform of the CAP. I set great store by the review clause scheduled for 2003 and the discussions in the EU on whether or not it is possible to pull that clause forward to 2002.

Mr. Robathan: May I remind the Minister that last October he kindly agreed to come to my constituency to see dairy and beef farmers who are struggling? Those who have survived would still like to meet him and I very much hope that he will be able to visit them in the near future. While I agree with his policy, in the unlikely event that he is still Agriculture Minister at the time of the CAP reform—

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): He will be there longer than you.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister may have moved up or down, or even—we hope—across to the Opposition Benches. What will happen if he is still Agriculture Minister at the time of the review in 2003 and is unable to persuade his European partners of the need for the quota system to be withdrawn?

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind wishes for my personal future in this post. I would point out that I have outlasted most of my predecessors. I think that I am also the fourth longest-lasting Minister in the Council of Ministers. There seems to be a rapid cull of Agriculture Ministers, as well as some of the animals for which we are responsible.

On the substance of the hon. Gentleman's question, the UK's views are clear and well known and, to be honest, they should not be a matter of party politics. We want to do the best thing for the dairy sector and for our own dairy farmers. The review proposals that we put forward in the Agenda 2000 round were right. I am convinced that the EU will have to return to our proposals or something similar in future. I argued the case vigorously with the other Ministers in the Council of Ministers and I am making progress.

Finally, I welcome opportunities to discuss these matters directly with those in the dairy industry and, although I have not been able to do it yet, I would like to visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency and meet the dairy farmers and, perhaps, those from neighbouring constituencies as well.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my right hon. Friend agree that many dairy farmers have seen the price of raw milk fall considerably in recent years as the power of the supermarkets has increased? This matter was seriously looked at by the Competition Commission following the original recommendation of the Welsh Affairs Committee. Does he agree that, in order to re-establish their position in the market, dairy farmers should be encouraged to work in partnership with each other and form co-operatives?

Mr. Brown: As my hon. Friend knows, I agree with that proposition. I think that vertical integration in the industry is part of the way forward. It also means that there has to be much more co-operation between retailers, processors and producers. As people have heard me say time and again, I believe that each sector of the highly integrated supply chain has a vested interest in the well-being—which means the profitability—of other parts of the chain. My hon. Friend is on to a strong point. There is a pressing need for a good study of how the supply chain works, where the strengths and weaknesses are and how power is apportioned. I am reflecting on that and hope to have something further to say soon.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister think it fair that British milk quotas will not go up until 2005, whereas four other EU countries have had their milk quotas increased? Is it fair to our milk producers that we have to rely on French imports into Britain until that time?

Mr. Brown: I do not think that the quota system serves our country well, nor do I think it fair that during the Agenda 2000 negotiations I was saddled with commitments that had been entered into by the previous Government with regard to Ireland's quota dating right back to 1983–84. The solution is not to quarrel over the allocation of quota; it is to remove the instrument altogether. That should not come as a sudden shock to dairy farmers throughout the EU. There should be a progressive phasing out of the instrument. I still think that our proposals to depreciate it over six years are the right way forward.

Organic Farming

6. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What assistance is available to farmers wishing to diversify into organic production. [137137]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Under the England rural development programme, the organic farming scheme provides conversion aid under five-year agreements to farmers in England. The budget for the scheme over a seven-year period up to 2007 is £140 million. In addition, the organic conversion information service—OCIS—which is funded by MAFF, provides free advice to potential organic farmers.

Angela Smith: I warmly thank my hon. Friend for that answer that shows a real commitment to organic farming, that we have not had in this country for many years. One of the problems encountered by people interested in converting to organic farming is that of co-ordinating information, advice and technical assistance. Will my hon. Friend ensure that there is co-ordination of technical assistance and advice, as well as help with marketing?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Those who choose to convert to organic farming need technical and business support. We provide that through

our research and development budget, which has been doubled to £2.2 million. There is also a range of R and D projects relating to soil, fertilisers and manure, worth about £8 million a year, which is beneficial to the organic sector. Through OCIS, people get help, support and backing, as they do through the Soil Association and other organisations that back farmers.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister will know that a crucial part of organic farming is crop rotation, to keep the land clean, and that that always means the inclusion of root crops. What are the Government doing to prevent the British sugar industry from being destroyed by the proposals of Commissioner Lamy, which would not only damage our industry but destroy the cane industry in the Caribbean?

Mr. Morley: That was an ingenious way of getting sugar beet into a question on organic farming. These are major issues for our sugar beet sector, which is important in my constituency. We are aware of the concerns and have received representations from sugar beet farmers. We are aware of the proposals and are giving careful thought to the issues.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his great success in constantly getting more funding and resources for organic farming, and I apologise to him because I am constantly asking for more. Will he confirm that the United Kingdom is the only country in the European Union that does not give financial rewards for the environmental benefits of organic farming, and does he plan to do anything about that?

Mr. Morley: Studies have shown that organic farming brings environmental benefits, and we recognise that as a Ministry and as a Government. We have a range of agri-environment schemes, such as countryside stewardship and environmentally sensitive areas, designed to meet different objectives. It may well be that organic farmers can choose to go into countryside stewardship schemes. We are to review our agri-environment programme in 2003. Given the substantial extra sums that will go into the schemes through the rural development programme, it may be opportune to consider organic stewardship schemes for the future, and I assure my hon. Friend that we will give that careful consideration.

Bovine TB

7. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If he will make a statement on tuberculosis in the bovine herd. [R] [137138]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Cattle TB is a complex and serious animal health problem that is on the increase in many areas of the country. Previous control policies have not worked, and the Government are committed to pressing ahead with extensive research and field trials to identify more effective control measures.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister will know that the latest figures for October, showing a 20 per cent. year on year increase in TB cases, show that this serious problem is getting worse. She will also know, from the new case in Shropshire, that the geographical area of TB is spreading. What action does she propose to take outside the Krebs trial areas to deal with the problem?

Ms Quin: We recognise the increase in cases. My noble Friend Baroness Hayman gave evidence on this issue to the Select Committee yesterday. We have increased spending on the TB strategy to £45 million this year, and further increases have been announced in the spending review. As the hon. Gentleman may well know, we raised the compensation payments to farmers from 75 per cent. to 100 per cent., which he will presumably welcome. We have to proceed with the trials on the basis that has been recommended to us, and we have held firmly to that, even though, as he knows, there are criticisms of the trials from the opposite point of view to the one that he has expressed. We have to be guided by the trials in determining what action needs to be taken.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real solution to the problem of bovine TB lies not in the tests being held but in the development of a suitable vaccine? I asked in the House four years ago when such a vaccine would be ready and whether the necessary resources were being put in. Can my hon. Friend give the House a positive answer today?

Ms Quin: We are putting the resources in, but developing a vaccine is a difficult task, and it is still not near completion. I would love to be able to promise my hon. Friend that it was on the verge of being introduced, but it is not, so we have to accept the recommendations of the Krebs report and proceed with the trials.

Although the development of an effective vaccine would be tremendous news for all concerned, farmers are being encouraged to take other practical measures—such as adopting better husbandry techniques—to avoid some of the obvious risks of spreading TB. We are trying to make farmers aware of those other measures.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Cattle with TB have to be slaughtered, but slaughterhouse costs are high and getting higher. Will the Minister implement as a matter of urgency the recommendations of the Maclean report?

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister answered that point a little earlier, but perhaps the hon. and learned Gentleman did not hear it. Clearly, we are considering the Maclean report recommendations, and hope to make an announcement very soon.

Biofuels

10. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): If he will make a statement on research funded by his Department into biofuels. [137143]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The Ministry spends around £0.6 million per annum on energy crops research, concentrating on the development of higher-yielding crops and of improved crop protection which avoids the need for the use of pesticides. Furthermore,

under our rural development programme, £30 million will be available to support the planting of energy crops and to set up producer groups.

Dr. Starkey: I welcome the Government's commitment to funding research on energy crops and biofuels. Does my hon. Friend agree that such crops have the potential to provide more environmentally friendly alternatives to fossil fuel, and that they can be a very useful diversification opportunity for farmers? Will she outline any measures that she is proposing to build on the pre-Budget report to look at ways of improving the economic competitiveness of biofuels?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend makes some important points. This is an exciting area for agriculture and for the general economy. MAFF is very keen to play its part in the examination of new alternative energy sources. A number of Departments are interested. A fund exists in the Department of Trade and Industry for alternative energy sources, there is the new opportunities fund announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and there are also the resources announced in the pre-Budget report.

I recently launched the second stage of the IENICA project in York, which is also looking at the development of these new opportunities across the European Union as a whole.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the Minister agree that the most valuable innovation would be a serious tax incentive for biodiesel? Is the Ministry giving the Chancellor of the Exchequer the evidence that he needs to take a step that would be in the interests of the Government's environmental policy and their agricultural policy?

Ms Quin: We have had discussions very recently with the Treasury on these matters. It is obviously important to look at the economics involved in biofuels, to determine the most viable prospects for such alternative crops. We are very keen to take the work forward. There are possibilities, and the new developments happening all the time alter the previous economic appraisals of viability. For that reason, it is important for Government Departments, including MAFF, to look at the issue very closely.

BSE Inquiry

11. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations of the BSE inquiry report. [137144]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Government are studying the report's findings with care, and looking closely at the lessons that flow from them. Some of the issues have already been addressed through the creation of the new Food Standards Agency, the appointment of consumer representatives to advisory committees, the placing of scientific advice in the public domain and the switch from deregulation to better regulation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I also announced on 26 October that there will be a new national fund for the care of variant CJD victims and financial arrangements to benefit sufferers and their families.

The Government's substantive response to each of Lord Phillips' points will be published in the coming months and the House will have an opportunity to debate the report in Government time. I promise that I will provide the House with an update on progress before the end of the year.

Mr. Russell Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, especially the reference to better regulation. Will he confirm that the very culture of deregulation under successive Tory Governments made it much more difficult to ensure that important protection measures were enforced? Is it not obvious from the recent comments of the Leader of the Opposition about bonfires of food safety regulations that these people have just not understood and learned the lessons of BSE?

Mr. Brown: The whole culture of calling for bonfires of regulations rather than for better regulations is wrong. That is the view of the Government; it is also the view of Lord Phillips. In the report, Lord Phillips makes some very sharp points about those who harass public regulators when they are trying to do an important job to protect animal health, particularly—in the case of BSE—when there are important human health implications.

SOLICITOR–GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Financial Crime

26. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What progress he is making in the prosecution of financial crime. [137160]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The Serious Fraud Office continues to deal successfully with an increasing case load. The Government have allocated increased funds of £3.6 million, £4.6 million and £5.6 million in the financial years 2001–03. In respect of those funds, the SFO has entered into a service delivery agreement published on 3 November, which sets challenging targets of increasing case load and reducing investigation and trial times.

Mr. Kidney: Is my hon. and learned Friend aware that there appears to have been no conviction for insider dealing for the past three years and that statistics for other financial crimes such as fraud and money laundering are not even kept separately from all other fraud offences? Does that not convey the impression that officialdom is not serious about the fight against financial crime? Will my hon. and learned Friend assure the House that the prosecuting authorities for whom he is responsible are unbending in their determination to root out financial crime? Will he talk to his ministerial colleagues who also have responsibility for law enforcement to ensure that they share the same attitude?

The Solicitor-General: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. I think that there have been successful insider dealing prosecutions—perhaps my hon. Friend should talk to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. My hon. Friend, who has been heavily involved with the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, knows

that the Financial Services Authority will have a responsibility in this area, so we are very much on the case. The Attorney-General and I see the prosecutors from the Department of Trade and Industry regularly, and I shall certainly refer them to the points that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that juries are more likely to convict if the trials can be kept simple? That suggests the absence of conspiracy charges but the presence only of substantive charges and few counts.

The Solicitor-General: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right that the offences have to be put in a simple way to a jury. The SFO has had considerable success in doing that, demonstrated by the number of convictions that it has obtained in recent times. This involves introducing technology into the courts, and the Lord Chancellor has done a considerable amount in that regard as well. The director of the SFO has argued for a general offence of fraud on the basis that that would make prosecutions more efficient, and the matter is being considered.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Is my hon. and learned Friend aware of the excellent work that north Yorkshire trading standards department is doing in that area of crime and of the successful prosecutions that have been brought? Is he content that a local authority organisation should have to take the risk of bringing these cases to court? If he is not aware of the matter, will he have urgent discussions with the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department to review the position of authorities that have to proceed with such prosecutions?

The Solicitor-General: Local authorities certainly play an important role in that area. They prosecute under a range of legislation, such as the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, the Consumer Credit Act 1974 and so forth. I am not aware of the north Yorkshire department's success, but I know that trading standards officials throughout the country play an important part in rooting out fraud.

Foreign Governments (Extradition Cases)

27. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): In how many extradition cases his Department is acting on behalf of foreign Governments. [137162]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The Crown Prosecution Service acts for foreign Governments requesting the extradition of persons to their states. It ensures that formal extradition requests comply with any relevant treaties or conventions and with the Extradition Act 1989. It also advises requesting states on any further material required. In addition, it drafts proposed committal charges, liaises with all interested parties and appears on behalf of the requesting state at court. At the beginning of November 2000, the CPS was recorded as acting for foreign Governments in approximately 79 individual requests. It is advising foreign Governments in approximately 112 further cases where extradition has been requested.

Mr. Chope: One of those cases involves the Portuguese Government and one of my constituents. Does the Solicitor-General accept that in such circumstances it is desirable to have communication between those acting for the individual and the Government of the foreign country? Will he do something about the fact that, for four and a half months, even the Portuguese ambassador—in response to my letters and those of my constituent's solicitor—has not been able to get a firm response from Lisbon after a change of circumstances that render continued prosecution, and extradition in this case, redundant?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman raised a specific case, in which, I understand, the divisional court will consider an application for habeas corpus soon. So I should not comment on that. As a result of his question, I have reconsidered the role of the CPS in carrying forward extradition requests. At present, under a decision called "Thom", it acts purely in a solicitor-client relationship. I have raised questions about that and I will pursue the matter further.

Importantly, in recent times the CPS has dealt with requests by the United States Government for the extradition of the alleged bombers of its embassies in Africa and it has acted on a request for the extradition of a person alleged to have committed war crimes. It operates effectively in that area, although there is the problem that the hon. Gentleman raised and I will come back to him on that.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): What new responsibilities does my hon. and learned Friend anticipate that his Department will have if and when we get around to enacting our obligations under the treaty of Rome to create the international criminal court? Clearly, we will have new duties relating to extradition—duties that we would wish to pursue with vigour.

The Solicitor-General: I agree. As I said, we have already responded to a request by the war crimes tribunal for Rwanda and I anticipate that we would act in the same vigorous way when we receive requests from the new international criminal court.

Human Rights Act 1998

28. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Human Rights Act 1998 on the conduct of prosecutions. [137163]

The Solicitor-General: The significance of the Human Rights Act on the work of the Crown Prosecution Service was recognised at an early stage and a high priority was given to ensure that the CPS was well prepared for the implementation of the Act.

In consultation with other prosecuting agencies and leading human rights experts outside the CPS, it developed a comprehensive training programme for prosecutors. That training programme and the continued guidance and advice that CPS staff receive has ensured that cases giving rise to human rights issues have been dealt with professionally and effectively. We had expected that human rights problems would be raised in ordinary cases and that they would be dealt with in the ordinary way. That has proved to be the case.

The Human Rights Act has meant that the courts are considering many new arguments. A number of cases raising human rights points are already going to the appeal courts.

Mr. Robathan: Is not the nub of the matter the fact that, due to the workings of the Human Rights Act 1998, some prosecutions are failing or are not being taken forward by the CPS, because evidence or the methods of gathering it are being ruled inadmissible? Is it not true that since the Government introduced the Act, guilty people will walk free because of its long-term and unforeseen consequences?

The Solicitor-General: That is certainly not the case. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Act provides specifically that legislation continues in force. Courts must apply the legislation. It is the case that several human rights points have been raised, as I pointed out in my original answer, but the CPS is prepared with particular lines to take when such cases are raised. Defenders will raise all sorts of arguments on behalf of their clients—we can expect that. Occasionally, courts at the lower level may favour those arguments, but we have already implemented a fast-track procedure whereby such cases can be taken quickly to appeal. I can give the House an assurance that criminals will not be walking free as a result of the Act.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): What lessons has the Solicitor-General learned about the effect of the Human Rights Act on section 2 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, following last week's Court of Appeal decision in the case of the Crown against Offen?

The Solicitor-General: I am aware of the case; the judgment is being considered. That case simply involved an interpretation of "exceptional circumstances" in the Act. The Home Office is considering the implications of the Act, but the important point is that—as I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan)—the courts cannot disapply the Act; they must apply legislation. In some cases, of course, they can make declarations of incompatibility and in such cases we might decide, as a Parliament, that remedial action should be taken and that the legislation should be amended. However, the basic point remains that legislation cannot be disapplied; it must be applied by the courts.

Crown Prosecution Service

29. **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): What improvements he has made to the performance of the Crown Prosecution Service over the past three years; and if he will make a statement. [137164]

30. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service. [137166]

The Solicitor-General: In May 1997, the Government announced that the CPS would be reorganised into 42 areas with the same boundaries as police forces; we also established the Glidewell review to recommend changes to make the CPS more effective against the background of that decision. The review reported a year later and its recommendations were almost wholly accepted. In implementing the recommendations, the CPS has undergone major organisational change affecting all staff, but has maintained its performance. Extra money was made available in the spending review, including money for a performance improvement programme. That will assist the CPS to become even more effective.

Mr. O'Brien: What action is my hon. and learned Friend taking to improve the rate of successful prosecutions? Does he agree that in order to do so we need to improve the level of representation made in the courts by the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: I agree with my hon. Friend. As a result of the Glidewell recommendations, one change is that the agencies are working together much more effectively. For example, in my hon. Friend's area, in Wakefield, the agencies—the CPS, the police and so on—recently agreed a protocol on racial crimes. As I have said to the House on previous occasions, information technology is much more effective in the agencies; the CPS has an extensive programme for implementing IT. I assure my hon. Friend that all steps are being taken to make the CPS more effective.

Mr. Swayne: Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that there is little value in providing additional funds to police forces so that they can apprehend criminals if we are unable to follow that through with successful prosecutions? Is he convinced that the CPS is adequately funded? The representations that I have received—especially from magistrates—are that it is not; it is thus not capable of delivering that follow-through.

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman cannot have heard the announcements made about, for example, the extra £15 million next year for the CPS and the considerable increase in funding—about 8 to 10 per cent.—over the next three years under the comprehensive spending review. However, I take his point that if the police are to take forward charges effectively, they need effective prosecutors. We are taking steps to ensure that that need is met.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): During the progress of the Bill that became the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000, I emphasised to the Solicitor-General the importance of effective monitoring of other prosecution agencies. What is the hon. and learned Gentleman doing about that?

The Solicitor-General: The different prosecutors fall under the auspices of other Ministers, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point that each prosecuting agency must work effectively, and an inspection service can ensure that. The point that the hon. Gentleman raised about the extension of the scope of the responsibilities of the CPS inspectorate is an interesting idea and may be taken forward at some stage, but that would require the House to change the 2000 Act.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give us the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows.

MONDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Motions relating to Westminster Hall and Thursday sittings.

Motion on the Immigration Appeals (Family Visitor) (No. 2) Regulations 2000.

TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Supplemental allocation of time motion followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Motion relating to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

WEDNESDAY 22 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill.

Motion relating to the coal operating aid scheme.

THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER—There will be a debate on European affairs on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. That is the pre-Nice debate as you will recall, Mr. Speaker.

FRIDAY 24 NOVEMBER—There will be a debate on the Sixth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee on the Environment Agency on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 27 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Freedom of Information Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business for the remainder of November in Westminster Hall will be:

THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER—Debate on the Ninth Report from the International Development Committee on the effectiveness of EU Development Assistance.

THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER—Debate on "Opportunity For All: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion".

Mrs. Browning: I thank the right hon. Lady for the business for the coming week, but wish to express a little disappointment that she was not able today to announce the date for the rising of the House for the Christmas recess. I mention that for a particular reason—not because Opposition Members are anxious to leave our green Benches, but because we are extremely anxious to receive from the Leader of the House a reassurance that the Prime Minister will come to the Dispatch Box and report on the Nice summit to the House before we go home for Christmas.

This is the third time that I remind the right hon. Lady of the fact that, given the importance of the Biarritz summit which the Prime Minister attended—and where he approved, with other Heads of Government, the EU charter of fundamental rights—but has not yet come to the House to answer questions on, it would be unacceptable for him to dodge giving the House a full report on the Nice summit before the House rises. Given that the Queen's Speech is now the latest that it has been since the 1920s, I hope that the Leader of the House will reassure us that the Prime Minister will find time to come and report on the Nice summit before the rising of the House.

Will the right hon. Lady consider a debate on the NHS national plan? In his statement earlier in the week, the Secretary of State for Health made the most cursory reference to what is supposed to be a major plank of Government health policy, yet Members have yet to have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State in detail about the plan, which we would very much like to do. I hope that that, too, can be fitted in before the House rises for Christmas.

After 6 December, it is likely to be the last Session of this Parliament. There is much unfinished business, so I would be grateful if the Leader of the House would consult with her colleagues across Departments and consider the issues that have been the subject of a great deal of publicity. Sometimes, the Government have announced—with great flourish and not a little spin—from the Dispatch Box that they intend to embark on major consultation about various policies. When those great plans are then consulted on, many receive such a negative response from people who know something about the subject that the plans are kicked into the long grass and the House never hears about them.

Proposals for the reform of alcohol licensing laws were announced on 10 April. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has received several assurances that the responses to the consultation on those proposals would be laid in the Library. They are not there yet, but we hear that the consultation could be reported on outside the House, in the next few days, by the Minister responsible. I hope that the right hon. Lady will use her good offices to ensure that such consultations are considered and reported back to the House.

At the Department of Trade and Industry, the consultation on the proposal for employment agencies is now 18 months old—and it has caused great uncertainty among employment agencies. However, the House has not yet had a chance to hear the responses from people in that sector.

We are coming to the end of this Parliament and I inform the Leader of the House that I am compiling a list of unfinished business. It covers the great changes that the Government have said, with great flourish, that they would make, but which they kicked into the long grass once they received responses from people outside. The Government hope that such issues will go away. We do not have short memories, and I am compiling a list for the Library. I hope that the Leader of the House will do the same, and that, at next week's business questions, she will tell us how the Government intend to deal with their unfinished business.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not yet able to give the hon. Lady the date for the Christmas recess, but I shall do so as soon as I can. I was a little surprised by her justification for asking about the date. Nothing is more far fetched than the notion that the Prime Minister would not report on the outcome of the Nice summit. He has reported faithfully on every official summit, and there has never been the slightest suggestion that he would do otherwise.

The hon. Lady will recall that she raised the issue of the Biarritz summit, and I became confused between Biarritz and Nice. No Prime Minister has ever reported on the outcome of informal summits, and I see no reason for my right hon. Friend to begin to do so. However, he has always faithfully reported on the outcome of the proper summits. I take slight exception to the hon. Lady seeking to convey the impression that he might in some way try to avoid doing so.

As for the suggestion that there will be something to conceal from the House because of the major changes that the Prime Minister will make at the summit, I know that the hon. Lady heard him yesterday remind Conservative Members of the 30 occasions on which they gave away the rights to qualified majority voting in the Maastricht negotiations. She said that she has a list, but I have a little list of all the changes that the Conservative party has made to taxation and similar issues since it took us into the European Community. The Government are not attempting to evade their responsibility.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on the NHS national plan. I am sorry that she did not welcome the outcome of the statement made the other day. Her health authority received an increase in funding of 8.3 per cent., but I understand why the Conservative party wants to draw a veil over such issues—it pretends that nothing is happening.

The hon. Lady referred to unfinished business and said that she was compiling a list. That is fine. She added that Conservative Members did not have short memories, but, I am sorry, I have to take issue with her on that. The Conservative party wants legislation on many issues, such as alcohol licensing, and complains that the Government have not introduced it. Her memory must be extremely short if she has forgotten that the Conservative party has not only complained about every piece of legislation that we have introduced, but said that the legislative programme was far too heavy. However, I should not be surprised by that—the Conservative party says that we are spending too much, but then demands spending increases. After complaining for months that we have introduced too much legislation, she wants us to introduce more.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to an outstanding report on arms licensing, which was produced this Session by four Select Committees, and, in particular, to its chief recommendation that the four Committees be allowed to conduct prior scrutiny in the next Session? Given the timing of that recommendation, the weight that it carries—it has been unanimously approved by four Select Committees—and the importance of the issue, will she give a positive response to that recommendation and provide an opportunity to debate that important report?

Mrs. Beckett: I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of the relevant Department. I must admit that I have slightly lost track of the timing on that matter. As for having a debate on the report, if the House agrees on Monday—it will, of course, be a free vote because it is a House matter—to the Modernisation Committee's unanimous recommendations on Westminster Hall sittings, there will be even more time to debate Select Committee reports. I think that two thirds, rather than half, of Westminster Hall's time will be available for such debates. That will obviously create more opportunities.

On the issue of prior scrutiny, Departments will have to consider that carefully because of its implications and the time that it would take, but I will certainly draw his remarks to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I strongly endorse the request of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands).

May I ask the Leader of the House for an urgent statement on the potential use of taxpayers' money for party political campaigning by Members of Parliament? There is a need for clarity. I draw her attention, as I did three weeks ago with her Government colleagues, to Fees Office operations directorate factsheet No. 1, which appears dramatically to extend the use of the office costs allowance for Members to the sending of

newsletters, factsheets, annual reports to their constituents.

The Senior Salaries Review Body, with which I had an interview this morning, is totally unaware of the change in the rules, even though it is undertaking an important re-examination of them. There has been no consultation, as far as I am aware, with any Opposition party. Several hon. Members of all parties have paid for such publications out of their own pockets during this Parliament.

In addition, it is totally inappropriate, at the presumed end of a Parliament, to change the rules in such a way. It looks as though some Labour Back Benchers, who have limited responsibilities in the House and limited staff to undertake those responsibilities, will suddenly receive a taxpayers windfall just before the general election that they can use to campaign. Will the Leader of the House urgently investigate how that rule came to be made and why there was no proper consultation on it? In the meantime, will she have it withdrawn until we have a statement?

Mrs. Beckett: I hope that I can satisfactorily answer the hon. Gentleman's main questions. I am a little surprised that the information has not been conveyed to him. No one consulted Opposition parties, no announcement was made and the SSRB could not be aware of a change in the rules because, as far as I know, there has not been one. If I identify correctly the guidance to which the hon. Gentleman referred, it is issued by the Fees Office, and it is not for me or any Leader of the House to instruct the Fees Office about the administration of expenditure and what is considered proper expenditure of public money. That is the last thing that I could do, and it is for the Fees Office to supervise that matter. My understanding is that it issued guidance to clarify the issue.

It has always been the case that Members have the right, should they wish, to provide information and to circulate newsletters that are paid for by the office costs allowance. I have always understood that some Members do that. Many others do not simply because there is not enough room in their allowance for that. As for the notion either that my hon. Friends are in some way seeking party political advantage or that there is a windfall, I assure the hon. Gentleman that in the Labour party—I do not know what the position is in his party—many people find themselves subsidising the office costs allowance out of their salaries.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): Has my right hon. Friend seen early-day motion No. 1103 on the future of community health councils?

[Mr. Patrick Hall]

[That this House notes that the National Health Service Plan proposes the abolition of the community health councils and the redistribution of their functions between the Patient Advisory and Liaison Service, patients' forums, advisory citizens' panels, local council all-party scrutiny committees and the Commission for Health Improvement; and calls for the Government to engage in a robust national debate and consultation on how to deliver effective patient empowerment by adding to the best of community health councils and particularly by addressing the need for independence, integration locally and nationally, appropriate statutory powers and access to information and support mechanisms to identify and promote best practice.]

Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that there is considerable interest in these matters both within and outside the House, particularly with regard to independence, local co-ordination and integration? Will she seek to make time for a debate on these matters as soon as possible?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are strong views on the matter on both sides of the House—there is some concern and some support. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter in the near future, especially as, if I recall correctly, the paper is still out for consultation. My hon. Friend can, of course, seek the extra opportunities that will be provided should the House agree on Monday to the report on Westminster Hall for Back Benchers as well as for Select Committees.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the right hon. Lady consider reorganising the business next week so that on Monday we can discuss the EU proposal that 48 countries under the EBA—everything but arms—initiative should be able to import into the EU sugar on a tariff-free, quota-free basis? Does she understand that that poses a grave threat to the UK sugar industry? Does she also understand that many feel that it would be entirely destructive? British agriculture is not in a position to withstand any further economic knocks.

I know that there is to be a debate on these matters in Westminster Hall—it is listed for Tuesday. However, there is a real risk that they will considered by the General Affairs Council on Monday or early on Tuesday. That being so, the House should debate the issue urgently.

Mrs. Beckett: If the GAC is discussing the matter on Monday, a debate in the House on Monday could have little influence on the GAC debate. A debate on European affairs is scheduled for Thursday, and I do not feel able to bring it forward.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the excellent GCSE results that were announced today? They are a great tribute to teachers throughout the country, including those in my constituency in Nottingham. Such a debate would enable us to highlight the achievements of pupils gaining five A to C higher grades, and to highlight the real achievements of many schools that are working in exceptionally difficult circumstances with pupils of low ability. They have been able to move such pupils from a G to an F grade, and have ensured that pupils take one or more GCSEs.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am only too happy to welcome the excellent results in his constituency, where I know he takes a great interest in education matters.

I entirely take my hon. Friend's point. I remember many years ago hearing William van Straubenzee, a Conservative Member, trying to educate some of his colleagues in the understanding that sometimes to raise the achievements of those whose abilities are somewhat limited is even more demanding, but equally worth while, than to raise the achievements of those who are of higher ability. I am conscious that a range of achievement is needed. My hon. Friend is right to identify that at least in part as a result of the Government putting money into education, and also as a result of our encouragement and desire to raise standards, achievements are higher across the board.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I know that the right hon. Lady takes seriously the historic responsibilities that she has as a defender of all Members, and particularly of the minority. Usually, a Minister who winds up a debate attempts to answer questions that have been raised in the debate. I ask her to refer to recent debates and, if I may be personal, speeches that I made in the defence debate and the procedure debate. By arrangement with the Front Benches, a Minister has only 15 minutes to answer questions, which means that he or she has an even greater excuse not to respond to them. Will the right hon. Lady use her influence—she has no control—through the usual channels to ensure that Ministers winding up a debate have long enough in which to answer the questions put during the debate?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important and interesting point, which illustrates the fact that we need to give more thorough and careful consideration to how we handle such issues. All too often, hon. Members make assertions—the press are sometimes even worse—that people should do this or they should do that. However, as I know the right hon. Gentleman fully appreciates, Front Benchers respond to requests that they curtail the time they take to allow more Back Benchers to contribute in the debate. None the less, I take the point that the greater the degree to which that is done, the greater the difficulty in responding to issues raised in the debate. The point is an important one; I cannot undertake to find an answer to it now, but it is a matter to which the House should give careful consideration.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the health consequences for pensioners of scrapping the £200 winter fuel allowance, as advocated by the Tories, which would have a devastating effect on 18,000 pensioners in my constituency and on pensioners throughout the country?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will recall that the policy to which he refers is not unprecedented: when they were last in government, the Conservatives scrapped the heating allowance that then existed, so we have seen it all before. I share my

hon. Friend's view that, in the light of long understanding of the incidence of hyperthermia and excess winter deaths in this country, one of the most important steps taken for many years was the introduction of the heating allowance. I am astonished that the Conservatives appear not to have realised in time that when pensioners, understandably, talked about wanting an increase as of right, they did not mean people taking away what had already been given by the Labour Government.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am sure that the Leader of the House shares the Liberal Democrats' disappointment at the actions of the House of Lords in making, in effect, a wrecking amendment to the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill. Will she make clear the Government's intentions in that respect? Report and Third Reading will take place in the Lords and the Bill, as amended, will return to the Commons, which is likely to insist on its way; if the Lords reject it again, the Parliament Acts will be used to make sure that the will of the elected House, expressed on a free vote, prevails. Will the right hon. Lady also make it clear that if the Lords make reasonable amendments with which the Commons might agree, they will be given fair wind in this House?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not in a position to give the hon. Gentleman the information he seeks, because the way in which the agenda in the other place will be settled is not clear—it never is. The agenda in the other place is matter for the Lords; the Government have no control over it and no majority through which to press their will. The Bill remains with the other place, and I cannot clarify its intentions or the likely consequences for this House. All I can tell him is that the Government intend to make progress, one way or another.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): With regard to the pre-Nice debate next Thursday, will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that the draft treaty of Nice will be available in the Vote Office well in advance of the debate, so that it can be examined and considered? Will she also try to ensure that the draft treaty, which is, in effect, a legislative document—the Nice summit will be legislating—is available outside the House, so that our constituents and the public can see it?

Mrs. Beckett: I freely confess that I am not sure whether it is possible to do that, but I shall draw my right hon. Friend's request to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who, I am sure, will take it extremely seriously.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Will the right hon. Lady schedule an urgent debate on the cover-up being conducted by Government in respect of the exorbitant cost of preparations to join the euro? She will be aware that those costs are now estimated to be heading towards £38 billion, and that Ministers and Departments, especially the Department of Health, have instructed national health trusts throughout the country to refuse to answer legitimate questions put by Members of Parliament about the disgraceful costs being incurred by the trusts, which are directing vital money away from patient care. Does the right hon. Lady agree that that is an urgent matter for an early debate?

Mrs. Beckett: No. It is absolute rubbish to suggest that money is being diverted away from patient care, just as it is rubbish to suggest that there are vast hidden costs.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to access www.thisisgrimsby.co.uk? *[Interruption.]* If hon. Members like it, they can try the sister site, www.thisisscunthorpe.co.uk, the equally excellent site of my local newspapers. If my right hon. Friend has accessed the site, she will have noticed in Friday's edition that the first cheques for trawlermen's compensation have now gone out to those who fought for 25 years to win justice in that case.

In addition, my right hon. Friend will have noticed in Monday's edition pensioners warmly welcoming the winter fuel allowance and their free television licences; in Tuesday's edition that the Government have given consent for a new power station—that is 500 jobs; and in yesterday's edition £18.5 million extra for my local health authority. I leave the choice up to my right hon. Friend, but can she organise a debate on one of those issues, so that my residents know exactly what the Government have done for them and what the Tories would take away?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her remarks, and I warmly congratulate her on the zeal with which she has pursued the issue of trawlermen's compensation ever since she has been in the House, not least at business questions. She makes a valid point, offers us a range of items from which to choose, and identifies the fact that it took the return of a Labour Government for the trawlermen to get the compensation for which they have been fighting for so many years. I add to that my own list, which includes the far east prisoners of war who suffered, sadly, at the hands of the Japanese; the families with vaccine damage—*[Interruption.]* I know that Opposition Members do not want to hear any of this. Those people asked them for money for 18 years and got no answer except no. Deeply though I am tempted by my hon. Friend's list of excellent items to debate, I fear that I cannot offer to find special time, unless she tries Westminster Hall.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I think and certainly hope that the Leader of the House knows how much I genuinely respect her leadership of the House. Last Thursday, at column 534 of *Hansard*, I sought to summarise her views on free votes on the Liaison Committee report, with which her Parliamentary Secretary, winding up 10 minutes later, did not choose to find fault. If, as the Prime Minister intimated yesterday, I did misrepresent the right hon. Lady's views, I apologise to her. In a constructive vein, can she say how the matter will be taken forward in future?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He is always courteous, not merely to me but to everybody in the House, and is recognised for that. I took no offence, and I do not immediately recall the precise words of his summary. I simply say to him that my view has always been that whenever a matter is put for decision

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before the House, it is always on a free vote if it is a House matter. That is a simple statement of the position as it has been and remains. As to the issue of how we will take forward the proposals of the Liaison Committee, the right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government consider them to be of major importance and believe that they should be given more mature consideration. I cannot, I fear, tell him at present when we are likely to be able to take those proposals forward.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): In view of the recent revelations that Ministers in the former Tory Government never had any intention of holding a proper competition for the site of the millennium exhibition, does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a little like buying a lottery ticket and discovering that the organisers did not hold a draw? That disgraceful behaviour cost the people of Birmingham £500,000, and has also cost money for people in Derby, Stratford and elsewhere. If a local council behaved in such a way, we would surcharge the guilty councillors. In my view, we should surcharge the guilty Conservative Members. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need an early opportunity to debate the matter and get to the bottom of what happened?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to suggest that Derby, as well as Birmingham, will respond somewhat sorely to the information that is currently being published. If what is reported is true, it unfortunately tends to confirm the anxieties of most people in this country who live outside the metropolis. They believe that too many events are London centred, which causes resentment and suspicion on all occasions when there are such competitions. It is usually unfair to assume that there is not a free competition and that London is bound to win, but such stories raise people's anxieties. I fear that I cannot give my hon. Friend an undertaking to find an opportunity for a debate on the matter in the near future. However, as I said to other hon. Members, there will be extra opportunities for debate in Westminster Hall, if the House decides that on Monday, and I have little doubt that the matter will be raised again there or elsewhere.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I draw to the attention of the Leader of the House the situation of a constituent of mine, who has twice been called to have a flu vaccination, but twice had that appointment cancelled. Is the right hon. Lady aware of the grave shortage of flu vaccine in many parts of the country, including Stockport, and will she ask the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House to make a statement on that severe crisis, which is hitting patients and costing lives?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that there have been problems with the availability of flu vaccine and that Ministers in the Department of Health have applied considerable pressure to ensure that those problems will be resolved. I was not aware that a particular difficulty had arisen in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will my right hon. Friend arrange for an urgent debate on the new Criminal Records Bureau? The Government rightly said that voluntary organisations that work with children and vulnerable adults should be able to check on volunteers. However, I am concerned about the proposal to charge voluntary organisations for such checks. I am not sure that that is consistent with the Government's effort to encourage volunteering, reduce bureaucracy and ensure consistency across Departments. Can we have an urgent debate on that issue before the bureau's details are finalised?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point about an issue on which she has been campaigning. I am also aware that many hon. Members across the House are anxious for the system to work effectively and efficiently for the public's protection. I fear that I cannot offer her special time for an urgent debate, but I recommend to her, too, the availability of debating time in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Will the right hon. Lady be kind enough to explain to the House why she and the Government find it necessary to apply a timetable motion to the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill? Many colleagues in the House want to express their grave dismay and concern at the effective destruction of one of the finest police forces that the United Kingdom has ever had. Will she explain why the Bill's title has not been altered more accurately to reflect its practical outcome? She might consider calling it "Betrayal of the RUC Bill".

Mrs. Beckett: First, I remind the hon. Gentleman that a supplemental allocation of time motion is involved—in other words, the House has already discussed and decided to have an allocation of time motion for that Bill. Secondly, he will be as aware as anyone that the Patten report is part of the peace process and part of the response to it. Everyone recognises what is in many ways the very fine record of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but most people, at least, believe that if the peace process is to continue, to be established and to succeed, we also need a new approach to the police force in Northern Ireland.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is as horrified as the rest of us at the situation in Palestine, where more than 200 Palestinians, including many children, have been killed by Israeli security forces. This is clearly the most unequal of struggles: there are stones and a few guns on one side and guns, helicopter gunships and an army on the other.

Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary for an urgent debate so that the House can express its concerns about events and we can hear the Government's position on a situation that some of us believe is escalating into a major tragedy? I say that as a friend and not an enemy of the state of Israel, which I have always supported.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes some very important and serious points, and she is right to remind the House that she does so as someone who has been a supporter of the state of Israel but is concerned at the deterioration of the position there. She will know that the Government have always played an active role in trying to promote the cause of peace in the middle east, and we tried to encourage the two sides to come together. She will

know, too, that we voted in favour of Security Council resolution 1322, which condemned the excessive use of force against Palestinians.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will do everything we can to continue to promote the cause of peace. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter in the near future. Perhaps I could recommend the opportunities in Westminster Hall to her, as well.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Will the Leader of the House seek, wherever possible, to give the House an indication of the statements due in the subsequent fortnight? We are about to have an urban White Paper, and every quango dealing with regeneration and every non-governmental organisation has had this date in its diary for at least a fortnight. It is humiliating to be telephoned by people who are not hon. Members and told the business that will take place in my own House, not having been told of it myself in this Chamber.

Will the Leader of the House say when the statement on the rural White Paper will be made? It was due to be made consecutively with the urban White Paper, but that will not now happen. It was pulled last Tuesday, when the Government seemed to think that they would be besieged by lorry drivers. Furthermore, are we to have a statement on the climate change conference, which the Deputy Prime Minister will be attending next week in The Hague?

Of course, there are statements that cannot be foreseen, but there are many issues on which the Government have long intended to make statements and that flow from Green or White Papers. There is no reason at all why we cannot be given proper notice of those statements.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman was a senior Minister in the previous Government, and he will know as well as anyone else why Governments are always cautious about giving notice of particular statements. Events can change, and it can become necessary to delay some matters because it is necessary to deal with other matters earlier. The right hon. Gentleman said that it was always intended to take the rural and the urban White Papers together, but he is mistaken.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I said that they are separate.

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend assures both me and the House that it was always intended that they would be dealt with separately.

I fear that I cannot give an indication of what statements are likely to be taken in the next couple of weeks. Although the Government have some issues in mind that we may wish to report to the House, we always have to reflect on the ebb and flow of business and determine what business the House can take. The main consideration is that we ensure that matters are properly reported to the House, and we endeavour to do that. I also remind the right hon. Gentleman that the Government have made substantially more statements to the House than our predecessors did.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in the 18 years during which the Tories were in power, there was never a time when they gave advance notice of White Papers, statements or anything else? The answer to people like those toffee-nosed Tories is that they should come to work every day. If they would just come to work, they would find out.

Now that we have heard the welcome news about the trawlermen's compensation, the Japanese prisoners of war compensation and this month's winter heating payments—which the Tories would get rid of if they got half a chance—will my right hon. Friend tell the Department of Trade and Industry to get to grips with the compensation payments for miners who are suffering from chronic bronchitis, emphysema and vibration white finger? If my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe can deal with that and knock together the heads of those 230 solicitors who are holding up the money, she will not even have to make a statement.

Mrs. Beckett: I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend's remarks. He will know that no one is more conscious of the urgency of the case that he makes, or more concerned about the delays that have been occurring, than Ministers at the Department of Trade and Industry. He is right, too, to identify that there was no progress on any of those issues while the previous Government were in office. I can assure him that I shall again draw his remarks to the attention of my right. hon. and hon. Friends at the DTI. However, I know that they share his anxieties.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): In the light of the decline in gross domestic product in the regions of England and its severe decline in Wales during the past three years under this Government, will the Leader of the House tell us when we might have an opportunity to debate the Government's regional policies and particularly the use of the regional fiscal instruments?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's premise stands. My understanding is that GDP has grown under this Government—it must have done so, otherwise we would have a recession. Although a recession was much predicted by the Opposition, who were definitely disappointed that it did not arrive, we have not had one. However, I certainly understand his wish to debate issues of concern to his constituents. I recommend to him, too, the opportunities that arise—and may be increased—in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate the arrival of a unique, entirely unexpected phenomenon in Wales, which would not have happened under the previous Government? What has happened has no name as yet, but it could be described as nano-unemployment. An independent observer has said that we talked about full employment in the 1950s and 1960s, but now in Wales the level of employment is even higher because of the stable economy that the Government have created and the introduction of the minimum wage. Does not that provide a great opportunity for the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and all other Opposition Members to recover from the terrible affliction that they suffer from whenever they talk about Wales—repetitive whingeing syndrome?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful case. I am tempted to grant his request, especially as he is

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right to say that not only in Wales, but across the United Kingdom we are seeing a return to levels of employment—and, indeed, to low levels of unemployment—of a kind that has not been seen in this country for 20 years or more. That is an achievement of which we can all be rightly proud. I fear, however, that he will not be surprised to learn that I cannot find time for an extra debate, but I know that he will take every opportunity to make his points in other ways.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The Leader of the House will recall that at business questions on 21 March, I asked her about the cut-off time for tabling oral questions, as a result of which the Procedure Committee produced a report. Paragraph 17 of its summary states:

> Taking these various factors into account, we have concluded that the deadline for tabling questions for oral answer should be moved from 5 pm to 6.30 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. We recommend that the Speaker should authorise such a change.

Will the right hon. Lady represent Back Benchers and find time for a debate, with a substantive vote, so that those changes can be put into effect? If she cannot find time for such a debate, will she have a private discussion with the Speaker, as I understand that implementation of the proposal requires no change to Standing Orders?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to say that that does not require a debate and vote. He will know how reluctant any Leader of the House is to try to find time for a debate that is unnecessary, given that we are unable to find time for so many necessary debates. Mr. Speaker will certainly have heard the hon. Gentleman's words, as I have, and I assure him that the matter will be considered.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Referring to a point raised earlier, we should have a full debate after the Nice summit because many of the proposals are causing widespread concern. Indeed, there should be a full debate on all the European treaties, as that would allow us to ask why the Tories gave up sovereignty in 1985, why they signed up to the single currency in 1992, and why, shortly afterwards, they followed that with the stability pact. I look forward to the contribution of the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), because I am aching to know why he signed the Maastricht treaty in 1992.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. We know that Conservative Members introduced VAT because they took us into the European Union, but such a debate would give us an opportunity to find out why they almost doubled VAT, why they increased it again to 17.5 per cent., and why they put VAT on fuel, although they now complain about the taxes on fuel. I share my hon. Friend's wish to air all those fascinating matters thoroughly in the Chamber, but I fear that I cannot find time for a special debate to do so.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the Leader of the House provide time to debate the implications for land use, planning and public services of the latest statistics from the Office for National Statistics, which show that, in the last three years, there was net inward migration of 451,000 people—equivalent to the size of Portsmouth and Southampton combined and to more than half the population of Dorset? Major implications flow from that. The rate is twice the rate that prevailed over the past six years. Does the right hon. Lady agree that this is a serious issue that demands the House's attention?

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman that during the period to which he refers, there have been, for example, substantial upheavals in eastern Europe, the Baltic states and elsewhere, which have led to pressure on migration across the world. I am not aware of the figures that he gives. It was my understanding that, until relatively recently, there had been a net outflow, so it may be simply that we are seeing something of a redress of the balance. Of course these issues are taken into account by Governments of every shade as we see the ebb and flow of travel to and from particular countries.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that yesterday the EU gave approval for the Government to go ahead with its aid package to the deep coal mining industry—an industry that was so disastrously treated by the Conservative Government. That aid package is welcome in mining communities, but there are concerns about the early lifting of the gas consents and the need for investment in new clean coal technology. Will she find time for a full debate so that those issues can be aired when the regulation is debated?

Mrs. Beckett: I join my hon. Friend in his welcome for the agreement for the package of support. I understand that there will be concerns about the lifting of the gas consents—although my hon. Friend will know that these have been maintained now for a considerable time—and I recognise his concerns about the development of clean coal technology. I fear that I cannot find time for an additional debate on these matters, but I am confident that if my hon. Friend is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, he will be able to air some of the issues when we debate the scheme itself.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): The Leader of the House will recall that yesterday I asked the Prime Minister about community health councils. I am delighted to find that one of her colleagues has already asked a question about that matter. In contrast to yesterday, however, Members on this side of the House are not stumped for a further question.

I met the health trusts in my constituency, which led me to want to campaign for community health councils. There is bitter opposition to their scrapping. They said that the costs that they were incurring to change over to the euro—without any decision being made in this country—had already outstripped the amount stated to me in an answer during the previous Department of Trade and Industry questions, when four of my colleagues asked questions and received inadequate answers. Should not the Leader of the House make time in this House for a complete answer from the Government, taking into account all the various departmental budgets for the cost

of the changeover to the euro? Would it not be appropriate for either the Prime Minister or the Chancellor to give answers to those questions?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not share the exaggerated claims for the costs of handling the euro which, after all, will be in circulation in this country—as it will be in the rest of Europe—whether Britain joins or not. In consequence, all sorts of organisations must prepare to deal with it. The notion that that will in some way impinge on health service provision in the hon. Gentleman's locality when his health authority received an increase of 8.4 per cent. in the announcements made the other day—I am surprised that he did not welcome that—cannot be borne out, even on the back of an argument about CHCs.

The hon. Gentleman said that he would ask his question even though somebody else has already asked it. I realise that I am risking the wrath of about 90 per cent. of the House in saying this, but women tend not to repeat something that has already been said; men never shirk from doing so.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): In view of today's report from Professor Colin Talbot—which says that the Welsh economy is now better than it has been since the 1950s and 1960s, with zero unemployment in certain parts—could we have a debate on the Welsh economy? Does my right hon. Friend agree that such a debate would be of particular interest to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), Lord Hunt, Lord Crickhowell and Lord Walker, who could all hear just how much better the Welsh economy is doing now that none of them is Secretary of State for Wales?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I have seen reports of the work of Professor Talbot, and the picture is certainly encouraging. I share my hon. Friend's view that there are important lessons, not least for the right hon. Members for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) to whom he referred. Great though the temptation is, I fear that I cannot find time for such a debate, especially at this time of year. However, may I warmly recommend Westminster Hall to my hon. Friend?

Urban White Paper

1.20 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The Government have today published a White Paper on the future of our towns and cities, which is accompanied by two documents, "The State of the English Cities" and "Living in Urban England: Attitudes and Aspirations". These set out the supporting analysis, copies of which have been placed in the Library. As we have said on several occasions, we will publish our rural White Paper later this month with the agreement of the business managers and yourself, Mr. Speaker. I always try to assist the House and the Opposition in giving what information I can, and I assume that, on this occasion, information might have been useful to help with the list of questions that was distributed by the Opposition Whip just before their spokesman came into the Chamber. We shall note with interest whether we get different questions at different times.

A common message runs through those documents, which are about people, places and prosperity. We want to create sustainable communities in which everyone, no matter where they live, can enjoy a good quality of life in communities in which economic prosperity and social justice go hand in hand. I am sure that the House will agree that we have some of the best towns and cities in the world. We have famous historical and cultural centres, dynamic commercial areas, pleasant suburbs and seats of learning that command respect the world over and of which we are justly proud.

The last urban White Paper was produced by the last Labour Government more than two decades ago and focused narrowly on inner-city areas. We now understand the need for a much broader approach that takes in all urban areas. Much has happened since that urban White Paper was published. Cities are powerful engines of growth, but in the early 1980s many of them were hit hard by economic changes. The approach then regarded economic behaviour as detached from its social context, and in the years that followed many areas suffered from neglect, poor management, inadequate public services, lack of investment and a culture of short-termism.

Our aim is to reverse that legacy of decline and bring about a lasting urban renaissance. There are signs of hope, as our attitudes and aspirations survey shows: 85 per cent. of people are satisfied with the areas where they live, the rate at which people are leaving our cities is slowing down and people are moving back into our city centres. We still face big challenges. People and jobs have been leaving our great cities, and people are increasingly living in smaller households or alone, with the result that many more households will need to be accommodated over the next 25 years, as the House has discussed.

Some neighbourhoods suffer from a poor quality of life and a lack of opportunity. Economic performance in some areas is weak, with a knock-on effect on the surrounding region. Over the past 20 years, out-of-town shopping centres have taken the heart out of some of our urban areas; 30,000 hectares of our green belt have been built over; and playing fields have been sold off for short-term profit without regard for the health of the communities they served.

[Mr. John Prescott]

On coming to office, we took immediate action to alleviate the worst problems and began laying the foundations for the long-term strategy that we are now bringing together in the White Paper. We merged the Department of Environment and the Department of Transport to encourage a more joined-up approach to solving problems. We have got hundreds of thousands of young people back into work with the new deal—*[Interruption.]* It is all very well the Opposition mumbling, but we have provided an extra £5 billion to tackle the £19 billion housing repair backlog that we inherited.

We produced the integrated transport White Paper and the £180 billion 10-year plan to rectify decades of under-investment in our transport infrastructure under the previous Administration. We began tackling problems in our most deprived communities through the £800 million new deal for communities and the social exclusion unit. We have committed £350 million over three years to regenerate the coalfield communities that were decimated by the previous Government's policies.

Modernising local government has been a priority. We have legislated to make councils more efficient and more accountable to local people. We established the regional development agencies to drive forward economic growth and regeneration in the regions—*[Interruption]*—and they are working. Many years ago, the Opposition said that they would abolish the regional development agencies for Scotland and Wales. They failed to do so. Although it was a manifesto promise, they did not carry it out. Why would they keep regional development agencies for Scotland and Wales and not give them to the English regions? We shall be asking them that at the next election.

We are modernising the planning system and have set a new target of building 60 per cent. of new housing on developed land. We are on target for achieving that. The quality of construction is improving, following John Egan's report, "Rethinking Construction". In 1998 we set up the urban taskforce under Lord Rogers to look at the causes of decline in our urban areas and recommend practical ways of bringing people back into our towns and cities. I would like to express my personal appreciation to Lord Rogers and his team for the excellent report on which much of the White Paper is based.

The White Paper builds on that groundwork. It sets out a long-term strategy that will bring lasting benefits to all who live in our towns and cities—a strategy which recognises, in Lord Rogers' words, that

people make cities, but cities make citizens.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What does that mean?

Mr. Prescott: Think about it. Evidently, the Opposition have a limited knowledge of these concepts.

There are four key components to our strategy: improving quality of life through partnership with local people; developing sustainable communities in attractive, well-kept towns and cities; achieving economic growth and shared prosperity in all urban areas, and providing good-quality services.

The first is improving quality of life. In the White Paper, we commit ourselves to working in partnership with all concerned to make all areas places for people. It is not just a matter of bricks and mortar. People need jobs, a decent home, good public services and an attractive and safe environment. To be successful, plans need to be shaped by local people for local people.

A clear message from regeneration projects over the past 20 years is that local people must be fully engaged from the outset. All too often, that has not happened—it certainly did not under the previous Administration.

Local authorities have a central role. A good council is one that listens to, leads and builds up local communities. We want councils to work through local strategic partnerships and to involve the community, service providers, business and voluntary organisations in producing community strategies. They should set out an action plan to improve their town or city as outlined in the White Paper.

Secondly, we want to develop sustainable communities living in attractive, well-kept towns and cities, which use space and buildings well and which are cleaner and less congested. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a £1 billion tax incentive package to promote urban renaissance. As a result, more investment will be attracted to disadvantaged areas by the removal of stamp duty from all property transactions in those areas. A block of flats costing £250,000 could qualify for an extra incentive of £6,000.

The re-use of brownfield land will be encouraged through the provision of accelerated tax credits for cleaning up contaminated land. A company spending £1 million on cleaning up contaminated land could receive £300,000 without having to wait until the property is sold.

More homes will be provided as a result of the 100 per cent. capital allowances for creating flats over shops and VAT reforms to encourage the conversion of properties for residential use. For example, someone spending £20,000 on a conversion could receive an incentive of £2,500. It is an important consideration in the development of single-person households.

The new urban regeneration companies that we set up last year are beginning the process of transforming parts of Liverpool, east Manchester and Sheffield. We plan 12 more to tackle the hardest hit local areas in every region. One can often tell the health of an area by the quality of its public realm, and in particular its parks, play areas and open spaces. They are indeed, as they are often described, the lungs of our towns and cities. We have set up a comprehensive programme, including demonstration projects and an extended green flag award scheme—like the blue flag scheme for beaches—to encourage and recognise excellence.

Planning has a fundamental role to play. I can announce today that, in response to Lord Rogers's report, we will conduct a fundamental review of planning policy guidance note 1, "General Policy and Principles", to put the urban renaissance at the heart of the planning system. Simplifying compulsory purchase will make it quicker and easier to unlock land and fairer to everyone involved. There will be new guidance and, ultimately, legislation.

There is a shortage of people with the necessary range of skills to drive forward the urban renaissance. We are therefore setting up regional centres of excellence to improve skills and training in each region. The first two will be in the north-west and in London. In addition, we will start a programme of international secondments so that we can learn from the best in the world.

Our town centres will be stronger. We will protect them from new out-of-town schemes. We will improve them through the town improvement schemes, with local funding, as proposed in the local government finance Green Paper. The millennium communities at Greenwich and Allerton Bywater have shown what good design can achieve. The Greenwich millennium village will be an attractive, mixed tenure development, with homes within walking distance of shops, employment and services. It will have good open spaces and, above all, it will be environmentally sustainable, using 80 per cent. less energy and 30 per cent. less water than a similar conventional development. We will build five more millennium communities in different parts of the country.

Our new English cities fund is designed to encourage the maximum growth in private investment in priority areas, which is vital if we are to secure the widespread regeneration that we seek. The fund will bring up to £250 million into new mixed use projects.

The third component of our strategy is creating the conditions for economic growth and shared prosperity in all our towns and cities. We want to see the generation of more wealth and social justice side by side. Growing disparities and exclusion from our increasing national prosperity are simply unacceptable, and have dominated the past 10 years.

If towns and cities are to be successful economically, they need effective support and a clear regional lead. We have therefore given the regional development agencies more money and much more freedom to use those funds to best effect for the people of their region.

Access to investment capital is also vital to economic growth. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced last week that we will consult on a new community investment tax credit to encourage private enterprise in under-invested communities. We will also work closely with the venture capital industry to set up the first community development venture fund to support new businesses in disadvantaged areas.

Although under this Government there are 1 million more people in jobs, there is a mismatch between the jobs that are available and the skills of those seeking work. We need to ensure that local people have the skills that businesses are seeking. We are therefore setting up the new Learning and Skills Council announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, with a budget of £5.5 billion a year. That is an increase of £600 million. It will bring together funding for education and training to ensure a coherent approach that benefits both learners and employers. In this way, we hope to encourage lifelong learning and reduce the skills mismatch that exists in too many areas of our cities and towns.

Any efficient, modern city requires a good transport system. That is why the 10-year plan for transport emphasises improving bus services and commuter railways, and why it will fund up to 25 new light rail lines. There is a considerable amount of money for the local transport plans that we are to announce in December.

The fourth component of our strategy is good-quality services. By 2003-04 there will be £139 billion a year for key services: health, education, transport, housing and criminal justice, as well as culture, leisure and sport. That is £33 billion more than now. It amounts to an average real increase of nearly 7 per cent. a year for the next three years, which is a substantial increase however it is measured.

The extra money will be backed by tough targets to ensure that we get substantial improvements, with the greatest change in the most deprived areas. We have set ourselves the target of making sure that all social housing is of a decent standard within 10 years, and we are providing the resources needed to make that possible.

Providing homes for key workers is essential if we are to have good-quality services in our major conurbations. We have allocated £250 million over the next three years to help key workers to buy homes. We will shortly set out the details, following on from the housing Green Paper.

We are raising educational standards by expanding the excellence in cities and sure start programmes, by extending free education for three-year-olds and by attracting more people into higher education through the excellence challenge. Only today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced that performance in the first excellence in cities areas has improved much faster than anywhere else.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made clear earlier this week, people's health should not depend on where they live. We are improving health services and reducing inequalities through a major expansion of investment in the health service. We have set tough targets for reducing crime and are backing that with an enhanced crime reduction programme, additional funding for the police and a 10-year drugs strategy.

We recognise that the most deprived areas need extra help and we are determined to narrow the gap between them and the rest of the country. That is why we have set up a neighbourhood renewal fund of £800 million and will shortly be setting our action plan for neighbourhood renewal.

There have been many attempts to change our towns and cities. Too often they have been partial and limited, looking at buildings or the economy in isolation and forgetting the people who live there. This White Paper is broad in its scope and long term in its perspective. We deal with towns and cities struggling to recover from decline as well as those where the pressure of growth needs to be carefully managed. We have set out the way to achieve this and provided the money to back it up.

However, no Government can deliver on their own. We will lead and enable regional and local partners to transform our towns and cities. We will get decisions taken at the right level and transfer real power from Whitehall to Whitechapel. Lord Rogers called for an urban policy board to track progress in implementing our proposals. We will put urban issues at the heart of Government by setting up a new Cabinet Committee. That Committee will be advised by a new group bringing together community, academic, professional, private and business interests.

The Government will be accountable. The Cabinet Committee will prepare for an urban summit in 2002 that will take stock of progress. We will also publish a new "State of the Cities" report in 2005.

I recently visited a deprived pre-war estate in my constituency. Most constituencies contain estates like it. There was graffiti, litter, empty houses and a general air of decay, but a very strong sense of community too. I met

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a woman who had lived there all her life. She said, "I love living here, but I don't want to go on living like this, John." We must not fail people like her, her family or the community.

This White Paper sets out our long-term strategy. We cannot deliver on our own, so I am calling on local authorities, business planners and developers, voluntary and community groups and, above all, local people to work together to bring about an urban renaissance.

In short, this White Paper is about giving people more say over shaping their future, making sure that people can live in attractive and well-kept towns and cities, creating and sharing prosperity, and ensuring that we have places with good-quality services which meet people's needs.

I commend the White Paper to the House.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for that statement, and for the advance copies of it that he supplied. I welcome him back to the Chamber after the recent important debates on the tube, the Transport Bill and other matters. Sometimes I think that we see him only when there is a glossy brochure to produce or a disaster to announce.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Where were you?

Mr. Norman: I was here in the Chamber on Monday, as Labour Members well know.

The subject of the statement is a matter of commitment and passion that is shared by all parties. The failure of our inner cities over the past three decades or more has been the engine of poverty, deprivation and social failure. Inner cities account for 54 per cent. of crime in the country, and the figure is rising. They are the source of lost opportunity and are the root cause of children left behind by the prosperity enjoyed by the rest of the country.

I should like to join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to Lord Rogers, who has produced a formidable report on the subject. He has played a valiant role in the past year, lobbying and harassing the Government into producing the statement that we have heard today.

At last, three and a half years into a Labour Government, we have a White Paper. At first glance, we welcome the White Paper and many of its proposals. However, people will judge it not by its grandiose words, but by whether it accepts the hard recommendations made by Lord Rogers and addresses the fundamental criticisms that have been made of Government policy in the past.

The *Financial Times* said today that the Government were nervous about the reception of their White Paper. Is that surprising when, according to our first-cut tally of the White Paper, of the 105 recommendations made by the Rogers report only 14 have been met in full? Some 34 have been fudged or delayed and 57 are either not addressed in the White Paper or have been rejected outright. Many people living in our cities will think that a very disappointing tally—too little, too late. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Deputy Prime Minister had a proper hearing, and so should the Opposition spokesman.

Mr. Norman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I ask the Deputy Prime Minister to address four fundamental points. First, the Government have been criticised in the past for their failure to co-ordinate the various initiatives on urban regeneration. The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs said:

> There is a lack of co-ordination between local, regional and national Government . . .

The Committee also said that the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions do not appear to have the same views about the role of the cities. According to yesterday's reports in *The Times*, neither do they have the same views on the north/south divide. The Deputy Prime Minister does not think that it exists, but the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry thinks that it is widening. The Government's response has been to set up a Committee. Does the Deputy Prime Minister seriously think that that will be enough? Will the DTI and DETR regeneration budgets be merged under that Committee? Will the right hon. Gentleman chair that Cabinet Committee, or will it be left to the Minister for the dome? Will it meet regularly, or will it be like the Rural Affairs Committee, which has met only once this year?

The Government have been criticised for dissipating resources and applying Elastoplast solutions—for doing the easy things but neglecting the tough actions. What has happened to the primary legislation that Lord Rogers called for to strengthen the powers of regeneration companies? What has happened to the much vaunted urban priority areas which would have enabled more far-reaching and rapid delivery of change? Has the Deputy Prime Minister rejected these recommendations, which were fundamental to the Rogers report, or has he just been thwarted by the Treasury?

In the past three years, the Deputy Prime Minister has cut the amount of money spent on regeneration. Will he now clarify what—if anything—in today's announcement represents new money or new tax incentives? Or does it consist entirely of reheated announcements from the past? Has he been comprehensively pre-empted by the pre-Budget announcement?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned a £1 billion tax package, already mentioned by the Chancellor last week. Is that not to be spread over five years, with only £163 million of it for next year?

More specifically, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us definitively his attitude to the zero VAT rating on new houses built on green fields? Has he rejected Lord Rogers' recommendation of levelling the playing field between urban regeneration and greenfield development, because the statement appears to be silent on that subject?

Does the Deputy Prime Minister recognise the growing concern, expressed by Lord Rogers, the Rowntree Foundation and many others, about the continuing exodus from our cities and about his commitment to accelerate that exodus by building 900,000 unwanted new homes in the south-east and 500,000 in the south-west? Does he not recognise that that is a plan that flies in the face of all that the statement is designed to achieve? It will accelerate the migration of the better-off and able from the inner cities to the countryside, and from the north to the south.

Finally, does the Deputy Prime Minister recognise that summits in 2002 and Cabinet Committees are all very well, but in six months' time when he retires from office

he will be judged not by his promises but by his record? By the time he retires, the hard facts will be that he will have spent less on regeneration in our inner cities than did the previous Conservative Government; and there will be 3,000 more homeless people than he inherited, 51 per cent. more people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, 3,000 more empty council houses, and rising crime in almost every major city. Of all the new jobs that the Government claim to have created, only 10 per cent. will be in the inner cities. According to the Government's statistics, 300,000 more people are living below the poverty line and the exodus from our cities has accelerated, not declined—all that at a time of unprecedented prosperity.

Is not the real record one of rising poverty, a widening north/south divide and the neglect of our inner cities? Is not the real truth that this is a Government who have flunked the big decisions and masqueraded as the party of the inner cities, but have betrayed their own heartlands?

Mr. Prescott: That was a bantam weight contribution by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). As for appearances in the House, I have an interesting note from the Library: I have appeared at oral questions four or five times more often than the hon. Gentleman since he has been on the Conservative Front Bench, and I have been here more—or at least an equal amount of time—for statements. So I am before the House more often than the hon. Gentleman. I have embarked on a secret strategy to improve the relationship between us, however: absence makes the heart grow fonder.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's endorsement of the report and congratulations to Lord Rogers and his urban team, who have produced an important piece of work. I also welcome the noble Lord's support for the report, which he made clear on the "Today" programme, and for the new financial measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. It was inevitable that I should have to wait for the Chancellor's announcement before the measures could be included in the White Paper—that is normal practice. The fact that I repeated the announcement does not make the measures irrelevant, as they are part of the package.

The big decision is that £180 billion will be going into the transport industry. We are often asked in the House, "Where are the resources?" I have catalogued all the billions of pounds that will be available to improve investment in the social structure in our cities and towns, which the previous Administration failed to provide. Admittedly, the hon. Gentleman was not responsible for the decisions of the previous Administration, but he was certainly a member of the Conservative party at the time, so I am surprised to hear any complaint from him. The Conservatives doubled homelessness, put an awful lot of people out of their homes because of negative equity, and at the same time held back £5 billion from the sale of council houses, refusing to invest it in new housing. We have released resources that the previous Administration deliberately kept in accounts while the quality of homes in our inner cities declined year on year—they simply would not put the money back in to improve houses. That was one of our first decisions. Our housing programme of the past three years compares favourably with any record of the previous Administration.

As to how many of Lord Rogers' recommendations have been accepted, a number have been implemented in part or fully and we disagreed with only six—I mentioned one, which was the urban policy board. I shall take the evidence of Lord Rogers himself; on the "Today" programme, he made it clear that the White Paper is a powerful tool for the regeneration of our cities—

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): He has not seen it.

Mr. Prescott: No, he has not seen the White Paper—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) is not allowed to do that.

Mr. Prescott: I have catalogued all the matters covered by statements made in the House because we need a comprehensive approach. The White Paper aims to find a framework. Lord Rogers knows about the transport and housing plans; he knows what we intend to do about brownfield sites. Those matters are part and parcel of our approach to the regeneration of our cities, so it is right for him to say—he is also well aware of what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said—that the White Paper is a powerful tool for the development and regeneration of our cities.

As for differences between the DETR and the DTI in the development of our policies, clearly there are none. Press reports are not necessarily to be taken as they are presented. I have read the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. It makes no statement whatever about differences between the north and south. My right hon. Friend referred to the economic differences in our cities; after 18 years under the previous Conservative Administration, that is hardly surprising. We are united. The White Paper is about uniting Departments to ensure that our towns and cities meet the requirements and make improvements.

As for the Tory record on regeneration, during their last year in office, the Tory Government cut back spending on regeneration to £1.3 billion. This year, we are spending £1.5 billion; we are increasing that by 15 per cent. a year for the next three years. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells wants to make a comparison, but he does not take into account the amount that we put into new deal programmes and the extra resources allocated for the inner cities. Those amounts need to be added in order to make comparisons about regeneration. When the hon. Gentleman makes that comparison, he will find that the resources that we are giving our towns and cities are substantially higher.

The White Paper brings together thinking across Government; it provides a framework for our towns and cities, and is what we intend to do to provide better opportunities.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the White Paper. Will he pay tribute from the Dispatch Box to all those—local authorities, private companies and individuals—who have already demonstrated in many of our big cities such as Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol that urban regeneration can be made a reality, that we can bring people back to the cities and that that movement has already started? Will he tell us, in setting out the signposts

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for achieving the aims of the document, how soon we shall receive the new planning guidance that he mentioned?

Mr. Prescott: I welcome my hon. Friend's remarks, especially as he is the Chairman of the Environment Sub-Committee. I appreciate the help that the Committee has given us on this matter, particularly the recommendations in its reports; they were most useful when we were considering the White Paper.

I support his comments on urban regeneration; it is an important development. In fairness to the Opposition, some of the urban regeneration schemes started by the previous Administration have been of much benefit to our cities—but the programme is not limited to that. There are distinctive differences between us, but the regeneration programmes have been of considerable benefit; we want to build on the successes and deal with the weaknesses. The White Paper addresses that.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Like the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), I congratulate Lord Rogers. I welcome many of the initiatives in the White Paper, including, for example, improved support for home zones and measures to help walkers and cyclists.

However, my overall impression of the White Paper is that it has sound and fury but signifies not a lot. There seem to be many missed opportunities. For example, why is there no proposal for a greenfield development tax to boost developments on brownfield sites? Help with contaminated land is welcome, but does not go far enough.

Why is there no proposal to reduce VAT on work to bring back into use the scandalously large number—750,000—of empty homes? Why are there no real measures to simplify the plethora of regeneration schemes and budgets—so bewildering that much of the budgeted money does not even get spent?

Finally, I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will at least agree that, without the full involvement of local people in urban renaissance, the White Paper will simply be a waste of paper.

Mr. Prescott: I am sorry, I did not hear the last part—I was too busy. Did I hear someone say waste of space? I heard the other soundbite, which was that the White Paper gave the overall impression of sound and fury and did not signify a lot; I always thought that that was a description of the Liberal party. There seems to be common accord between the two Front Benches on that point.

I believe that the VAT proposals are a step in the right direction, and that they are the direction in which most people want us to go. The Conservative spokesman also asked why we were not introducing VAT on greenfield sites. The Chancellor has made it clear, and we have made it clear, that these matters are under active consideration. We started with stamp duty. We are now into zero VAT and 5 per cent. VAT. These are justified incentives for people to begin to develop empty properties—and properties of the type in which many single-person households might wish to live. I think that we are taking a step in the right direction. I recognise that Lord Rogers wanted more, and I recognise what the Liberal spokesman is saying, but the direction is right, the strategy is right and it is part of our development.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I welcome all aspects of my right hon. Friend's excellent statement. I especially welcome his repeated commitment to ensure that 60 per cent. of new housing is built on developed land. Will it now be possible for local authorities radically to change existing UDPs? For example, could Bradford council—now Conservative controlled—if it so wished, restore the great swathe of land near Silsden in my constituency to green belt, instead of pushing for hundreds of houses on that site?

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for that expression of support. We are committed to ensuring that 60 per cent. of new housing is built on brownfield land. We are now in the range of about 53 per cent., getting on for 54 per cent., and moving in the right direction. In addition, the planning changes that we have made will help us to move in the same direction. When I made the new announcement on PPG1, I had that very much in mind.

I am never sure what figure the Opposition propose for new housing built on brownfield land. It was 50 per cent. at one stage, and they only achieved an average 45 per cent. over their time in government. Then it went from 60 per cent. to 70 per cent., and down to two thirds—and I am still not quite sure what it is.

Our policy is absolutely clear. We have said that our figure is 60 per cent. We are on target for it. We are changing the planning regulations to achieve that. That can play a major part in the south as well as the north, by recognising the density of buildings and houses per hectare; we are going to achieve that.

The UDPs can be, and are being, reviewed—PPG3, which my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) mentioned, provides one way in which we are asking local authorities to review those plans.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Some of the comments that the Deputy Prime Minister made at the opening of his statement are particularly welcome, drawing attention to the importance of playing fields, the importance of encouraging homes in cities and towns rather than outside them—in the countryside in particular—and the importance of keeping the green belt intact.

Trafford borough council is reviewing its unitary development plan and is contemplating development in the green belt and the building of 2,400 houses on farm land outside the Greater Manchester conurbation. It is also contemplating destroying playing fields in Bowdon in my constituency. While councils are reviewing their unitary development plans, as they are currently, will the Deputy Prime Minister inform them of the Government's view that that type of development in green spaces outside towns and cities should be stopped, that the green belt should be protected and that playing fields should not be built on?

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about the importance of play areas or green spaces—or public realms, as they are often called. They are important, and we should all—local authorities and

national Government—give great importance to them. I am bound to say that the previous Administration's record is none too good. They got rid of 5,000 play spaces. Since we have restricted such development, we have received 856 applications to build on playing fields, and only six have been implemented against the agreement of Sport England. So we have considerably reduced such development and we have retained the playing fields and green spaces that the hon. Gentleman wants.

We have recommended in PPG3 that unitary development plans make it clear that building on such greenfield sites is not acceptable. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we make recommendations, and if a case comes to me for a planning decision, I have to take such advice into account.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement, but will he help the House by providing a simple definition of a town, as opposed to a city? Will he pay regard to the evidence that will appear in the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's response to the White Paper following a visit by its members to Thirsk and Boroughbridge? When will PPG25 be adopted and come into effect?

The White Paper refers to the learning and skills councils, so will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us who will be responsible for implementing the Investors in People programme locally?

I very much welcome the target for reducing accidents on our roads. Will the right hon. Gentleman increase the number of bypasses that will be built?

Mr. Prescott: One of the advantages of the list of questions that is distributed to Conservative Members is that it gives them the opportunity to repeat many questions—but I am sure that I will be in trouble with you, Mr. Speaker, if I give crib answers to crib questions. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady knows exactly what I mean.

As for the hon. Lady's first question, a city is a town that has been incorporated. There will be an announcement on that subject shortly, as many towns have applied to become cities. York is already a city, and, in my area, Hull is a city. There is a serious distinction between cities and towns and we are dealing with the definition. The rural White Paper will contain a definition of market towns, and we shall say something about that when it is eventually published.

We have provided for an increased number of bypasses. It is interesting that when I announced £180 billion for transport programmes, many Tory Members queued up to tell me about the need for bypasses. However, as they want cuts in public expenditure, I thought that they might want to forgo the building of bypasses in their areas. That would certainly happen if the £16 billion of cuts in the Conservative party's public expenditure programme were ever implemented.

PPG25 deals with flood plains, which are a matter of serious consideration. The hon. Lady will know that the previous Administration had a code of practice that did not mean a great deal. Many houses were planned on flood plains, and those plans were endorsed by both central and local government. We thought that that was wrong, and after the floods in 1998, I ordered a review. We had hoped to publish PPG25 in December, but the House will accept that I want to learn from some of the problems that have occurred recently, and to take them into account. That should not delay things a great deal, so I hope that PPG25 will be published either at the end of this year or at the beginning of next year.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): Did my right hon. Friend hear what I heard a few minutes ago when the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) talked about a period of unprecedented prosperity? Would my right hon. Friend be gracious and thank the hon. Gentleman for his sophisticated analysis of what has happened in the past three years? Perhaps my right hon. Friend can also persuade him to use what influence he has to reopen the Asda store in Darlaston, which was closed in the week of the general election. That was a malevolent decision.

Many people will welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement. Will he kindly arrange for a courier to be sent to Bovis forthwith with a copy of the report and all the planning guidance, and ask it not to build 700 homes on a greenbelt site in my constituency? Perhaps he will arrange to look in his pigeonhole, where a letter may arrive from me asking for that application to be called in by his Department when it is submitted.

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome words, which were no doubt addressed to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who was simply recognising the fact, which everyone else in the country knows, that in the past three years we have had unprecedented prosperity and economic growth. I am sure that we will have a chance to argue that in the coming months.

I cannot comment on Asda; that is a matter for the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells. I assume that he no longer has anything to do with Asda—or, indeed, Railtrack—but no doubt he can bring considerable experience of those companies to his present job.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on the new Walsall art gallery, which is a good-quality and well-designed building in the public realm.

As for whether I should send a copy of the report to Bovis, a copy will be sent to anyone who wishes to have one and to make a contribution. As for building 700 homes in the green belt, my hon. Friend knows that I have a planning function and role, and it would be more than my life is worth to comment on that now.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend set a target for all social housing to be brought up to a decent standard within 10 years. That is excellent, but what about the private sector? One in five houses in east Lancashire is deemed to be unfit for living in, and 99 per cent. of those are in the private sector. More of our housing stock was built before 1919 than in any other area, and that housing is in a dreadful, deplorable condition. Is any special help being targeted on east Lancashire, because its unique housing problems can be addressed only with additional central Government cash?

Mr. Prescott: I am aware—I have just received advice to confirm this—of the difficulties in my hon. Friend's constituency, and the rest of east Lancashire, with regard to home renewal programmes. The housing finance Green

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Paper attempted to introduce more flexible financial arrangements, which we hope will offer an opportunity for action. Of course, the taxation arrangements announced by the Chancellor will help with some private accommodation, but not necessarily in east Lancashire. I shall consider the matter and, if there is anything to add, write to my hon. Friend.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The Deputy Prime Minister will know that there has been great concern about the length of time between the publication of the urban taskforce report by Lord Rogers and the White Paper. Some of us will look carefully at how the White Paper responds to the report. In view of the importance of regeneration, do the Government intend to appoint a sole Minister to oversee regeneration in its entirety, and if necessary to take decisions when there are—albeit understandable—differences between one Department and another?

Mr. Prescott: It is a bit rich for the Opposition to ask why it has taken so long to produce the report by Lord Rogers and the urban development taskforce. During the past 20 years, when many of our cities were in considerable decline, there was no report, no statement and no commissioning of anyone to do anything. I think that the hon. Gentleman was a Whip in the Conservative Government, and perhaps that meant being quiet. I accept that he might not have been able to say much from the Back Benches, but he could have said something to the Government. That would have added some credit to his criticism.

Nevertheless, we established Lord Rogers' taskforce in 1998 and he produced an excellent report. We have responded to that and to the Select Committee on such matters. We have made a comprehensive statement on urban regeneration in the next decade or so. When the rural White Paper is published, another statement will be made. The previous Government made no statement on either of those issues.

Mr. George Mudie (Leeds, East): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for the compliments that the White Paper pays to Leeds, and congratulate him on the pledge to improve all social housing within 10 years, and on the provision of resources to carry out that pledge. However, may I draw his attention to the fear prevalent among local government colleagues, that that pledge is aimed only at local authorities that get rid of their stock? Will he assure our local government colleagues that it applies to all local government, regardless of the ownership of the housing stock?

Mr. Prescott: I understand my hon. Friend's point about social housing. We have given a commitment that will apply for 10 years. The specific circumstances to which he refers relate to local authorities and conditions concerning the transfer of properties. I made it clear in a previous statement that arm's-length companies could be established so that local authorities could retain ownership and have access to private capital. That means public-private partnerships, which I have been advocating in other less controversial areas.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): May I remind the Deputy Prime Minister that, contrary to the answer he gave my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), he paid tribute earlier to some of the initiatives that were launched by the Conservative Government, in which I had a modest involvement, nearly 20 years ago? As my hon. Friend said, the need for urban policy initiatives should be supported by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I was impressed both by the quality of Lord Rogers' report and the speed with which he produced it. I believe that I am right in saying that it has taken the Government considerably longer to respond with a White Paper than it took Lord Rogers to produce his recommendations. I am concerned that the right hon. Gentleman's statement seems to include many announcements that various matters will be reviewed. That does not reflect the urgency that some might think is needed.

The right hon. Gentleman talks continually of towns and cities. I welcome that, but one change has taken place since I had some responsibilities for these matters. Many of the problems of major cities now also face market towns and other towns throughout the country, and they, too, need attention.

Mr. Prescott: I think that I am right to say, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, that I wanted to give credit to the regeneration projects that were implemented in a number of cities, even when the previous Administration were in power. I have said that those were improving city centres. The right hon. Gentleman was much involved in that policy. My disagreement with him was that much of the previous Government's policy related to economic circumstances and did not take account of social investment. I am trying to say in the White Paper that there is a need to do more than focus on economic circumstances. A study that we put in the Library makes the point that what characterised the 1960s and 1970s, and went on into the 1980s, was the idea that we should deal only with the economic problems. However, the investment that we put into education, housing and communities is connected. In many instances, cities were denied the possibility of jobs. The regeneration process was good, but they did not benefit from it.

We are taking the arguments forward from the Labour party's inner-city policies, and beyond what the right hon. Gentleman developed under the previous Administration. The Conservative Government did not produce a document or an analysis to which to work. *[Interruption.]* There was no White Paper; we have produced the first one on these matters for the past 20-odd years. We are saying that all the parts should be put together.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he said about Lord Rogers and his recommendations. We could not simply accept the report and write it into a White Paper; there has to be consultation. We have received good advice from Lord Rogers, but if the Government are to adopt it we must start a process of consultation. It would be nice to say, "I don't need to consult because I've put the report into the White Paper", but the House would not be very happy with that sort of approach, and rightly so. There will be a time difference.

The White Paper is more comprehensive than Lord Rogers' approach. If a Government receive a recommendation from an outside body that something should be done about tax, the right hon. Gentleman will know that there will be lengthy discussions and

negotiations. I think that we can agree that the White Paper is more comprehensive than Lord Rogers' report, and that it is a move in the right direction. It builds on some of the successes to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, but takes things much further.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement as a representation of an on-going commitment to improving inner city areas such as the one that I represent in Liverpool. I advise him not to listen too much to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who on a recent visit to Liverpool indicated the extent of his knowledge of inner-city regeneration when he said that as he drove through Toxteth he had wound up his car windows. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the regional development agencies are key institutions for ensuring that the regeneration that is taking place is sustained? Will he say something about the hon. Gentleman's policy, which is to abolish them?

Mr. Prescott: I shall leave interpretation of the Opposition spokesman's visit to Liverpool, and what he said there, to others. Presumably, he noticed that the tower blocks have been knocked down there. I think that that is the one initiative that he advocates for regeneration—to knock down 10 tower blocks in five years. As there are 1,600 of them, I assume that he has an 80-year programme. It is an exciting initiative, but it will take a little longer to implement than some others.

The Opposition's policy on the regional development agencies is inadequate to meet the need. I believe that the agencies are a powerful force for development in the regions. They have been effective in Scotland and in Wales, and they have many supporters, including the CBI and many Tory councils, that want to see the agencies remain so that they can help to develop their regional economies. I think that as before, we shall see the Tories change their minds. It will be another bandwagon the Tories will jump on.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Has the Deputy Prime Minister lost his battle with the Treasury to impose VAT, albeit at a low rate, on greenfield development, as well as giving concessions on VAT in city centres? Will he revisit the proposal of the Minister for Housing and Planning in the housing Green Paper to limit rent increases to RPI plus zero, which threatens to dislocate the development programmes of housing associations, which are so important in inner cities? Does he still accept the words of the Minister for Trade when he took the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 through the House—that the Government would be judged on their success in narrowing the GDP gap between the regions? Is that still valid?

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in a Government who implemented many of the proposals that he wants to see changed. It was a Conservative Government who introduced VAT to the UK and created the problems to which he is referring. He had no success in his attempts to secure a reduction in VAT, and failed totally with the Treasury.

As for VAT payments and tax changes, an exemption will be introduced so that no stamp duty will be paid on property transactions in disadvantaged communities. There is the 100 per cent. capital allowance for flats over shops, which had been called for for a long time, even during the term of office of the previous Administration. There is a package of VAT reforms to encourage additional conversions of properties for residential use. I think that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed favourable views on those initiatives.

Mr. Curry *indicated assent.*

Mr. Prescott: But he failed to convince the Treasury that VAT should be reduced, and it seems that I have been more successful. I am glad about that. Properties will be improved, and where he failed, I have succeeded.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on being a member of a Government who have, in the words of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), brought about "unprecedented prosperity". I also congratulate him on the White Paper, especially with regard to the improvement of social housing. However, I shall express one concern. Some of the financial packages that have been put together to bring about improvements in social housing have led to stock transfer or to new build with registered social landlords. I am concerned about the long-term impact on the level of rents, especially re-let rents, for people who are transferred with some rights of tenure. Rents may no longer be affordable. We should pay some attention to that in the context of the White Paper and the future housing Green Paper.

Mr. Prescott: Whether social housing is in the public or the private sector, people want decent housing. We are working in both areas. As for stock transfers, my hon. Friend knows that we are trying to give local authorities more choice. I announced that in the Green Paper. My hon. Friend raises a legitimate concern, which most of us are aware of, about the level of rents. That will arise especially in the London area, given its special difficulties and the social transfer arguments.

The Green Paper makes it clear—consultation is taking place—that we must have an affordable rent structure. My hon. Friend will know that housing finance is an important factor, along with the benefits and supports that are provided. We are taking those matters into account in our comprehensive review.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Given that the Government's rough sleeper targets are proving far harder to achieve in London than elsewhere, may we have an assurance that London's complex and intractable problems will receive special attention, especially as London's wealth-producing engine does so much for the rest of the nation's economy? Finally, on a narrow but important point, will key workers in London include postmen?

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman takes an interest in rough sleepers and often asks questions about them, so I think that he knows that we have reduced rough sleeping by 30 per cent. We still have more to do, but we have had some success.

As for categories of key workers, we have already had bids from teachers and postal workers, but it is for local authorities to judge those matters, as the key sectors in which there are shortages vary from area to area. However, we are providing resources and advice. I am

[Mr. Prescott]

sure that the House welcomes the £250 million that we are providing as a step in the right direction in dealing with the problem.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his pledge to put urban renaissance at the heart of planning. Will he meet the needs of my constituents by ensuring that the green spaces and play areas he mentioned are integrated into new housing developments on brownfield sites, not placed at a distance where security is a problem? Notwithstanding his comments about small households being the norm nationally, will he bear in mind that in constituencies such as mine, where there is a young multi-ethnic community, there is still a need for larger units to accommodate larger households and alleviate overcrowding?

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend. She reminds me of my recent visit to Peckham, where a big building had been knocked down and the resulting space integrated into a new community. I was delighted to read in *The Guardian* the other day that Peckham library, with its wonderful design and architecture, had received an international award. I am pleased to see the local community and individuals beginning to rule their own lives and make decisions about their community. That is exactly what I want to see developing in other inner-city areas, and the White Paper will ensure that the powers and resources needed are available. In addition, PPG1 will make it clear that the public realm is an essential part of the urban renaissance. The White Paper will assist local authorities to achieve that.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I can find no mention in the White Paper and the Deputy Prime Minister's statement of the greatest disaster to overcome urban regeneration—the European Union ruling that gap funding was illegal. Is it not the case that the £250 million a year over five years announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the additional funding previously given to regional development agencies, will not nearly make up for the sums that would otherwise have gone into urban regeneration?

Mr. Prescott: I do not agree. However, any state aid or assistance as defined by the European Community is a serious matter. We have compensated regional development agencies and English Partnerships to deal with the difficulty. Ultimately, we are confident that the resources that we have announced will be able to go into all our proposals.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the White Paper. Will he take care to ensure that the urban renaissance takes in the entire urban area? My constituency, which falls outside the city council boundary, often misses out on urban regeneration grants. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that urban renaissance applies to the whole of the urban area and not only to the areas defined by city council boundaries?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes an important point about boundaries, and about where urban areas, inner cities and suburbs begin and end. That is a real problem and one that is different in every area. We face the problem everywhere, in towns, cities, suburbs, market towns, rural areas and villages. In the main, economic regeneration tends to take place in the centre—usually, the city—but there is an obligation under planning requirements to ensure that all areas share in the prosperity. In PPG1, we shall emphasise that the overall, comprehensive approach is needed in respect of planning and development.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I, too, welcome much of the White Paper, the intentions behind it and its recommendations in respect of inner-city housing. However, how does the right hon. Gentleman reconcile his fine words about the availability of inner-city housing with his continuing and unnecessary beneficial tenancy of an inner-city flat provided by a transport union, which is clearly contrary to paragraph 113 of the ministerial code of conduct?

Mr. Prescott: That is clearly not comparable.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Listening to some of the questions put by Opposition Members, one might have thought that nothing had happened in the past three years, even though paragraph 7.6 of the White Paper lists a dozen major initiatives that have an impact on urban areas. The Government should be congratulated on delivering those programmes. However, paragraph 7.3 states that

> One of the strongest lessons from the past is that policies and programmes need to be comprehensive and tailored to the circumstance.

The initiatives listed demonstrate that the Government have delivered on a cross-departmental, comprehensive basis. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that no rules or regulations stand in the way of local communities acting on an equally cross-departmental basis?

Mr. Prescott: That is an important point. One of the purposes of the White Paper is to bring together all the different initiatives. I could have waited three years, carried out an analysis and then produced the White Paper, but the problems were so clear that we developed different policies relevant to the framework set out in the White Paper. It is fair to say that many of the things mentioned in the White Paper are policies that have already been announced in the House by the Secretaries of State for other Departments. What I have done is ensure that they come together within the White Paper framework. I shall certainly try to ensure that the policy we want to prevail in Government also applies in local authority areas. We want decision making on community and local strategies to involve not only local authorities but all community bodies, including those involved in housing, education, health and so on.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I, too, welcome the White Paper, which represents a considered, rounded approach, in stark contrast to the solutions for simpletons that we have recently been hearing from Opposition Members. Does my right hon. Friend consider that the transport requirements for effective urban regeneration can properly be applied within the

requirements of transport policy in an urban area generally, as opposed to within a specific local authority area?

Mr. Prescott: That is a detailed and important point. Local transport plans should be relevant to the development of the urban area. However, the essential point, which will also have to be addressed in the rural White Paper, is that people should be able to move between the areas in which they live and work, inside and outside city boundaries. Those whose task it is to follow the advice set out in the White Paper face the important challenge to adopt a comprehensive approach, and we have provided the resources for them to do so. People in Southampton have been considering a solution using light railways, which would not be limited to Southampton's immediate area. Local authorities and local people make their decisions through the local transport plan, but such plans should not be confined to inner-city areas.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): As Member of Parliament for one of the areas that have applied for city status, may I tell my right hon. Friend with what eager anticipation we in Brighton and Hove await the announcement to which he referred? Brighton town centre has benefited from having a town centre manager, and I know that my right hon. Friend is aware that the all-party group on town centre management issues, which I have the pleasure to chair, commands considerable cross-party support. What role does he envisage for town centre management schemes in realising the aims of the White Paper? What proposals does the White Paper contain on sustainable funding for town centre management schemes?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend will realise that which areas will be granted city status is a great secret. It is a matter for the Home Office. I do not know what the outcome will be and I am not involved in the decision, although I do, of course, read the bids and hear from Members of Parliament who lobby me on the subject. We must wait for the announcement.

With regard to the Association of Town Centre Management, many of its proposals are for the sort of schemes that we endorse in the White Paper. Much can be done in the public realm—for example, by improving transport—to develop our town centres. We have set out such plans, and the various funds available are sustainable. We plan funds for local authorities over a three-year period to enable them to plan ahead. It should be possible to provide the resources to improve our town centres, and I welcome the work done by the association.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I accept the White Paper, but does my right hon. Friend agree that further thought should be given to ways of helping councils such as Burnley, which has 3,500 empty houses in the private sector? Demolition is extremely expensive, and there is little site value once those properties are demolished.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes the point that I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). The renewal of private properties is a particularly difficult problem, which my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) has raised with me three or four times. I give him the same response as I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle: I will write to him and consider how we can assist further in dealing with that problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am sure that we shall return to these matters in the future, but now we must move on.

Orders of the Day

Insolvency Bill *[Lords]*

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

PROHIBITION DURING PERIOD OF DISQUALIFICATION

'. A person subject to a disqualification order or undertaking under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 shall not act as the principal of any trade or business providing services to consumers during the period of disqualification unless so authorised by the Director General of Fair Trading.'.—*[Mr. Chope.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.31 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 2—*Disqualification orders: unfitness of director*—

'. After section 3 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 there is inserted the following new section—

"Disqualification orders: unfitness of director

.—(1) The court may make a disqualification order against a person where it appears to it—

(a) that he has been a director of a company which was struck off the register of companies by reason of its failure to deliver company accounts, and

(b) that his conduct as a director of that company makes him unfit to be concerned in the management of a company.

(2) The maximum period of disqualification under this section is five years."'.

Amendment No. 14, in clause 6, page 4, line 26, at end insert—

'(5) Before accepting a disqualification undertaking under this Act the Secretary of State shall prepare a summary statement of the outcome of the relevant investigation.

(6) The summary statement prepared under subsection (5) above shall be a matter of public record.'.

Amendment No. 22, in page 5, line 5, at end insert—

'(1A) The Court shall only grant an application under subsection (1) above if it is satisfied that there has been a material change of circumstances since the giving of the disqualification undertaking on the part of the person who is subject to the disqualification undertaking.'.

Mr. Chope: New clause 1 would prevent disqualified company directors from setting up and running unincorporated businesses during the period of their disqualification, unless they had obtained the authority of the Director General of Fair Trading.

The new clause evolved from a useful debate that we had in Committee during the fourth sitting on 7 November, when I moved what was originally amendment No. 1 to clause 5.

There was universal sympathy and support for my amendment in Committee. The Minister said:

I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Member for Christchurch, as the problem of rogue traders is serious.

He said that he would be disappointed if, as pundits predict, there was no Department of Trade and Industry Bill in the Queen's Speech, and he said that he and the Government wanted to clamp down on rogue traders, but that my proposal was "not the appropriate vehicle".

In my experience, that form of words is the last desperate line of defence of a Minister who concedes the argument, but has been told by his officials that he cannot agree to the change.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): My hon. Friend must be aware that there may well be a general election in the first half of next year. Were that to be so, even if there were a Bill in the Queen's Speech, does my hon. Friend agree that it is most unlikely that it would reach the statute book? If something is not done now—today—we may face a period of two years before it is possible to deal with the matter.

Mr. Chope: My right hon. Friend is right. Throughout their term of office, the Government have said that they would legislate on rogue traders and introduce legislation to protect consumers. There is every prospect that this Parliament will be concluded before they have done anything effective on that front. The modest measure contained in new clause 1 would enable the Minister to go to the people at the next general election and say, "I delivered in part. I was not able to deliver the whole, but I delivered in part."

To develop the Minister's metaphor in Committee that my amendment was not the appropriate vehicle, if Parliament misses this bus, when will the next one come along? That is the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

The Minister told the Committee:

Legislation will be properly framed to undertake the tasks that the hon. Gentleman has identified, one of which will be enacted in the new year—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 7 November 2000; c. 105.]

He then referred to the injunctions directive. I do not know whether my right hon. Friend is familiar with that, but if not, he soon will be. The Minister undertook, among other matters, to send all members of the Committee a note about that directive.

In accordance with that undertaking, the Minister duly sent us such a note. As a result of reading it, I have modified the argument that I advanced in Committee. The new clause would make the Director General of Fair Trading the key person who could allow a disqualified rogue director to set up as the principal of an unincorporated business. It also makes the measure less absolute than that proposed in Committee and integrates it into the injunctions directive.

The injunctions directive is to be implemented in the United Kingdom by regulations. It is clear from the Minister's note that the European Union expects us to introduce that directive so that it has effect before 1 January 2001. That target will be missed by the Government, but in paragraph 6 of the note that the Minister kindly provided, he stated:

The implementation regulations will designate the Director General of Fair Trading as the lead independent public body who will be empowered to obtain cease and desist orders in respect of all the legislation covered.

It is worth noting that the injunctions directive will be far more limited in application than the issue of rogue traders. The Minister gave us a list of other European directives and areas where the injunctions directive would apply, but from my reading of that list, I do not believe that it would deal with the situation that I recounted to the Committee, involving a person in my constituency, Mr. Gary Turley, who runs a business called Be-Secure Windows. He has been going round to various of my constituents, offering to carry out works on their house and demanding large cash sums up front so that he can buy the windows and other goods and materials. The House will not be surprised to hear that having done that, he never provides the windows or does the work. As a result, he is a good example of a rogue trader. He is ripping off people in my constituency and the surrounding area.

I do not know whether Mr. Turley was ever the director of a company, but if he behaved in such a way as a director of a company and he was disqualified as a director of that company, under my new clause he would automatically not be able to carry on business as an unincorporated trader. If the new clause were implemented, it would catch quite a large number, although not all, of rogue traders.

The last desperate argument that the Minister may deploy, as he did in Committee, is that new clause 1 would be piecemeal legislation. In that case, as I said in Committee, the new clause should fit in well with the Bill, which is made up of piecemeal legislation.

New clause 2 is even more important than new clause 1. It would fill a serious loophole in the current law as it affects the accountability of company directors. It builds on a full debate that we had in Committee. The best way of explaining the matter to the House is to give an example of how the gap in the law came to my notice, and the gravity of what was exposed by that experience.

A limited company can be established, it can trade and solicit subscriptions and donations, but after it has achieved its objectives, it can disappear without ever having to file accounts and without the public ever acquiring information about the remuneration of its directors or the value of their shareholdings.

Provided that no creditor is dissatisfied, the authorities in general and Companies House in particular have no penalty or sanction to use against the directors. Such sanctions as are available apply to persistent failure to file accounts. A company may be set up in the knowledge that it will trade and remunerate directors with large sums of money. If it dissolves as a result of a failure to produce accounts, the people who are eager to find out what those accounts might reveal—including the remuneration of directors—will be unable to gain access to that information.

That serious loophole in company law came to my attention two years ago when I inquired about a company called People's Trust Ltd. Some hon. Members may recall that that company was set up in January 1997 with the avowed aim of championing higher standards in public life. However, the records show that it failed to fulfil its obligations under the Companies Acts at the first hurdle: it failed to file its accounts. Two reminders were sent in 1998 and a notice was then placed in the *London Gazette*—all with no response. People's Trust Ltd was then struck off the register for failing to file its accounts. It was thereby dissolved and unable to trade legally as a company with effect from the beginning of September 1998.

The founding chairman and main source of funds of that company—to the extent of at least £1 million—is well known to officials at the Department of Trade and Industry and to hon. Members: it is none other than Mr. Fayed. When challenged by *The Independent* about the failure to file accounts, a spokesman for Mr. Fayed said:

> It appears that there has been an administrative oversight on the part of our legal representatives. That being the case, we will look to rectify this on Monday morning.

It will not surprise hon. Members to hear that nothing at all was rectified. Indeed, that was the last we heard of the company.

I complained to Companies House and suggested that some sanction should be introduced to gain access to the accounts. That was when I was told about the gap in the law, which means that the accounts, which must have existed, continue to remain hidden from the public gaze because when a company is dissolved it no longer has an obligation to provide information. I submit that the failure to file accounts, far being an administrative oversight, was a deliberate and calculated exploitation of the loophole in the Companies Acts, which the new clause would close.

In an article published in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 30 March 1997, Mr. Fayed commented on the DTI report into Harrods:

> Ten years ago, just before the 1987 election, the Thatcher Government commissioned a report that called me a liar . . . The British Government took away my reputation and good family name after 40 years' hard work. I will not go to my pyramid leaving my children under the shadow of a report that is unfair and untrue. I have seen the arrogance of power at very close quarters. I did not like what I saw. I will campaign for root and branch reform. That is why I gave away £1 million last week to the People's Trust, an independent pressure group dedicated to cleaning up politics.

What happened to that £1 million? How much was used to pay the company directors for past services rendered? How much was left when the company was dissolved by default of filing its accounts and what happened to the donations that the company solicited from possibly naive members of the public?

A report in *The Guardian* of March 20 1997 stated that the trust intended to send out 2 million letters to members of the public asking for £5 subscriptions to support its cause.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend know whether that company, or another in a similar position, could make political donations before it was dissolved, which also could not be tracked? Does he not think that that is also an important consideration?

Mr. Chope: That is an incredibly important consideration. That abuse—I submit that that is what it was—having been uncovered, it is incumbent on the Government to take immediate action to prevent it from happening again. As my right hon. Friend implied, the more we are concerned with transparency in politics and donations to political parties, the more important it is to prevent people from setting up such a company and using it as a means to change public opinion with the support of large sums of money. As I said, £1 million was involved, although some press reports suggest that the sum was larger.

2.45 pm

We do not know how many donations were given or what was received, if anything, for the £5 subscriptions. All that we know is that no creditor complained, which meant that the company was able to disappear in the circumstances that I described.

It is worth reminding ourselves that People's Trust Ltd. was not a small, insignificant company. It must have had a turnover of more than £1 million, because it had a starting donation of £1 million from Mr. Fayed. It also had prominent public figures on its board. Apart from Mr. Fayed, the board contained Mr. Michael Cole, Mr. Fayed's then press officer; Mr. Andrew Neil, a former editor of *The Sunday Times* and still a distinguished journalist; and Mr. Robert Fallowfield, one of Mr. Fayed's accountants. Lord Alton of Liverpool was also on the board, as was Mr. Alex Carlile, a former hon. and learned Member of the House. Hon. Members will recall that none other than Mr. Carlile was the first to raise in the House the story in *The Guardian* involving the then hon. Member for Tatton. He did so on a point of order at about 10 pm when he had already been tipped off that *The Guardian* would run the story the next day, thereby enabling all the other newspapers to carry the story. He provided a service for—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying wide of the mark. He has given details, at some length, about one company and its director, which is reasonable, but I hope that he will relate his remarks rather more precisely to the new clause.

Mr. Chope: I certainly will, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To conclude the point, the company secretary was a Mr. Christopher Graffius, a former researcher for Lord Alton.

Although I have not given examples of other companies, I submit that the case that I have described is sufficient to warrant Government intervention and the incorporation of the new clause in the Bill. One of the main responsibilities of directors, along with the privilege of incorporation, is the duty of full disclosure. Failure to deliver company accounts is a grave breach of directors' duty to make a full disclosure.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs responded to my argument in Standing Committee. He said that section 5 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986

> provides that a director who is prosecuted for not filing accounts can be disqualified on the basis of that single offence.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 7 November 2000; c. 124.]

In fairness to him, it then became apparent that the advice given to him by his officials, which led him to make that statement, was incorrect. He admitted that he was wrong and that, under the present company law, it is not possible to prosecute a director for a single failure to file accounts, however grave or mischievous that failure might be. He agreed that it might be better to table an amendment to section 3 of the 1986 Act. That is what the new clause represents. I hope that the Minister will agree to the new clause in its revised form, because it meets his concerns. There was general concern in Committee that the loophole needs to be closed.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Hear, hear.

Mr. Chope: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees. I formulated the new clause in such a precise way largely because of suggestions that he made in Committee. I am grateful for his advice and assistance.

Amendment No. 14 arises from debate in Committee—at column 120, on 7 November 2000—on amendments Nos. 5, 7 and 52, which would have made an agreed statement of facts a precondition of acceptance by the Secretary of State of a disqualification undertaking.

The Minister, in reply to that debate, said that it was for the Secretary of State to decide to accept the undertaking, and that it would be unduly restrictive and might lead to delay and increased costs if the Secretary of State could accept an undertaking only when there was an agreed statement of facts.

Amendment No. 14 deals with all the Minister's concerns, and thereby confines and limits the requirement to the production of a summary statement that will be a matter of public record. I hope that the Minister will agree that that is one way of partly satisfying concerns that have been expressed by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and many other people. Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that the basis on which a disqualification order is made—or an undertaking for disqualification is accepted—should be set out in reasonably full terms, so that it is available to the public and on the public record should a director subsequently seek a variation in his disqualification undertaking or face disciplinary proceedings in any professional body. I hope that he will accept amendment No. 14, too.

Both new clauses and amendment No. 14 are developments from the very useful debate that we had in Committee. I hope that they will find favour with the Government.

Mr. Burnett: Liberal Democrat Members give qualified support to new clause 1 and complete support to new clause 2.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) was right to ask why a person who is unfit to run a limited company should be able, either alone or in partnership, to run a business. There is much force in that argument. I have examined in some detail the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, and my view is that, in most cases of disqualification under that Act—especially when they relate to criminal offences and the test of beyond all reasonable doubt has been met—the hon. Gentleman is correct in that assertion. Why should such individuals be able to run a service business either on their own account or in partnership with others?

I have nevertheless re-examined in detail section 3 of the 1986 Act. As the hon. Member for Christchurch said, in Committee, we discussed at length section 3, which could be said to be fairly draconian in its treatment of directors. It deals with persistent defaults, which it states can be

> conclusively proved by showing that in the five years ending with the date of the application he—
>
> the director—
>
> has been adjudged guilty (whether or not on the same occasion) of three or more defaults in relation to those provisions.

I know that there are other tests, but that one is pretty tough on directors—albeit rightly. Nevertheless, I do not think that, as a result of disqualification under section 3 of the 1986 Act, a person should be disabled from, for example, starting his own small business perhaps as a shopkeeper or a window cleaner.

As I said, Liberal Democrat Members give qualified support to new clause 1. Although I believe—for the reasons that I have given—that its terms are draconian and go a little too far, the new clause certainly has merit in dealing with those who have been found guilty of a criminal offence. I hope that the Minister will consider that.

New clause 2 has been tabled to overcome the problem with the word "persistent" in section 3 of the 1986 Act. I believe that, in some cases, the failure to deliver to the Registrar of Companies just one set of accounts can be extremely important and have far-reaching consequences. I therefore support the new clause, which is drawn wisely and subtly.

New clause 2 contains two tests, whereas initially, in Committee, we had only one—which was, as the hon. Member for Christchurch said, draconian. The first of the tests is that a person

has been a director of a company which was struck off the register of companies by reason of its failure to deliver company accounts.

The second important test which we are now able to debate is whether the person's

conduct as a director of that company makes him unfit to be concerned in the management of a company.

There are now, correctly, two hurdles. New clause 2 is sensible, and Liberal Democrat Members strongly support it.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I support my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) on both new clauses. I accept and very much agree with what he said about the spatchcock nature of particular proposals in the Bill.

My hon. Friend has been a distinguished member of the Trade and Industry Committee, on which I serve, and which considered the draft Bill in some detail towards the end of last year. In our report issued in December 1999 we broadly welcomed the general thrust of the draft Bill's proposals, but we felt very much that, on some matters, it was somewhat premature to legislate. We particularly felt that, as a general review of insolvency procedures was in progress, it might have been better to leave everything until we could have a more comprehensive Bill.

Nevertheless, the Committee felt that the draft Bill raised some important issues and that, on balance, it was probably right to go ahead with some restricted amendments, subject to various safeguards that we suggested. Although I regret to say that some of those safeguards have not appeared in the Bill, if I am able to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair, I shall deal specifically with some of them in a later debate. Overall, however, it is right to introduce—as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is seeking to do—the new clauses and amendments. It is very important that the public should be protected.

I must declare a personal position. I was a director of Maples Group Ltd, which went into liquidation a few years ago. Perhaps my experience as a non-executive director of that company will be helpful to the House. I was invited to join the board of Maples Group Ltd—the parent company of Maples Stores plc, the furniture retailer—by CinVen, which is the venture capital arm of the coal industry nominees who administer the coal industry pension fund.

At the time, the directors of CinVen said to me, "We have a company that we backed in a management buy-out and is well-advanced. Although it is not yet profitable, it is very much nearing profit, and it will be near market levels. We want to strengthen the board before the company is floated. Would you join the board, with your experience of general corporate governance and your particular experience of property matters?" I am a chartered surveyor, and the company's main assets were probably the shops that it owned or on which it had leases.

On that basis, I agreed to join the board of the company. Within a few months of doing so, I became very concerned about the figures that the executive directors were giving the board, because the cashflow figures did not match the trading figures that they were reporting to us.

3 pm

Shortly after I joined the board, Mr. Tom Vyner, the then deputy chairman of Sainsbury's, was also invited to join as chairman, to strengthen the board and to consider its trading activities in greater detail. After four or five months, Tom Vyner and I became increasingly concerned that the company's cashflow did not reflect the sales and turnover figures that the executive team were giving us. After four and a half months, we took the most unusual and rather hostile step, as non-executive directors, of calling in investigating accountants. We did so through a little bit of subterfuge: we said that we wanted the investigating accountants to look at a few individual branches to find out why figures were not entirely matching up and to report to the whole board.

As soon as we received the first verbal report of the investigating accountants, we put all the executive directors on gardening leave. When we received the subsequent report, we summarily dismissed them. I have to be careful about what I say, because the executive directors may be subject to legal prosecution and it is important that I do not prejudice that case. Suffice it to say that the duties of directors are paramount and their obligation to protect the public, customers, suppliers and everyone else is their first duty.

It is right that the law should be draconian in such matters and that if directors have misbehaved in any way—whether criminally or simply negligently—the protection of the public should come before the possibility of their continuing to trade in another venture and possibly putting the public at risk. The duty of the law must be, first, to protect the public and, secondly, to consider whether those people should be allowed to trade in another venture. For that reason, I strongly support the new clauses proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I very much support what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has said. He has introduced the real world into our debates by speaking about rogue traders and the impact that they can have on the public.

[Mr. Richard Page]

He asked why the Bill does not contain measures to deal adequately with those people—why they are being missed out and allowed to continue their activities.

As my hon. Friend said, the measure that he proposed in Committee was a little short on certain legal requirements but its thrust and direction were right none the less. We hoped that the Minister would introduce a measure of his own, drafted by the skilled officials who ensure that legislation contains no loophole that can be challenged in the courts. I regret that no such proposal has appeared, but the Minister now has his chance to accept my hon. Friend's proposal, which has been so ably supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) and the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). In my own humble and stuttering fashion, I shall return to that a little later if I may.

Before the Minister responds, I should like him to consider an article that I read recently in the *New Statesman*, which has recently run a profile of him. May I say that it is completely relevant to the new clause, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I can see that you are on the edge of the Chair, waiting to leap in if I go out of order for 30 seconds? This engaging little piece states:

> It may have escaped many people's notice that we have a Minister for corporate social responsibility—

the Minister who will soon be standing at the Dispatch Box. I hope that he will bear in mind the fact that he has that corporate social responsibility, and consider how he can apply it to stop rogue traders regularly ripping off the public. I regret that the Minister has not introduced such a measure in response to the clear and positive suggestion in Committee.

I want to speak to amendment No. 22, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) and I tabled. The proposals for expediting and simplifying processes by which directors can be disqualified must be welcome. I accept the figures produced by the DTI and offered by Ministers in relation to the proportion of disqualification orders that do not proceed to court, and their argument about the advantages of arrangements that permit the Secretary of State to accept undertakings from people whose conduct—let us be delicate—has been faulty.

Of course it is important to safeguard the interests of those who fall within the ambit of the new procedure. On the other side of the coin, it is equally important that the interests of the public should be protected against the premature lifting or termination of disqualification undertakings. I always listen carefully to the Minister, but I did so with special care when he argued in Committee that the court should have a discretion as to whether to reduce a period for which an undertaking should be in force or to provide for it to cease to be in force. The hon. Gentleman tantalised me and, I suspect, mystified the rest of the Committee—perhaps that should be the other way round—with his immortal words:

> a factor other than a material change in circumstance since the person gave the undertaking may be of sufficient importance to persuade the court to make an order . . .—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 7 November 2000; c. 122.]

The hon. Gentleman never explained what he had in mind. He gave no example to support his argument. I am a great believer in the notion that real-life examples make the case and put flesh on the legal bones. I can think of several facetious arguments about those who have given such undertakings being disappointed or even bursting into tears if their disqualification undertakings are not lifted or shortened, but I can think of no serious ones. I hope that the Minister will be more forthcoming.

If the Secretary of State has good grounds to seek and accept a disqualification undertaking from an individual, there should be significant material grounds for any application to the courts requesting that undertaking to be shortened or terminated. It is no good simply announcing that the courts will have the power to take into account any relevant factors in determining such an application under new section 8A(2). The Bill should include a clear direction to the courts that they must have material justification to alter or end the period of the disqualification undertaking.

Mr. Butterfill: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems is that the prosecution case may take some years to come before the courts? Although the Secretary of State and the Department may be convinced that wrongdoing has occurred, it may not be possible to rely on a conviction in the courts until quite a lot of damage is done in other companies.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend is correct, but the purpose behind the Bill is to bring about such disqualifications more quickly. That is one of the reasons why we have given it qualified support. The difficulty is that we see written into it the means whereby disqualification could become quicker, which can be to the advantage of a director, obviating the need for huge legal costs. Written into the Bill is a way for the director to get out of the disqualification period under the standard time and for no material reason. I am trying to persuade the Minister to come up with reasons.

I do not share the Minister's rose-tinted view of life; he thinks that the courts will see through all the old lags who are trying to put one over on them. Anyone with business experience, or even experience of dealing with politicians, will know how persuasive and plausible such people can be. It is better that we take specific precautions now than that we find ourselves obliged to take them later.

It is proposed to give the director a second bite of the cherry. Under the new procedures envisaged in the clause, the Secretary of State may accept a disqualification undertaking, which has the same effect as a disqualification order. So far, so good. There is a new procedure for compromising disqualification proceedings without their even being commenced. The present way of compromising such proceedings is by way of a carecraft order. If such an order were made, the director would be bound by it. If he wants to be a director of another company, he has the right, under section 17, to apply for leave to do so.

Under the new procedure, the director would still be able to apply for leave to be a director of another company. However, he is given an additional right by the proposed new section, under which he can apply to the court for the disqualification undertaking to cease to be in force or for the period of disqualification to be reduced. Does this give the director the right to backtrack or to welsh on the bargain previously made by the Secretary of State? *[Interruption.]* I am sorry to use the word "welsh" like that; I saw the Minister shudder and I wish to withdraw that word.

Any director with any sense will agree to a disqualification undertaking. Having fixed the maximum period for disqualification, he can then can apply, under the new section, to see whether he can reduce the period or get out of it altogether. We know that the period cannot be increased, so he has nothing to lose except the cost of court proceedings. New section 8 is a difficult luxury to justify.

I am realistic and I know that if we tabled an amendment to remove the section, the Minister would more than likely reject it. I have tabled an amendment which could be regarded as a compromise and which may be acceptable to the Minister and the Government. I propose to limit the second bite of the cherry to where there is a material change of circumstances only. The proposal does not go as far as I would like it to but, at the very least, it means that the director will not be able to give a disqualification undertaking and then apply immediately to have it cease or have it reduced. That would prevent a fairly obvious abuse and it would be difficult for the House to object.

To those who are unconvinced, I would say this: why should a director who has freely given a disqualification undertaking have the right to apply to the court to get out of it without there having been a change of circumstance—particularly when he has the right to apply for leave to act as a director of a specific company? If it remains unamended, that is the way in which the measure will operate in more cases than I would care to imagine. From my business experience, I have seen company directors reappear like phoenixes, using the same modus operandi. They have appeared to be almost untouchable. The new clause would give a specific protection to the public which does not exist at the moment.

3.15 pm

Perhaps I would be less sympathetic towards the new clause if I knew that there was to be a consumers Bill in the Queen's Speech. However, the word on the street is that there is to be no such Bill. The Minister can look me in the eye and tell me if I am wrong and, if so, I will withdraw these remarks. A specific promise was given that, in the lifetime of the Parliament, there would be a consumers Bill. One of the areas that such a Bill would tackle is the problem of rogue traders.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is being far too charitable. Even if the Minister felt able today to anticipate the Queen's Speech and assure my hon. Friend that there would be a consumers Bill in the Government's programme, the Minister could not guarantee that that Bill would reach the statute book because the Prime Minister might intervene and call the election ahead of the time at which he needed to. My hon. Friend would be left in a position where an undertaking would have been given—perhaps in good faith by the Minister—which could not be fulfilled. I hope that my hon. Friend will not feel obliged to back off even if the Minister gives an undertaking about the Bill today.

Mr. Page: I am frequently accused of being too charitable but that's the way it is: I am one of those creatures who go through life being charitable.

Mr. Forth: Well, I am not.

Mr. Page: I well know that my right hon. Friend is not charitable. He is a very hard man. I realise that any political party needs a balance of the soft and the hard. The soft version is at the Dispatch Box; the hard version is one or two rows behind.

The matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is serious. If the Minister can assure us that there will be a consumer Bill, we will look at it and give it whatever support we can to ensure that the public are protected from rogue directors. We will see what we can do to get the Bill on the statute book as quickly as possible—subject to a reading of the small print. I would hate to give a carte blanche undertaking here without seeing the specifics of the Bill. I am given to understand that a section in a consumers Bill could deal with these matters.

I draw my remarks to a close by thanking the Minister for sending to every member of the Committee the injunction directive and the directives that will be covered by the measure. According to his letter, there are 11, although I have not counted them to see whether that is so. The notice sent with the letter states:

> Further directives, including the proposed directive on distance selling of financial services will be added in due course.

That may prevent a certain amount of distress to members of the public caused by directors not acting correctly in that area. However, measures are already in place that make it difficult for rogue traders to operate in limbo in that area. I thank the Minister for his letter and look forward very much to what he has to say, bearing in mind the fact that, according to the article in the *New Statesman* he is in a position of "corporate social responsibility". I hope that he can find it in his heart to accept amendment No. 22 and give serious consideration to new clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): By my standards, we have had a lengthy debate on this group of amendments. May I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on the superb intelligence that he gets from my Department or wherever the Queen's Speech is being drafted? He knows what is in the Queen's Speech, although I do not. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) will be delighted to know that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire has helped to boost the circulation of the *New Statesman* by purchasing a copy of that estimable organ. I have seen my portrait in the magazine and, if the hon. Gentleman was using a Library copy, I shall report him.

At the beginning of his speech, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) said that I am in danger of missing the bus in relation to implementing enforcement measures against rogue traders. However, I fear that the hon. Gentleman has missed the point of the legislation. For the benefit of those who were not present in Committee when amendments similar to the hon. Gentleman's were debated, I shall reiterate that the main purpose of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 is to provide the public with protection against those who abuse the privilege of limited liability. Sections 6 and 7 of the Act allow the Secretary of State to apply to court for a disqualification order against a director of an

[Dr. Kim Howells]

insolvent company whose conduct in relation to the company is such as to make him unfit to be involved in the management of a limited company.

In response to the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), I was glad to press ahead with the provisions in the Bill—limited though they are, according to him—and am pleased that he gave us the benefit of his experience of a company that found itself slipping into insolvency and receivership. The hon. Gentleman illustrated clearly why the relevant laws should be tough in relation to the honesty and probity of company directors. Section 8 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act enables the Secretary of State to apply for a disqualification order against a person who has been the subject of a statutory investigation, as provided for in that section, and in the case of whom it appears to be expedient in the public interest that the person should be disqualified. Similarly, clause 6 of the Bill will allow the Secretary of State to accept a disqualification undertaking in such circumstances under sections 7 and 8 of the 1986 Act.

I repeat that I have some sympathy with the concerns of the hon. Member for Christchurch, but the 1986 Act is not the appropriate measure with which to try and address the issue of rogue traders. Those concerns need to be dealt with in other ways, and we are doing that through, for example, the useful directive that the hon. Gentleman told us about; better enforcement of consumer legislation, including measures on e-commerce; pursuing issues that cause particular concern, such as the servicing and repairs of cars; as well as the scheme that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in which someone purporting to sell windows in his constituency is just operating a scam. We shall also deal with rogue traders through an important series of measures to modernise consumer advice networks. As I indicated in Committee, the impending EC injunctions directive should be of some help in that area too.

Whatever the hon. Member for Christchurch thinks about disqualified directors being able to trade as sole traders, it would be inappropriate for the 1986 Act to go any further by restricting a person's right to do so. Such restrictions need to be dealt with in other ways. New clause 2 deals with issues relating to that and, as the hon. Gentleman said, is similar to the amendment that he tabled in Committee, although he revised the amendment's drafting in the light of our debate there. New clause 2 would introduce a new clause into the 1986 Act and would allow the court to make a disqualification order against someone when the court considers that he or she has been a director of a company which was struck off the register of companies because it failed to deliver company accounts, and it considers that the person's conduct as a director of that company makes him or her unfit to be involved in the management of a company.

As I explained in Committee, directors can be disqualified for failure to file their company's accounts under sections 3 and 5 of the 1986 Act for defaults in relation to various provisions of company legislation, including failure to file accounts at Companies House.

Mr. Burnett: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: In a moment. I accept that neither provision would allow for disqualification following only one default, as the hon. Member for Christchurch said.

Mr. Burnett: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself, I will give way in a second.

It is not clear how the amendment would allow for a disqualification after one default, either. Nevertheless, disqualification on default would be going too far in any event.

Mr. Burnett: Does the Minister agree that, in some cases, the failure to deliver just one set of accounts can be of the greatest importance? Surely, a person who fails to do so on being given notice or who is judged guilty of conduct that makes him unfit should be disqualified.

Dr. Howells: I shall try to deal with that in a moment. The two matters are not directly related and I shall try to make it clear why that is so in relation to the legislation.

It is not our intention to revisit in the Bill what constitutes unfit conduct for the purposes of achieving a disqualification. Where there are concerns about the failure of a company to file accounts, another remedy exists. A complaint made to the Registrar of Companies, who has enforcement responsibility in this area, will result in him taking appropriate action against the company. If the company is carrying on business or is in operation, the registrar will take enforcement action to secure delivery of the documents, up to and including prosecuting the directors in the magistrates court or, in Scotland, referring the matter to the prosecuting authorities.

In addition, the late filing of accounts attracts an automatic civil penalty. If, in the registrar's opinion, the company is not carrying on business or is not in operation and is defunct, he can initiate statutory action to dissolve it and strike it off the register.

In Committee, the hon. Gentleman raised the fascinating case of the People's Trust, and he may wish to know that it is currently up to date with all its filing requirements at Companies House. Indeed, I started to dig around a bit on the hon. Gentleman's behalf, given his fascination with that company. The trust was incorporated on 22 November 1996, but failed to file accounts or annual returns as required by the Companies Act 1985. It failed to respond to statutory letters inquiring whether it was still in operation or carrying on business under section 652 of the 1985 Act. It was struck off and dissolved on 8 September 1998 and was restored to the register after a relatively short period, on 5 November 1998. All outstanding documents filed at the time of restoration are up to date with all current filing requirements. I would be the last person in the world to defend Mr. Fayed, but that should be on record as it is perhaps an additional piece of information that I am sure would interest the hon. Member for Christchurch.

3.30 pm

Mr. Forth: Perhaps the Minister could clarify something. He seems to be saying that all the required information is available from 1998 onwards since the company was restored to the register. Is he also telling us that we now know everything that we need to know and

should know about the company between 1996 and 1998, as that is the period of the most interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch?

Dr. Howells: I understand that the relevant information is there, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Christchurch could find out very quickly by accessing the terrific new computerised filing system in Companies House. He need merely get on to his PC—

Mr. Chope: I do not have a PC.

Dr. Howells: That has certainly thrown me. It would be good if the hon. Gentleman had a PC, but if he does not have one he cannot access the files online. I suggest that he travels to Cardiff, which is an excellent city, goes to Companies House and talks to the estimable staff there, who will do the job for him. By the way, I understand that there are even short courses to help people access files via their PCs, if the hon. Gentleman is interested, but clearly he is not.

Amendment No. 14 would require the Secretary of State to prepare a summary statement of the outcome of the relevant investigation before accepting a disqualification undertaking from a director, and to make that summary a matter of public record. I am not at all sure that the hon. Member for Christchurch would like the effect of the amendment, were it accepted. It would seem to impose a duty on the Secretary of State to make public a summary of the unfit conduct he alleges against a director following the completion of his investigation.

Although I would ask which investigation the hon. Gentleman needs to refer to, that is not at all clear and only section 8 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act expressly refers to investigations. That summary would include any allegations that the Secretary of State was prepared subsequently to withdraw before accepting a disqualification undertaking.

Let me remind the House of how we envisage the process working. When inviting a director to offer an undertaking, as a matter of practice, the Secretary of State will put the unfit conduct that he alleges to the director concerned so as to give the director the opportunity to respond to it. It might be that the director is able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State that one or more of the allegations made no longer stands up—in other words, that the case that the Secretary of State is putting to him is not accurate in one or more respects. A director may be able to introduce new evidence which puts an entirely different complexion on the conduct concerned. Where that occurs, the Secretary of State may withdraw that allegation and consequently be prepared to accept an undertaking for a lesser period. In those circumstances, if the amendment were agreed to, the public record would disclose an allegation of unfit conduct that had subsequently been withdrawn. I am sure that the hon. Member for Christchurch would agree that it would be unjust to place a director in that position. It does not seem right to us and we do not consider that the amendment should become part of the Bill. We remain of the view that the public record at Companies House should only show particulars of disqualification undertakings accepted by the Secretary of State.

I now turn briefly to amendment No. 22, which was addressed by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire. It is the same as amendment No. 71, which we debated in Committee. For those who have not had the opportunity to read *Hansard*, I shall repeat the point that I made. We do not consider that the court should be restrained in the way that is proposed under the amendment. It would be far more appropriate for the court to have a discretion on whether to reduce the period for which an undertaking is to be in force or provide for it to cease to be in force. It could be that some factor other than a material change in circumstances since the person gave the undertaking—a change in law, for example—would be of sufficient importance to persuade the court to make an order under new section 8A. According to the text of the new section, the court will be able to take into account any factors that it considers relevant when making such an order. The court will be helped in reaching a view by any matters that the Secretary of State calls to its attention under subsection (2) of the new section. With that, I urge the hon. Member for Christchurch to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, although I find it disappointing in some respects. He argued that my amendment No. 14 could cause injustice to directors because the statement of facts might subsequently be proved to be inaccurate. That is why, when we made the original proposal in Committee, we said that we wanted an agreed statement of facts. The Minister raised all sorts of objections to that. He said that it might cause delay or that it might be difficult to get an agreement. We then moved an amendment to overcome those obstacles and now, in typical civil service fashion, the Minister raises objections to the idea that there should be a non-agreed statement of fact. It is desirable to have more facts available on the public record than there will be under the Government's proposals. That is my concern.

As for the Minister's arguments in relation to new clauses 1 and 2, first, I am grateful to him for letting us know that the People's Trust has become a phoenix rising from the ashes. Back in 1997 there was an enormous amount of press comment saying that the People's Trust was no longer trading, had gone out of business and had vacated its luxurious Knightsbridge offices. It was reported that the disappearance of the People's Trust

> marks the end of Mr. Fayed's third foray into public morals.

That is how the *Evening Standard* described the situation on 8 August 1997.

Perhaps the resurrection of the People's Trust suggests that there is yet another foray on the way. I shall look with interest at the contents of the documents to which the Minister has drawn our attention, but I do not think that the fact that they have now been filed alters the burden of my argument. I illustrated my contention that there was a gap in the law and the Minister agreed. However, he then recited a series of sanctions which, although they might apply to different cases do not apply to a case in which somebody makes only one serious breach of his duty to file accounts.

Mr. Page: If my hon. Friend is in the slightest bit worried about finding examples to prove his point, I can spend an hour or two with him after the debate giving him the necessary names.

Mr. Chope: I do not think we need any more examples. The examples that I quoted are sufficient. The fact that

[Mr. Chope]

the Minister has not been able to show us what remedies are available demonstrates that there is a gap in the law that needs to be filled.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Not only should there be a duty to file accounts, but there should be a duty to file one set of accounts in good time. In the case of the additional clause which is qualified, as new clause 2 is, there should be a draconian sanction for failure, and there is not one now.

Mr. Chope: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am very grateful to him for his involvement in the promotion of new clause 2. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) spoke earlier about the implications for limits on party political funding. It is no good if people say that they will not file the accounts, and the company is then dissolved and struck off, and, at some stage in the future, when the time for investigating the funding of parties in a general election campaign is over, the company is resurrected.

I was caught out because I had assumed that, once a company's accounts were no longer available because it had been struck off and dissolved, that was the end of the matter. Now the Minister says that, in this specific case, the company came back later. That is no good. The people responsible for that appalling default of their obligations under company law have carried on with impunity. New clause 2 would put an end to that loophole.

The Minister made a rather feeble response to new clause 1. We are talking about serious issues of rogue traders. The Government purport to be on the same side as us in campaigning against rogue traders and the injustice that they cause to the hapless individual. An early-day motion has been tabled on the subject and the hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) promoted a ten-minute Bill supporting action against rogue traders.

I tabled the new clause to take action on the matter, and the Minister's response is that it is not appropriate. That is not good enough. The people will decide on this. The Government have been going on about how they will do something against rogue traders, but they are merely paying lip service to people's concerns. They are not legislating to close the loopholes.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) for introducing into the debate a pertinent example drawn from his own experience as a non-executive director and as a member of the Trade and Industry Committee; I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) for his support for my new clauses and amendments; and I thank the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) for his help and advice.

It would be a gross indulgence to divide the House on more than one of the new clauses. As new clause 2 would remedy the greatest mischief straight away, and there is no complaint about its drafting, that will be the right one on which to have a vote. I hope that hon. Members will support it when I give them the opportunity to do so. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 2

DISQUALIFICATION ORDERS: UNFITNESS OF DIRECTOR

'. After section 3 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 there is inserted the following new section—

"Disqualification orders: unfitness of director

.—(1) The court may make a disqualification order against a person where it appears to it—

(a) that he has been a director of a company which was struck off the register of companies by reason of its failure to deliver company accounts, and

(b) that his conduct as a director of that company makes him unfit to be concerned in the management of a company.

(2) The maximum period of disqualification under this section is five years.".'.—*[Mr. Chope.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 46, Noes 221.

Division No. 337] **[3.44 pm**

AYES

Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Boswell, Tim
Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Gray, James
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Major, Rt Hon John
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Page, Richard
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tyler, Paul
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Christopher Chope.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony

Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 3

SECTION 309(1) OF THE INSOLVENCY ACT 1986 TO APPLY TO NOMINEES

'. The duty imposed on directors by Section 309(1) of the Companies Act 1985 to have regard to the interests of the company's employees shall apply to the nominee during his administration of the company.'.—*[Mr. Mitchell.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 46, in schedule 1, page 15, line 6, at end insert—

'and notify the registrar of companies, the company and any petitioning creditor of the company of the actual fees charged, the basis of the charges, the outcome of the moratorium and whether during the term of the moratorium he has been the subject of any adverse court judgment or disciplinary findings by any of the Recognised Supervisory Bodies.'.

No. 33, in page 20, line 20, at end insert—

'(5) The nominee shall have the power to apply to the court for directions to enable him to perform his duties under this paragraph.'.

No. 47, in page 21, line 45, at end insert—

'(c) on an application by any creditor, any member of the company or any other person affected by the moratorium.'.

No. 3, in schedule 2, page 35, line 47, at end insert—

'(ba) After subsection (4), there is inserted—

"(4A) The supervisor shall owe a duty of care to the employees of the company and consult regularly with their representatives.".'.

Mr. Mitchell: The purpose of the new clause and associated amendments is to swing the balance in favour of workers and trade unions. The new clause would involve them more in the process of a company's 28-day moratorium, and outline their role in that process.

So far the debate has been like a class reunion of Standing Committee B. It is a shame that more Labour Members are not present, as by amending in little ways little measures such as this Bill we can swing the balance in

[Mr. Mitchell]

favour of the workers, the less well-off and the people who form the section of society that we represent. The vested interests always have people such as the Conservative Members present this afternoon who will speak for them and push their views and interests. It is important that we Labour Members use our influence to push the balance the other way when the opportunity arises.

It is as important for us to do that as it is for the Government to introduce major legislation. The Government tackle the big picture, and we Back Benchers tackle the small picture. That is what I want to try and do with these amendments. New clause 3 would impose on the nominee duties at present incumbent on the directors, to ensure that he attends to the same interest.

The Bill is right and worth pursuing. It is a minor measure, but it will be useful and will help to save companies. If we can get this measure in the interstices of the Government's legislative programme—as we can now, because the House is effectively ticking over, waiting for more messages to come from the Lords so we can get our teeth into the bigger issues—we should do so, and that is what we are doing. The Conservative party's critique that this is an unnecessary measure has no standing. However, if it is necessary, it is necessary to use it for the purposes of the people.

4 pm

The measure gives a new role to a vested interest—it creates a new role for insolvency practitioners. They have already been consulted on it extensively and they say that they want to be consulted more and to exert more influence on the processes and regulations when they are introduced. This is a Labour Government, however—it is not a Conservative Government, pandering to the vested interests. So when we have the legislative opportunity, we should use our role as a Labour Government to tilt the balance in the right direction. After all, for 18 years, it has been substantially tilted the other way. It is time to swing the balance back a little.

New clause 3 would impose responsibilities that are in the Companies Act 1985. Indeed, I was surprised to find them there. They were introduced to the Companies Act 1967. The surprising thing is that after the long years of Conservative Government, in which numerous Companies Acts were passed, almost year after year, as the previous Government changed their mind on these issues, these provisions were never removed. This is an important and potentially influential measure. The 1985 Act says:

> The matters to which the directors of a company are to have regard in the performance of their functions include the interests of the company's employees in general . . .

That is a point of leverage which has been too little noticed and used. If the responsibility is incumbent on directors under the 1985 Act, it should also be incumbent on the nominee in the period when the nominee's decisions will effectively change the shape of the company. For example, decisions will be taken about shedding staff. Attempts to save a company, given present priorities, always seem to involve firing people and reducing the number of employees to save money. Decisions made by the nominee will thus affect the employees. In that case, why should they not have the same responsibilities as the directors who continue to run the company and who should continue to exercise those responsibilities, but who are temporarily less powerful than the nominee?

A company is a team—it depends on its employees. It is a collective effort. We have to take a collective, communal view of a company. It does not consist simply of the directors and those in charge—everyone has an interest. The interests of the workers clearly lie in the company's survival. However, those interests get neglected in the vulture culture of insolvency and administration.

The whole process is a grab for money—the banks are the most powerful grabbers and play the most powerful role. They make so many loans, mortgages and floating charges, they have the necessary personnel and experience, so they will be the dominant influence. The workers are in a very weak position. They have a role as creditors; my hon. Friend the Minister will doubtless emphasise that as he did in Committee, because the workers may be owed wages.

I want to give the workers a role beyond that, as an integral part of the company, with an interest in its survival. They are stakeholders. I know that we do not talk so much about stakeholders now. Having discovered stakeholderism in the mid-1990s, we moved rapidly on to the third way. I am not sure what happened to the third way, but it has gone the way of all bright ideas. However, I think that the stakeholder philosophy is correct. Employees are stakeholders in the company; they have an interest in the company, and that should be taken into account.

The new clause is a comparatively diluted expression of that view, which amendment No. 3 develops more fully. It was well supported in Committee by both Labour and Liberal Democrat Members. I am not gifted with the killer instinct—something I have in common with the Prime Minister. I am too nice a guy and tend to think that one simply has to put the argument and the truth will prevail, a failing that spreads right across to Downing street. But had I the killer instinct, the Minister could have been beaten on this issue. I did not want to do that. The Minister undertook to look at the issue and see what he could do to incline the balance my way. I am sure that he has done that, and I am grateful to him.

I see from the posters going up around the country that it is now party policy to say "Thank you, thank you, thank you." As one of my constituents said, "What the hell for?" So I thank the Minister, but I was disappointed by the reply that he sent me when he exercised that function. He more or less advised me to go away in a fashion advised by French Connection UK. He said that it could not be done in the way that I wanted. I know what is happening here. The vested interests say, "We can't do that". The officials say, "Play it safe, Minister, there's no point in extending the role of the Bill. It will be a nuisance, it's another imponderable, it's not within the scope of the Bill which is simply concerned with matters of company administration and insolvency, so let us keep the focus on the main issue. Don't buy into emotive concepts like the workers or the stakeholders. Best say no—that's the easiest course."

I hope that, now I have approached the issue in a moderate form by proposing new clause 3, the Minister might look again at what he said in his letter. The nominee

is effectively making a life or death decision on the company and should have the same responsibilities as directors.

Mr. Butterfill: I have the disadvantage of not having served on the Standing Committee although, together with my hon. Friends on the Select Committee, I considered a number of these issues. The effect of the amendment is not entirely clear, and perhaps when the Minister replies it will become a little clearer. At present, the directors and, indeed, the officers of the company have personal liability under certain circumstances for malfeasance and can be sued individually. Is the hon. Gentleman intending to pass on to the nominee a similar liability vis-à-vis his duties in the particular connection that he proposes? If so, does he think that it will be easy to find a nominee under those circumstances?

Mr. Mitchell: It is good to hear the voice of the vested interests again expressed here, even if it did not get on to the Committee. The answer is that the directors have that responsibility, but they are also responsible for having regard to the interests of the company's employees in general. They have both responsibilities. They continue to be in charge of the company during this period. I want the nominee to be impressed with the same responsibility. It is fairly simple. It does not detract from the directors—they have the responsibility too. The new clause would spread the responsibility to the nominee.

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Mr. Mitchell: No, I do not want to give way again, because the tear-jerking picture of directors at risk will be paraded before us. I simply want the responsibility that directors have to employees to be shared. I am not going to get bogged down in that argument.

Mr. Butterfill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mitchell: No. I am sorry, but I am moving on.

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has said that he will not give way.

Mr. Butterfill: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has publicly accused me of representing a vested interest in the Bill. I want him to tell the House what vested interest he thinks I represent.

Mr. Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman may be somewhat sympathetic to the interests of directors. He paints that picture of directors at risk, giving the impression that the risk would be increased if the nominee shared the same responsibilities and had to pay attention to the workers' interests. That is why I accused him of pushing a vested or a sectional interest—that of the directors. I am speaking for the interests of the employees. I do not want to go further down that road—I did not want to give way in the first place, but I did so out of courtesy. The point was largely irrelevant, but it has been answered.

Amendment No. 46 is designed to ensure that the nominee is accountable to directors and the public. At present, the Bill only requires the nominee to inform the court when the moratorium has been brought to an end. It does not require the public filing of information on matters that have to be disclosed.

The Bill would extend what amounts to a state-guaranteed market for insolvency and business restructuring, to the benefit of insolvency practitioners. They have that privilege and it should be accompanied by an accountability requirement. That is what I am trying to impose in amendment No. 46.

Amendment No. 47 would bring paragraphs 26 and 28 of schedule 1 into alignment with each other. The Bill does not recognise that creditors, members of companies and other stakeholders have the right to ask the courts to seek a replacement of the nominee. Under paragraph 26, they can apply to the court if they are dissatisfied with what is going on, but they do not have the power that is given to the directors in paragraph 28 to have the nominee replaced. Those powers should be equal. The amendment would bring paragraphs 28 and 26 into line by extending the power to any creditor, member of the company or other person affected by the moratorium. That seems to be a balanced requirement.

Amendment No. 3 is the nub of my argument on Report, as it was in Committee. We should impose on the nominee a duty of care to the employees of the company. Why does the Bill not impose that duty—to have regard to the interests of employees when making decisions? As the Bill stands, only the interests of creditors are promoted and protected. We are a Parliament that is elected by the people for all the people. We should enact legislation that benefits as many people as possible—not merely the minority covered by these procedures.

I proposed a similar amendment in Committee. The Minister's response was that he was not keen to change the legislation and to recognise the rights of employees, which I regret. Where we have the power to do so, we should. My hon. Friend also stated that an employee's position is no different from that of any other creditor. Most employees will be creditors and, in that capacity, they can make representations to the nominee and even go to court. The response that they are merely creditors is flawed. Creditors' committee meetings are dominated by the major creditors, which usually means the bank and the insolvency practitioner. Working together, they dominate the proceedings and other people do not get a look-in. A nominee needs to be expressly instructed in legislation to ensure that employee interests are not overlooked. That is the duty of care imposed in the amendment.

4.15 pm

I recall in Committee the touching picture painted of workers at Sturmey Archer by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) who has put his name to amendment No. 3. He talked of their difficulties in understanding what was going on and getting representation. Let us give the nominee a duty of care.

The Minister has replied that employees are creditors and, as such, have rights. I am seeking recognition of their rights as employees, not as creditors. After all, it is the blood, sweat, muscles and brawn of workers that keep the company going. Without that human capital, no business

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will survive. At the restructuring of the company, matters that are crucial to all have to be decided—pension rights, jobs, wage levels, security and all the things that go with a job. Those matters cannot be discussed without the employees or their representatives being involved—if they have a trade union to do it, I am happy with that because a trade union will always represent the interests of the employees.

Directors have a responsibility to attend to the interests of employees and that should be the nominee's responsibility too. All those rights should be respected in business. In this legislation, we have the opportunity to ensure that those rights are protected and to incline the balance to the workers. It is not an onerous imposition or a radical restructuring of the Bill. It is merely saying that in the vulture culture, when all the creditors move in and everyone is grabbing, either to keep the company going or to close it down—grabbing for the assets and getting the best deal for themselves—someone should pay attention to the interests of the workers and have a duty of care to them. Someone should involve their representatives in the discussions.

We are in power and we are a Labour party. This is the party of the workers and the trade unions. We should incline the balance to them by the simple procedure of a duty of care. In the new clause, I have modified the provision and toned it down so as not to frighten the Minister or his advisers. The full-blooded statement is in amendment No. 3, and either would be suitable—obviously, I prefer the amendment. I cannot see why the Minister cannot leap to his feet and say, "Yes. I've seen the light. This is the responsibility of a Labour Minister. Let us have new clause 3."

Mr. Page: I will speak to amendment No. 33, but before I do so, I will deal briefly with some of the comments of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). His new clause has merit and I hope that the Minister will not be as hard-hearted and dismissive as he was in Committee. I hope that he will try to understand that the workers in a company have rights and responsibilities, and that a Labour Government should be looking after them, not casting them to one side.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby accused Conservative Members of blowing hot and cold. If we agree with the hon. Gentleman, we are right, but if we introduce the slightest balance, we are wrong and we are promoting vested interests. The attack on my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) was unjustified, unwarranted and without any evidence. That is typical of the way in which the hon. Member for Great Grimsby—with great humour, and most amusingly—shoots from the hip.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): In fairness to the House, if an hon. Member states that another hon. Member has a vested interest, it is incumbent on the hon. Member making that assertion to say exactly what those vested interests are. It is not necessarily wrong to have a vested interest—it all depends on the import one gives to the word "vested". Does my hon. Friend agree that our principal duty is not to support one sectional or vested interest against another, but to ensure that our legislation is fair?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend makes the point that I was trying to make: we should introduce balance in whatever we say. I certainly would never accuse a Labour Member of representing the vested interests of a trade union. Why should a Member not represent such interests? That is part of the great spread of diverse interests represented in the House; we hear a variety of views and can form a judgment. From such a balance, we can come to the best decision for the people of this country. That is why we are sent to this place.

I resent being lumped in under the term "vested interest". I remind the hon. Member for Great Grimsby that I introduced a ten-minute Bill that proposed splitting responsibilities: someone involved in the valuation of a company should not be allowed to carry out the liquidation. I think that the hon. Gentleman agreed with me—he praised me for that proposal—but now he lines me up with the vested interests against which he obviously has a vendetta. He would do more for everybody and do it better if he balanced his words more carefully, and thought before shooting from the hip.

When one disagrees with the legislation under discussion, it is a standing temptation to regard it as coming from cloud cuckoo land. That seems odd to me, as according to the Greek play by Aristophanes, the laws of logic applied more rigorously in cloud cuckoo land than they did on earth, but I use the term in its currently accepted sense when I apply it to this aspect of the Bill.

Dr. Howells: I am slightly confused as to whether the hon. Gentleman thinks that the Bill or the amendment comes from cloud cuckoo land.

Mr. Page: The Minister will have the opportunity later to tell me that my amendment comes from cloud cuckoo land; I was saying that the balance in this part of the Bill comes from there.

I should like to be able to say that the Bill's provisions for applying to the courts were entirely logical and straightforward. Creditors can apply, as can directors and anyone affected by the moratorium—including the company; so can liquidators, administrators, shareholders and the supervisors of voluntary agreements, but not the nominee.

Nominees will have responsibility for assessing whether voluntary arrangements proposed by a company's directors are likely to be approved and implemented—the kernel of the Bill. Such nominees will also have to come to a view on whether the voluntary arrangements are likely to be improved without modification, or whether they might fail. Those are huge and important responsibilities.

With great respect to the Minister, it is for this House and the other place to decide whether a nominee should have the right to apply to the courts when he or she may need guidance on the performance of his or her duties. If his or her decisions can be challenged in the courts by the parties I mentioned, surely it is fair and equitable to afford the nominee an equal opportunity to exercise that right.

The purpose of the amendment is not to give nominees an escape clause so that they can evade their responsibilities and under which courts would take over

those administrative and commercial decisions. I suspect that the Minister's opposition to the amendment is based on Mr. Justice Neuberger's decision—as though he and not Parliament ran the country. Although I have enormous respect for Mr. Justice Neuberger, it is not for him to decide whether nominees, or any insolvency holder, should have the right to apply to the court when in doubt about the decision that should be made; it is for Parliament to decide whether nominees should have that right. If we decide that they should have such a right, judges should respect that—unless, of course, the matter involves human rights issues.

At present, everyone involved in the whole chain of events—except the nominee—can apply to the court. Yet the nominee has to make that crucial decision that will bring the moratorium into effect, or will continue it. At times such a decision can be extremely difficult, especially if the nominee forms the view that the original voluntary arrangement will not be approved, but is likely to be approved with modifications proposed by a creditor.

The proposed procedure is novel—it does not take a tried and trusted path; the company could obtain a moratorium by applying to an authorised person rather than to a judge. The difficult decisions that were made by judges will be made by authorised persons. In Committee, we were all fully aware of how many times the Minister was asked to explain by which route the nominees might appear. In a rare show of comradeship with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, I acknowledge his excellent and valid point about the number of organisations that could license practitioners. The measure would add yet another one, but in a rather vague and nebulous form—appearing from the ether or through some osmotic process, an organisation would be approved by the Secretary of State and could then approve a nominee.

We should proceed along that route with caution. I must not say that the Minister has been sloppy, but he has only made vague and conciliatory noises about what a future nominee might be like—hard facts and detail are lacking.

Those authorised persons do not have to hold the same qualifications as a licensed insolvency practitioner. We are well aware of the views of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby on those gentlemen. It is important that the Secretary of State should ensure that if he creates even more bodies that can grant approval to carry out such work, they should be of a standard and quality that will be a help rather than a hindrance.

During proceedings on the measure, we frequently made the critical comment that it is half a Bill, or even less than half a Bill. It would have been an ideal measure under which to introduce monitoring or quality control of the operations of insolvency practitioners. But no such provisions were included. The issue certainly occupied the time of one member of the Committee. He made his argument forcibly and we were all made aware of what he was trying to achieve. The House will have gathered that I refer to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby.

4.30 pm

Just as there are rogue directors—although the vast majority of directors are decent people who work hard to the best of their ability—so too there are licensed practitioners who do not behave appropriately, but the majority do a good job.

I was pleased to hear from the new named body of licensed practitioners—the Association of British Recovery Professionals—that its title includes the word "recovery". I recently received, as did every member of the Committee, a letter from that body, saying that the word "recovery" is now very much in the forefront of its thinking. That is a change of emphasis and direction, which I am sure we all welcomed.

If the Bill does nothing more than to introduce the culture of rescue and recovery earlier in the process, it will have achieved something. Too many businesses run right to the wire, when they could have been saved if they had taken decisions earlier. In the United States an eminent gentleman—so eminent that his name escapes me—conducted research and discovered that if a company had taken slightly earlier the measures that it took in the last six months of its existence, it would have been rescued. Too many directors do nothing until the cliff edge is crumbling beneath their feet, and by then it is far too late—too late for moratoriums or any form of rescue. If any message is to be conveyed from this place to company directors, I hope that it will be my strong encouragement to seek advice and help earlier, instead of bottling things up and thinking that they can work their way out of their difficulties. In so many cases, neither success nor rescue comes, and the inevitable pain of bankruptcy follows.

I return to my comments about the fear that the authorised person will not be of sufficient quality. I do worry that a number of authorised persons will be out of their depth, so to my mind it would be bizarre and pointless to deny them the right to appeal to the court. What conceivable advantage can there be in denying the nominee such an opportunity? If he applies to the court unnecessarily, wasting the court's time, the court's displeasure will no doubt be exhibited and reflected in an appropriate order for costs, but it cannot be right to deny the nominee the right to apply to a court when he has a real need for guidance.

I urge the Government to reconsider the amendment.

Mr. Burnett: I shall speak to new clause 3 and amendment No. 46.

I was delighted to hear the speech by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) because I believe that there is very significant support in all parts of the House for new clause 3. It is not draconian. We are talking about duties that are already imposed on directors. They are not onerous.

Let us read what the new clause says. It imposes the burden of section 309(1) of the Companies Act 1985 on nominees—and why should nominees not have regard to the interests of the company's employees? The new clause is pretty tame, and not onerous. It merely provides that the nominee should at least consider the interests of the company's employees.

Dr. Howells *rose—*

Mr. Burnett: I am happy to give way to the Minister.

Dr. Howells: Will the hon. Gentleman concede that the intent of the Bill is to offer some companies the opportunity

[Dr. Howells]

to survive and to continue trading, and therefore to help employment? The whole point of the Bill is to offer support for employees, because without it, they will not have jobs.

Mr. Burnett: I entirely agree that the object of the exercise is to promote the rescue culture. We have in this country a particularly creditor-friendly business culture. I believe that all hon. Members who served on the Committee, from whatever party they came, recognised that. If the moratorium has the effect of keeping a company in existence, that is marvellous, but in taking his or her decisions, the nominee should at least have regard to the interests of the company's employees. That is not an onerous provision. Nominees must consider such matters. They may disregard them, but they must at least consider the number of employees in the company, whether the company should contract and whether people should be sacked. They should at least give those matters some weight. That is all that the new clause would provide. In my view, it is entirely correct. The employees have invested their time and efforts in the company and been loyal to it, and their interests should at least be considered.

Amendment No. 46 is not draconian or onerous in the slightest. At present, insolvency practitioners have almost carte blanche to charge what they like. There is little scope for those fees to be taxed or challenged, and that is deeply unfair to directors, employees and creditors—particularly unsecured creditors.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) is not the only hon. Member who has highlighted that unfairness. Two or three years ago, no less a Member than the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) initiated an Adjournment debate on the subject. The amendment is a small step in the right direction. Fees and other matters should be reported to the Registrar of Companies. I hope that when the Minister replies to the debate, he will tell us what he hopes to do and what provision his Department proposes to make to remedy this and other defects in the legislation, which were highlighted from both sides of the Committee.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I have a great deal of sympathy for the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). I suspect that I could have a long discussion with him about the things for which his constituents should be thankful to the Government—not least the national minimum wage—but I shall leave that for now.

In Committee an awful lot of examples were cited of the type of problems that the amendments would address and the Minister expressed some sympathy for the points that were raised. We should remember that the Bill deals with small companies, and that the period when discussions are held about whether to impose a moratorium is often traumatic for employees—it is probably the most stressful time of their lives. As the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) put it, a decision taken early can save jobs.

I shall be interested to hear the Minister's reply, because one thing that concerns me about the Government's unwillingness to accept the amendments is that, as I understand it, the Minister's argument in Committee was that employees are creditors and so are protected because they are part of the creditors' meeting. He argued that if they are not creditors, they are just normal employees and are protected by the directors. My worry is that the influence of the nominee in overriding the directors' wishes or suggesting to directors that they should go in a slightly different direction will be at variance with the interests of employees and key personnel. It is not unknown for key personnel, especially of small IT companies, to be poached and to move to other companies. There are several such key issues that the creditors' meeting would not address which would be crucial to the nominee's administration and the way in which the directors operate the company during the moratorium.

If the nominee does not have a duty of care to employees, I fear that the directors will say, "Of course, we would like to look after you, but this nasty nominee is telling us to do something different." Because of the relationship between the nominee and the directors, the terms and conditions of employees could be directly affected by decisions that they cannot influence.

My hon. Friend the Minister seems to rely greatly on the fact that employees will receive protection as creditors, but there are other concerns that he did not address in Committee.

Mr. Burnett: We considered two particular points in Committee. The first was the duty of nominees to creditors and the second was whether an employee was likely to be a creditor. In fact, he or she will almost certainly be a creditor. Therefore, does the hon. Gentleman agree that new clause 3 at least provides for the interests of a company's employees to be regarded by the nominee during the moratorium?

Mr. White: That is why I have some sympathy for the new clause and shall be interested to hear my hon. Friend's comments. The emphasis in the Committee was on the employees' role as creditors, but the issue goes beyond that. If we do not consider the problem fully, the Bill may not achieve its aims of saving people's jobs and giving them hope by providing a breathing space. If there is a simple duty of care on the nominee, different decisions may be taken and that may secure the employment of the people in the company concerned.

Mr. Butterfill: The House owes a debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for bringing this matter to its attention. New clause 3 and amendment No. 46 deserve serious consideration. Like the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), I am minded to support amendment No. 46, but I am not entirely clear about how the new clause will function. I shall listen to the Minister's considered reply before I make up my mind. In principle, the idea that there should be a duty to look after the interests of employees should be accepted by all reasonable people.

Mr. Burnett: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that the provision in new clause 3 is not as strong as that—it is a pretty tame proposal. It would be a requirement not to look after the interests of employees but to have regard to them.

Mr. Butterfill: The hon. Gentleman has an advantage over me on this, because he is a qualified lawyer with experience of the legal niceties. However, I shall listen to the Minister before I finally make up my mind.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend, who was savaged earlier by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), is showing his true colours by considering the matter dispassionately. Does he not agree that employees would be best served by amendment No. 46? If the Registrar of Companies is notified of the fees charged, the basis of the charge and the terms and outcome of the moratorium, there is more chance—if things go wrong—of money being recovered to pay creditors and employees. Will that not give those in the company a better chance of receiving something if, sadly, the moratorium does not work?

Mr. Butterfill: I have already said that I support amendment No. 46. It is admirable and will go a long way to dealing with some of the rare but considerable abuses that take place from time to time when companies go into liquidation.

4.45 pm

I have been nice about the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, but I was a little disappointed when he did not follow the best traditions of the House and did not allow me to intervene when he was rather rude and accused me of defending vested interests. My interests are fully declared in the Register of Members' Interests. I have two small directorships of family companies that do not have any employees other than the directors themselves. Therefore, I have no interest to defend in that respect. I have already talked about my experience as a non-executive director of Maples.

The hon. Gentleman seeks to include in the Bill provisions from the Companies Act 1985, which was passed by a Conservative Administration. If this Bill is passed, in the event of a liquidation, the nominee will have a duty to consider the interests of all those concerned. That is important. The hon. Gentleman referred to vultures, but they may be defending the interests of customers. For example in the case of Maples, our constituents—many of them pensioners—might have put down a £1,000 deposit on a three-piece suite, which would represent a huge purchase for them. Suddenly, the company went bust and they wanted their money back. Customers are also entitled to consideration, and it is always extremely difficult to balance the different interests and to treat everyone even-handedly and fairly, particularly if one knows that not everyone will be paid in full. On reflection, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree with that.

I have just voted for a new clause that would have helped to prevent the abuses that have occurred in some companies. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not support it, and he may recall that the Insolvency Act 1993 started as a private Member's Bill that I promoted. It protected the innocent purchasers of property that could be seized by a receiver or a liquidator. I changed the law to defend innocent purchasers from those that the hon. Gentleman describes as vultures. I do not apologise for my record on this issue.

The general theme of this group of amendments is the nominee's supervisory activity in relation to the moratorium. Unfortunately, I am the only contributor to the debate who did not serve on the Standing Committee, but I served on the Select Committee that considered the draft Bill. Therefore, I wish to point out the respects in which the Government have failed to meet the concerns that the Select Committee expressed.

One of the dangers is that nominees could face a conflict of interest. They will be invited by the directors to take up a paid position and a few in the profession—I hope not many—might think that it is worth taking such a rewarded post even if they think that a company does not have much chance of surviving. That would be regrettable, but the Government have failed to include in the Bill one of the defences that the Select Committee drew to its attention. If the directors of a company fail to attract the person that they want as nominee because he does not think that the company will survive, they may go to as many as 20 people to trawl for a nominee. Eventually, they may find a person who is sufficiently self-motivated to do the job.

The Select Committee suggested that the Government should include a defence against trawling, but they signally failed to do so. Perhaps the Minister will tell us why. Equally, the Government are changing the requirement for qualifications of nominees. That again exacerbates the danger. Up to now, only qualified insolvency practitioners have been able to fulfil that role, but the Bill will allow anyone with an appropriate qualification or who is a member of a recognised professional body to fulfil the task.

Plenty of people, such as certified accountants and chartered accountants, are members of appropriate professional bodies. Although they might be good accountants and produce good audits, they might have no experience of the specialised subject of insolvency. Again, the Select Committee made it clear that it was concerned that the Government were considering involving such people. A broad spectrum of people made representations to the Committee, and many of them expressed the same concerns. The Select Committee concluded that it might have been better if the Government had left this particular change to the wider review of the whole issue of insolvency.

We are all—I hope—interested in protecting every section of the public, including, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, employees, but that must be even-handed, transparent and above all fair.

Dr. Howells: I shall deal first with amendment No. 3 and new clause 3 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell).

The amendment seeks to place on a nominee and a supervisor a duty of care to employees. However, I am not sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that it would place a duty of care on a supervisor only under the existing voluntary arrangement procedure—that is, without the moratorium. It is also not at all clear whether the proposed duty on a nominee is to apply in both moratorium and non-moratorium cases. Either way, I believe that neither the new clause nor the amendment is necessary.

[Dr. Howells]

The first part of the amendment would provide for the supervisor to owe employees a duty of care in the existing voluntary arrangement procedure but, as I have said, that is not necessary. Section 7(3) of the Insolvency Act 1986 provides:

> If any of the company's creditors or any other person is dissatisfied by any act, omission or decision of the supervisor, he may apply to the court.

Therefore, if employees have concerns about the way in which the supervisor is acting, the 1986 Act already provides them with the ability to challenge the actions of the supervisor by seeking an appropriate order.

New clause 3 is not necessary either. Paragraph 26 of proposed new schedule A1 similarly allows

> any other person affected by a moratorium

to apply to the court if he is dissatisfied by any act, omission or decision of the nominee.

Mr. Burnett: Why should employees have to bother to apply to the court? Will the Minister concede that we are not proposing an onerous duty?

Dr. Howells: A proper procedure must be followed. I shall expand on this matter when I address the important issues raised by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), who spoke about redressing the balance in the way in which the case is presented. That is an important issue. I know from the many cases that arrive on my desk from the companies investigation team at the Department of Trade and Industry that we cannot blind ourselves to the truth that there are many sharp directors who are prepared to fleece creditors, some of whom are pensioners who might have used their savings to put down a deposit on a three-piece suite, as the hon. Gentleman said. We must take into account all stakeholders, not just employees.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby might have misunderstood the function of the supervisor and the nominees in a moratorium case. Neither will assume control of the company. I have said that a number of times, but hon. Members have not taken it on board. The purpose of the supervisor will be to perform the duties as set out for him in the voluntary arrangement. The nominee's role during the moratorium is set out clearly in proposed new schedule 1A.

The directors will remain in charge of the company both during and after the moratorium. We therefore do not consider it appropriate to include a provision in the Bill that imposes such an undefined duty of care on a supervisor. Nor do we think it right that he should have to consult employees' representatives or that nominees should be subject to the duty imposed in section 309 of the Companies Act 1985. That section, which is headed

> Directors to have regard to interests of employees,

states:

> Accordingly, the duty imposed by this section on the directors is owed by them to the company (and the company alone) and is enforceable in the same way as any other fiduciary duty owed to a company by its directors.

We must remember that the directors are still in charge of a company in a moratorium, and section 309 continues to apply. Therefore, they should have regard to that duty when framing a rescue plan. That is my point which, for whatever reason, my hon. Friends do not want to accept.

Mr. White: Many examples were given in Committee of employees whose directors did not act in the way outlined by the Minister. Will he undertake to ensure that, for the purposes of this Bill, that duty will be publicised clearly so that people who go into voluntary arrangements understand it?

Dr. Howells: I readily concede that successive Governments have done a bad job in making employees aware of their rights in such circumstances, but it is clear from section 309 that those rights are already enshrined in law. Far too often, trade unions do not take sufficient notice of them and employees do not know about them. I am not so worried about employees who are represented by trade unions, but about non-union, low-paid shop workers because those people do not have the confidence or the knowledge to use what is available. That is the problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) is right to say that we have a real job to do to educate people.

Mr. Burnett: We are not talking about directors—we know that they must comply with section 309(1). I hope that the Minister will direct his attention to the fact that new clause 3 would impose on a nominee the very small burden of having to have regard to the interests of the company's employees.

Dr. Howells: I have tried already to respond to that point. I have said that it is an unnecessary burden, and I believe just that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby said in Committee that he was looking for a way of ensuring that employees' interests were included in the equation. He will understand that supervisors and nominees will be aware that employees are able to make application under section 7(3) or paragraph 24, and should take that right into account when performing their duties. Additionally, supervisors and nominees will be aware that if they act in such a way as to give rise to a course of action—such as in tort—they will be vulnerable to legal action, and they would have to take that into account too.

On amendment No. 3, given the supervisor's function, it would be inappropriate for him to have regularly to consult employees' representatives. However, if an employee happened also to be a creditor, the supervisor would keep him informed of progress in the same way as he would other creditors.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby referred to amendment No. 47 after dealing with new clause 3 and amendment No. 3. It is a similar amendment to one that he tabled in Committee. Like that one, I believe that amendment No. 47 is unnecessary. First, it is not necessary for any creditor or any member of the company to be able to make such an application. If he or she is not happy with the existing nominee, they can vote to change the nominee at the meeting summoned under paragraph 29 of schedule A1. That can be achieved by proposing that it be a condition of any extension of the

moratorium that the nominee be replaced. I hope that the House accepts that. Alternatively, it can be proposed that the nominee be changed by amending the voluntary arrangement proposal considered by the meeting. It would be up to the meeting to pass such a proposal. We do not consider it appropriate that anyone should be able to apply to the court to change the nominee. The right contained in paragraph 28 to make application to the court to replace the nominee is designed to deal with specific circumstances.

5 pm

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West raised an extremely important point. I have said that I see far too many cases of shysters fleecing those whom we refer to as creditors. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby knows about those cases. I had one recently that received much publicity. It involved the World of Leather, where extremely dubious practices were carried on in the last few weeks of trading.

Constituents were affected throughout the country and there were some sad results. Many people did not get their money back and they did not get their three-piece suites. They are creditors—it is not only the big banks that are creditors, along with the circulating vultures, as my hon. Friend referred to them. I know of elderly and poor people who saved up for three-piece suites and did not get them. We must remember that the process is designed to protect those people, as much as it is designed to ensure fair play in every other respect. We are offering a period of respite for companies when they feel that they are in trouble. Perhaps the Bill will significantly add to that rescue culture.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West asked whether directors will be encouraged to shop around for a nominee until they find one who is prepared to sign the necessary statement. His intervention was tantamount to that. The likelihood is that in practice they will not have time to do that. We should bear that in mind. However, there seems no good reason why directors should not be able to test the market.

In the early days of consideration of the Bill in Committee, there was much discussion about the enormous fees that are charged by insolvency practitioners. Many allegations were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and others about dubious practices concerning fee setting and levels of fees. Perhaps the Bill will go some way towards breaking that monopoly.

Mr. Butterfill: It is not that I have any concern about people shopping around to get the best fee. That is entirely admirable. I am worried that if they shop around and are repeatedly turned down because experienced professionals say that there is no hope of their acting as nominees, they will eventually find someone who for self-interest—that of earning a few quid—will say, "Yes, I'll do it." That point, which the Government have not addressed, was addressed by the Select Committee.

Dr. Howells: I shall try to convince the hon. Gentleman that we have addressed it and that we are concerned.

As the hon. Gentleman says, some nominees might be more rescue-oriented than others for many reasons, good as well as bad. We know that there is a flip side to the coin. There are some professionals who are notoriously not interested in rescues, whereas there are others who generally are. It could work both ways. Any prospective nominee should be up to the standard expected of him. There is no question about that. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page). I believe that they will be up to the proper standard because they will be authorised and regulated by a body recognised by the Secretary of State for that purpose. However, if needed, in the unlikely event of a director being able to pull the wool over a nominee's eyes, various remedies are available in schedule A1 to address the abuse. Not the least of those is the offence contained in paragraph 40, which provides for the punishment of those who make false representations and the like to obtain a moratorium.

Those of us who have previously been involved with the Bill are accustomed to hearing my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby talk about the importance of public accountability of insolvency practitioners, and he is right to highlight that. However, in amendment No. 46, he is again talking about fees. I am glad that he wants to discuss fees, which are an important subject and one that is obviously dear to his heart—but the fact is that the Bill is not about the regulation of practitioners' fees.

At issue is the requirement on the nominee to give notice of the end of a moratorium. That requirement can arise for two reasons, among others: first, because the moratorium has come to an end without a voluntary arrangement being agreed; and, secondly, when an arrangement has taken effect following the meetings of a company and its creditors. In the first instance, the question of payment of the nominee's fees will be a matter for the company and its directors, not anyone else, to deal with. In the second instance, the nominee's fees will be a matter for the meetings to consider when voting on whether or not to accept the voluntary arrangement. What the nominee is to be paid is a matter that must be included in a voluntary arrangement, under rule 1.3 of the existing company voluntary arrangement procedure, and we intend that a similar provision should apply to the new moratorium procedure.

My hon. Friend should also take comfort from paragraph 32 of the new schedule, which sets out that, if a meeting proposes to extend the moratorium, the nominee has to inform the meeting of the costs of his monitoring activity up to that point and what he intends to do in that respect during the proposed extension. Therefore, anticipated costs will have to be approved if the moratorium is not to end. In those circumstances, I consider it to be neither necessary nor appropriate for the nominee to have to give the notice set out in amendment No. 46 regarding his fees.

My hon. Friend also desires the nominee to have to notify various individuals of

> any adverse court judgment or disciplinary findings by any of the Recognised Supervisory Bodies.

I do not consider that to be appropriate to the Bill, which my hon. Friend described in Committee as a very modest measure. Such issues have nothing to do with a moratorium and, as I have said before, practitioner regulation is not a matter for the Bill.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire spoke to amendment No. 33, which is identical to one that he tabled in Committee. For the benefit of those who have

[Dr. Howells]

not had a chance to read *Hansard*, I repeat that we do not consider it necessary to provide the nominee with the power to apply to the court for directions. The nature of the nominee's role is such that he should not be in a position in which such an application would be appropriate. Commercial and administrative decisions are for the nominee, not for the court. We do not consider that the court should be used to provide the nominee with a way in which to avoid taking decisions that are, rightly, for him, or to enable him to obtain the court's endorsement of his intended course of action.

I look to Mr. Justice Neuberger for neither direction nor support, but the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire is correct to say that I take a great deal of comfort from Mr. Justice Neuberger's ruling in the case of T and D Industries plc and another, relating to a company that was the subject of an administration order.

Having made those points, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby will withdraw his amendment and that the others will not be pressed.

Mr. Mitchell: I should make a couple of points before coming to my agonising decision about whether to keep the House on tenterhooks by pressing the matter to a Division.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), may I say that I was not neglecting the big things that the Labour Government are doing: they are important and the Government are successful. What I said was that, as Back-Benchers, we have a little influence on legislation affecting the way in which companies are run, insolvencies administered and companies rescued, and we should use that opportunity to tilt the balance towards our section of society and the workers. We have only a little influence but we can do much to improve society through little changes to legislation. That seems to me to be the responsibility of the Back Bencher. We do not get much responsibility, for heaven's sake; we should use what we have.

I did not want to take the question from the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) because I did not want to go down that legalistic path. If the hon. Gentleman understood me to say that he represented vested interests or, worse still, that he was one of the vultures I was criticising, I correct that impression and apologise. I was not saying that.

The hon. Gentleman was asserting the primacy of company directors by pointing out their legal responsibilities—to the detriment of the workers, I thought. My sole point was about the need to swing the balance towards the workers.

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Mr. Mitchell: No, I will not give way.

I make no correction on the vulture culture. In too many cases the interests of the banks is predominant, and in the scrabble over the money, the banks have enormous power. I know that there are tear-jerking pictures of people all over the country who are owed small sums by fraudulent companies, but that is not what we are discussing.

Through the Bill, we are trying to instil the rescue culture, to keep companies going. The power of the vultures to close companies down and to call in debt, in the unpredictable, lurching way in which banks do that, needs to be checked. All that I am trying to do is to tilt the balance towards the workers. After all, we are the Labour party still, I think. We are a party of stakeholders, and voice the interests of stakeholders. We work in a European context, and workers' rights are properly advanced by all the proposals coming out of Europe—something that I strongly support. We have an opportunity, so why are we not doing what we can and should do?

The trade unionists to whom I have spoken and with whom I formulated the amendments think that we will do so, but I am disappointed to find that my hon. Friend the Minister does not consider that necessary. I do not accept the argument that workers can apply to the courts. That is not part of their repertoire or expertise, and it should not be necessary if we write their primacy into legislation. I am not asking for the interests of the employees alone to be taken into consideration. I am asking for them to be taken into consideration, but not as the predominant influence.

Dr. Howells: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I am sure that he did not mean that it is not for workers or trade unions to take these matters to court. Many of the great advances that have been made by trade unions and workers have been made in court, as a result of brilliant advocacy. Even I am old enough to remember some of it, and I have witnessed it first-hand. I am sure that my hon. Friend does not mean what he just said.

Mr. Mitchell: I wish that I could speak Welsh, rather than the simple verities of Yorkshire—pure language of the people of the north. I was not saying that at all. I said that applying to the courts was not part of workers' expertise. Certainly, they need backing and support from the trade unions, and the trade unions provide it. We can encourage them to provide more of it. If the rights of workers have been trampled on, it is the responsibility of the trade unions to help them to go to court, but in some cases workers are not members of trade unions. The courts are an uncertain way of making progress, and we could make progress in the matter by simply writing into the Bill the requirement of a duty of care to the workers. That is all I ask.

I do not see why my hon. Friend is so adamant. I know that he has received advice to the effect that that would be a nuisance, would complicate matters and might lead to unforeseen consequences. I believe that it would set the tone for the entire procedure. My hon. Friend has turned down the idea and I am disappointed by his reply. It seems to me that as he is the Minister of social and corporate responsibility and as such issues are raised in that context, appropriate provisions should be included in the Bill.

5.15 pm

I was excited by the tumultuous support that I received from the other side of the House—Conservative Members are clamouring to support my proposal—but it puts me in an embarrassing situation. I would like to lead the Liberals and the Conservatives to the barricades and shout, "What about the workers?"

Mr. Page: After the hon. Gentleman's dramatic words at the start of our debate, is he now saying that he will not press the new clause to a vote and will back off? Surely not!

Mr. Mitchell: When I used the word "tumultuous" I was referring not to the hon. Gentleman's speech, but

to the widespread support I received from Opposition Members. I was delighted by their support—that shows that they have learned something after failing the workers for 18 years. I am disappointed by the lack of support among Labour Members, especially from the Minister, and I am now in an embarrassing position. Neither of my two co-authors of the new clause could be present for the debate. In light of that, I give up. I did not push the matter in Committee because of a lack of killer instinct. With a feeling of sad impotence, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Hon. Members: No.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 280.

Division No. 338] **[5.16 pm**

AYES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gray, James
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Major, Rt Hon John
Mitchell, Austin
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Page, Richard
Pickles, Eric
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Spring, Richard
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Welsh, Andrew
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Butterfill and
Mr. Brian Cotter.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*

Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 9

ADMINISTRATION ORDERS

5.15 pm

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 6, line 7, at end insert "and occupied by".

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 27, in page 6, line 14, at end insert "and occupied by".

No. 23, in schedule 1, page 15, line 25, at end insert "and occupied by".

No. 25, in schedule 3, page 38, line 19, after second "to", insert "and occupied by".

No. 24, in page 38, line 37, after second "to", insert "and occupied by".

Mr. Page: Unusually, I start by paying a small tribute to the Government and the Minister for at long last recognising the current legal difficulties affecting landlords and companies. The position was anomalous; it was and is quite illogical for a landlord to be prevented from taking proceedings against a company in possession of premises rented from that landlord when, at the same time, the landlord is allowed to re-enter such premises peaceably. Unfortunately, the Department's proposal is still confusing.

It appears on the basis of the legal advice I have received—not from the good justice Neuberger, but from another source—that under the amendment tabled by the Minister in Committee, it would be possible for a landlord to be forbidden from peaceably re-entering premises that are not occupied by the company that has sought and obtained a moratorium. I find the reasoning behind that rather difficult to detect.

The amendments are of a probing nature; I am a seeker after truth. Looking the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) in the eye, I say that this is a query from a vested interest. It is important that this matter is clarified. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman was in the Lobby, voting for the new clause. I commend him on his courage at this particular moment in his political career.

The purpose of the new moratorium procedure is to protect companies that have a reasonable prospect of becoming viable during a limited period. We all say amen to that and we all hope that they will be viable not only for that limited period, but will successfully trade out of their difficulties. I agree with the Minister that it would be quite perverse for such companies to be deprived by a landlord of the premises that they legitimately occupy: however peaceably that landlord regained possession, the business would collapse and the purpose of the moratorium would be negated.

Surely there should be no bar on a landlord reoccupying premises that the company in question is not using. It cannot be carrying on businesses vital to the success of the moratorium in premises that are unoccupied. I believe that the amendments would deal with the odd situation that the Bill will create. They will ensure that the landlord's legitimate interests in unoccupied premises are protected, while ensuring that companies under the protection of the new moratorium procedures do not suffer.

As long ago as 15 June my noble Friend Baroness Buscombe pointed out in another place the problems that arose from the Bill in its previous form. I will not go through all the difficulties and problems that would emerge, but I can understand that it is a natural instinct for a company in difficulty to keep as many options open as possible.

Would a fairer balance be struck if, as part of that application for a statutory moratorium, the tenant was required to specify those tenancies which were essential to the rescue effort? These would be protected by the moratorium, while the landlord's rights in relation to the remainder would be unaffected. This exception to the general rule could be achieved as part of the revision of the insolvency rules.

Nothing brings home the value of an amendment more than examples from the real world, and I have one. Three months after an administrator was appointed, a debtor who had leased three properties from a large landlord produced a list of properties that the debtor wished to retain and take forward to see his company survive. One month's rent had been paid on one property, but nothing had been paid on the others. One unit had been sold with full payment of arrears, although it took some time for the landlord to receive confirmation that the arrears would be made good. The second unit had been closed, and the administrator wished to retain the third. As matters stand, the landlord would be forbidden from doing anything with the premises that were not required.

As I said, my noble Friend Baroness Buscombe spoke about the matter some time ago, but it has taken six months for Government amendments to be introduced. Why on earth did it take so long to introduce those relatively simple amendments? That sort of delay is unacceptable. Furthermore, the lateness of the arrival of the Government amendments means that it has been difficult for the Opposition to consult all the interested parties, take advice and reach a satisfactory overall position. My amendments would address the problem, and I shall be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about the points that I have made.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory). As the Minister will know, I generally support the Bill, although, in Committee, I argued for ways in which it could be improved. However, at the basis of the Bill is the fact that it is fair legislation. The Government's intention in establishing moratorium arrangements in insolvency legislation is to enable businesses to trade out of their difficulties if possible. I fully support the Minister in trying to achieve that.

The British Property Federation has brought a certain matter to my attention. It states that the issue in question is the Government's

> proposal to reverse the Razzaq vs Pala court decision so that a landlord may not exercise the right of peaceable re-entry of a property while a voluntary moratorium agreement is in place without the permission of a court.

I agree with the general principle of that proposal, as does the British Property Federation. However, the federation is concerned to ensure that the fair balance between the interests of landlords and tenants is not disturbed, and that both should feel that their interests are properly safeguarded under the legislation. I should tell the House, and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) in particular, that I am not a landlord or a tenant, so I do not have a vested interest in advancing that case. However, the British Property Federation makes a fair point.

Mr. Burnett: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that property might be empty at the time of a moratorium because there is no stock and no money to pay for it? However, the moratorium would result in restructuring of finances and there could be cash and stock, and the property might have to be used again.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I think that I am at one with the hon. Gentleman. However I shall choose my words carefully and say that the balance of fairness would be preserved if, as an exception to the general rule, a tenant applying for a statutory moratorium was required to specify those tenancies that were essential to the rescue effort. Those would be protected by the moratorium, while landlords' rights in relation to the remainder would be unaffected. Our amendments would achieve that and ensure fairness. Will the Minister look at them sympathetically, as they would make the Bill fairer?

Dr. Howells: I have a great deal of sympathy with the approach of the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman). It is an issue that we have to look at carefully. We undertook a short consultation and, not surprisingly, views were polarised. It could prove to be a bone of contention.

The amendments tabled by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) would permit a landlord to exercise the right of forfeiture by means of peaceful re-entry where the premises concerned were unoccupied without first having to go to court. As the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) said, just because premises are unoccupied does not necessarily mean that they are essential to the rescue attempt, and that is why we do not consider the amendments to be appropriate.

After consulting and listening to the arguments, we concluded that the best way to approach the issue was to give the landlord the right to apply to the court for leave to re-enter any premises leased by the company or debtor to see whether or not they were necessary to the rescue attempt. The court can decide whether it is appropriate for the landlord to exercise the right of forfeiture.

The amendments could possibly mean that in order to ensure that a landlord could not exercise a right peaceably to re-enter premises, the company would have to ensure that the premises in question were physically occupied at all times. That seems unnecessary.

There is also the point that the company may have sub-let its premises. In those circumstances, the premises clearly would not be occupied by the company, hence the landlord would presumably be free to exercise any right to peaceably re-enter despite the fact that the premises might be essential to the rescue attempt.

If premises are no longer needed by a tenant, he is unlikely to defend any application by a landlord to forfeit the lease permitted by the court. Further, peaceable re-entry is not a frequently used right and also applies almost exclusively to business premises. In addition, the moratorium is very short, so the impact of the provision on a landlord would be limited in terms of time. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that explanation of where we stand and why we think that the amendments are not entirely appropriate.

Mr. Page: In view of the Minister's explanation and the point that I had not fully considered regarding premises being sub-let, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 12

INSOLVENT ESTATES OF DECEASED PERSONS

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 28, in page 7, line 32, at end insert—

> 'who has died after the commencement of this section'.

The amendment appears to be relatively simple and straightforward and I hope that the Minister sees it that way as well. It is highly important as it deals with a problem on which Ministers here and in another place have failed to satisfy right hon. and hon. Members and experts in insolvency law outside the House.

It is clear that the provision will have serious consequences for debtors who die before it comes into operation. I am advised that if the provision is enacted in its present form it will have retrospective effects. I am always reminded of a story about Winston Churchill. Someone told him that the first day of a child's life is one of the most dangerous, and Winston Churchill replied that the last is not without its hazards as well. Leaving that aside, I dread to think of the position of people who have arranged their affairs on the basis of what they understood the law to be.

Widows who may be living on restricted means in modest accommodation may find themselves faced with debts equal to the value of the interest in their homes held by their dead husbands. It is obvious that they will not be able to pay, or if they do they will be eligible for a much greater degree of support from the social security system. I believe many things about the Government, but I do not believe that they intend or want such an effect, since ruining widows or families through retrospective changes in insolvency law would not win the votes or the popularity that all Governments seek.

5.45 pm

Far be it from me to try to help the Government to avoid the pitfalls of unpopularity, but the safeguard in the amendment would help them to avoid an unnecessary trap. I hope that that is a compelling argument for the

[Mr. Page]

Minister to accept it, especially bearing in mind the fact that he is one of the self-confessed architects of new Labour.

Mr. Butterfill: I strongly support the amendment. It is a general principle of English law that legislation should not act retrospectively. It is not unknown for the House to pass retrospective legislation, but in general all Governments—and all hon. Members—have sought not to enact it, because it makes it difficult for people to plan their lives, creating unnecessary uncertainty and possibly affecting existing contractual arrangements.

There has long been a principle in English law that joint tenants own both absolutely and jointly, and that when one dies, the whole reverts to the other—or others, as there may be more than one. If the Government feel that that is no longer a form of ownership that should be protected, the answer is surely to amend the law on joint tenancies rather than to single out that area in the Bill.

Anomalies will be created. Building societies and others who have charges over property, in the expectation that they will achieve a charge over the whole in the case of a joint tenant, could have difficulties. The Bill is profoundly flawed on this matter, and that is compounded by the retrospective nature of clause 12.

This is not a new issue. It was considered by the Trade and Industry Committee, which said:

> There is a genuine policy question as to whether the interests of a deceased debtor in property held jointly should be treated as forming part of his estate for the purpose of its administration in bankruptcy. This deserves to be addressed explicitly rather than by merely referring back to . . . the 1986 Act; it remains for Ministers to make a positive case

for any such change.

Clause 12 does precisely what the Trade and Industry Committee said that we should not do: it refers back to the 1986 Act. Frankly, that will not do. It is an abuse of the House and an affront to the Committee's recommendations. Another of its specific recommendations was:

> It would be useful if the explanatory notes could confirm that no retrospective effect is intended . . .

The Bill does precisely the opposite. Neither the clause nor the retrospective effect should be allowed to survive.

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) makes a powerful point that I wish to build on. When the Select Committee made the recommendation to which he referred, the Government responded in paragraph 20 of the fourth special report of the Trade and Industry Committee, issued on 8 February. They said that the Committee's comments had been noted, and that it would be made clear that the provisions would not have retrospective effect. Therefore the Government have already committed themselves to ensuring that the provision does not have retrospective effect, yet unless the amendment is accepted, clause 12 will have retrospective effect.

In a short debate on my amendment (a) in Standing Committee, I found it hard to follow the Minister's argument as to why the provision would not be retrospective. Having looked at his argument again, I am convinced that the Bill is retrospective, and that if the Government stick to it they will be contradicting their undertaking to the Select Committee.

The Minister told the Standing Committee:

> Hon. Members will appreciate that we must strike a balance between the interests of creditors who have not been paid by a deceased insolvent and a survivor who has become sole owner of what he or she formerly owned jointly with a deceased insolvent.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, Tuesday 7 November; c. 130.]

That would be fine if the Bill applies only to people who die after it attains Royal Assent. However, what happens to such a survivor who finds, after the Bill is enacted, that the provision is used to alter the position that he or she was in before the legislation was implemented?

Mr. Butterfill: I have an example in which my hon. Friend may be interested. In it, a woman who knows that her husband is terminally ill goes to a building society for a loan. It is granted on the basis that there is a joint tenancy and that, if the husband dies fairly quickly as is expected, she will own the whole property. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill would mean that the building society's security would be halved?

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend is right, and I do not doubt that many other examples of that effect could be devised. However, that is the problem of retrospective legislation, as the Trade and Industry Committee recognised. The Government undertook that the provision would not have retrospective effect, but the Bill as it stands would have just that effect. I hope that the Government will accept the amendment.

Mr. Burnett: Clause 12 is designed to deal with a well known mischief. It is manifestly unfair that a deceased insolvent's interest in joint property escapes the creditor's net, but it is also unfair to make the change retrospectively. Retrospective law is bad law and contrary to the House's traditions. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) gave the example of a woman whose only asset, after she is widowed, might be the property in which she lives and which she will inherit from her insolvent husband when he dies.

Another problem appears in clause 12(3), which states that

> the court must have regard to all the circumstances of the case, including the interests of the deceased's creditors and of the survivor.

However, the subsection continues:

> but, unless the circumstances are exceptional—

and we do not know what is meant by "exceptional; that will be for the courts to decide in due course—

> the court must assume that the interests of the deceased's creditors outweigh all other considerations.

That is pretty draconian and unfair.

In reply to a point I made in Committee about how long this liability was to last, the Minister referred me to the Limitation Act 1980—that is, six years. An order might be made or applied for under this measure in respect of events that occurred five years ago. That is a bit tough, and I hope that the Minister reconsiders. I support the amendment.

Dr. Howells: By way of clarification, the Select Committee did not consider this version of the clause. We have moved away from revesting a property in a trustee. I do not know whether the hon. Member for South-West

Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) has looked at what is, in effect, new clause 12, but as the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) has just pointed out, the court can only make a monetary order and it will apply only when a petition is presented after the new section comes into force.

I hope that the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) will look at subsection (3), which was referred to by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon. The court can do justice, having regard to all the interests concerned, which includes the interests of the former wife. I thought that the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West gave a good example. It is entirely reasonable to assume that there will be such cases.

Mr. Butterfill: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but that is not what subsection (3) actually says. It makes it clear that only in exceptional circumstances will anybody other than the creditors of the deceased be taken into account. I am by no means convinced that the circumstances that I have described—which I think are deserving, and would be accepted as such by any reasonable person—are what a court might consider, strictly speaking, as exceptional circumstances.

Dr. Howells: It is a statement of faith—obviously I have more faith in the courts than the hon. Gentleman in that respect. *[Interruption.]* I will be steady. I think that what I said in Committee still holds true: we need to strike a balance between the interests of creditors who have not been paid by a deceased insolvent and the survivor, who is the sole owner of what he or she formerly owned jointly with the deceased insolvent.

We are not convinced that the creditors of an insolvent should be in a worse position if the debtor has died than if he or she were living. We think that limiting the application of the new provision so that it will apply only in those cases where the petition for the insolvency administration order is presented after the new provision comes into force strikes the appropriate balance.

It must be remembered that prior to the Palmer case, it was understood that the survivor would automatically have been deprived of the deceased's interest and the creditors would have got the debtor's entire share. On that basis, no thought would have been given to the survivor's situation or interests.

Clause 12 certainly does not treat the survivor as harshly as that. Indeed, it provides for the court to have a discretion to make a monetary order against the survivor, which is very important. It provides that the order will concern only so much of the value lost to the estate as is needed to meet the debts and other liabilities to which his estate is subject. In addition, the court will make such an order only after it has weighed the interests of both the survivor and the deceased's creditors; and in the balancing exercise, the court must assume that the interests of the deceased's creditors will outweigh all other considerations, unless the circumstances are exceptional.

6 pm

Mr. Chope: Is the Minister telling us that the measure may not prove retrospective in practice because one may be able to get the indulgence of the court not to apply it retrospectively? Nevertheless, the legislation will apply retrospectively and will put in jeopardy women whose husbands have died and who have relied upon having absolute entitlement to the formerly joint estate.

Dr. Howells: It is a question of balance. The hon. Gentleman is right: a judgment has to be made. As I have tried to explain, the provision will apply only in those cases in which a petition has been presented after the measure comes into force. We think that that is right and I hope that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Page: On Second Reading in another place, the noble Lord McIntosh said that he understood

> the need to be satisfied there is no retrospective aspect involved.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 April 2000; Vol. 611, c. 1272.]

In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) said that he remained to be convinced that the Government's amendment would not have a retrospective effect. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) referred to the Select Committee report and touched on the matter yet again. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch referred the Minister to paragraph 20 of the Government's response to the Trade and Industry Committee, to the effect that the new provisions would not have a retrospective effect. My hon. Friend repeated that today.

Mr. Chope: It is important that the words be on the record. They are:

> It will be made clear that provisions will not have retrospective effect.

That is what the Government said.

Mr. Page: I am always grateful to my hon. Friend for taking my next line away from me, which he did a number of times in Committee. My opportunity will come, however, as the wheel turns.

Despite all those Government statements and despite what the Minister has said, there has been no move. In its present form, the Bill has a retrospective effect in relation to those debtors who die before

> the commencement of this section.

As I said, and it bears repeating, there will be widows who live in modest accommodation on a modest pension, who have ordered their affairs with regard to the law, and who, if the Bill is enacted in its present form, will find that their affairs are no longer valid.

Mr. Butterfill: Does my hon. Friend agree that the plight of such a widow is compounded by the fact that, under (b), the petition for the order can be presented within five years of the day her husband died? That means that she may have to wait five years to find out whether the provision will descend upon her. That is the most appalling uncertainty in which to place her.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend makes his point. It is a fact of life that elderly people worry more than young people about security. I know of several of my elderly constituents who are desperately worried about accommodation and living in a secure environment. The risk of that environment being upset is exceedingly worrying.

[Mr. Page]

The provision will put widows under pressure and at risk. The Minister says that he has faith in the courts and so do I—particularly if one has a lot of money. My faith in the courts is such that, as I read the section, it clearly directs the courts that unless there are exceptional circumstances they must assume that the interests of the deceased's creditors outweigh all other considerations.

The operative word is "exceptional". The Minister is therefore being disingenuous in his response. I do not believe that the effect that he described will be the effect in practice. The courts will, in practice, go for the extra money and those widows will be at risk, but—

Mr. Chope: I hope that my hon. Friend is not going to seek to withdraw the amendment. Surely, this is a constitutional outrage. Why should not this House deal with the matter rather than leaving it to the other place? Their Lordships were very concerned about any retrospective provisions. Will my hon. Friend join me to divide the House on this important issue?

Mr. Page: This is what friends are for. I have to tell my hon. Friend, having considered the Minister's answer, that I believe that although the thrust and tone of my amendment are right, the drafting is neither specific nor accurate enough to deal with the matter. The Minister has shown himself in his true colours by his answer. I will seek leave to withdraw the amendment, but I hope that it can be produced in another place and that the Government can find it in their heart to look at the matter once again. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Hon. Members: No.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 34, Noes 210.

Division No. 339] **[6.5 pm**

AYES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cotter, Brian
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Gray, James
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Major, Rt Hon John
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Pickles, Eric
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Syms, Robert
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Christopher Chope and Mr. David Heath.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill

Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 15

REPEALS AND AMENDMENTS

Dr. Howells: I beg to move amendment No. 51, in page 9, line 40, at end insert—

'(3) Section 356 of that Act (Authority's powers to participate in proceedings: company voluntary arrangements) is amended as follows—

(a) for subsection (1), there is substituted—

"(1) Where a voluntary arrangement has effect under Part I of the 1986 Act in respect of a company or insolvent partnership which is an authorised person, the Authority may apply to the court under section 6 or 7 of that Act.",

(b) for subsection (2), there is substituted—

"(2) Where a voluntary arrangement has been approved under Part II of the 1989 Order in respect of a company or insolvent partnership which is an authorised person, the Authority may apply to the court under Article 19 or 20 of that Order.",

(c) in subsection (3), for "either" there is substituted "any" '.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 52 and 53.

Dr. Howells: In Committee, the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) asked whether the Financial Services Authority should also be given the right to apply to a court under paragraph 39 of proposed new schedule A1 to the Insolvency Act 1986, and he subsequently wrote to me on that point. I have carefully considered what he said, and I have concluded that we should afford the authority that further right—the right to make applications to the court on the grounds that any of the company's creditors or any other person is dissatisfied with the actions of the supervisor, and for the authority to be heard if such an application is made by another.

However, we need to go a stage further. Such rights should also be afforded to the authority in respect of applications under section 7 of the 1986 Act and article 20 of the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Those involve a procedure relating to existing voluntary arrangements without a moratorium, both here and in Northern Ireland. Such rights were not included in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 when it was passing through Parliament. We have concluded that they should have been, especially as the authority is given such rights in that Act to make an application and to appear on an application by another, in relation to the actions of a supervisor and the individual voluntary arrangements procedures.

We have therefore tabled amendments Nos. 51, 52 and 53, to give the authority the right to make applications and be heard on applications under those three provisions. All three allow applications to be made where any of the company's creditors, or any other person, is dissatisfied by any act, omission or decision of the supervisor.

Mr. Page: I wish to express to the Minister my appreciation of the fact that he has listened to the arguments. We shall support him if amendments Nos. 51, 52 and 53 are pressed to a vote.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 17

EXTENT

Amendment made: No. 52, in page 10, line 8, after "except" insert "section 15(3),".—*[Dr. Howells.]*

Schedule 1

MORATORIUM WHERE DIRECTORS PROPOSE VOLUNTARY ARRANGEMENT

Dr. Howells: I beg to move amendment No. 5, in page 11, line 37, at end insert—

'"money market contract" and "money market charge" have the meanings given by the Financial Markets and Insolvency (Money Market) Regulations 1995 ("the 1995 regulations"),'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 6 to 9.

Amendment No. 1, in page 12, line 24, after "small", insert "or medium".

Amendment No. 2, in page 14, line 12, leave out "28" and insert "90".

Government amendments Nos. 10 to 12.

Dr. Howells: The Bill already contains provisions to prevent the moratorium prejudicing the existing modifications of insolvency law applicable to contracts undertaken in connection with certain key operations on the financial markets. The modifications to insolvency law are contained in part 7 of the Companies Act 1989 and the provisions in the Bill are to be found in paragraphs 2 and 23 of the proposed schedule A1 to the Insolvency Act 1986.

The purpose of the modification of insolvency law is to protect the integrity of the financial markets, to provide an appropriate framework to deal with the possibility that a market participant may default on his obligations, and to avoid systemic risk. However, a little more is needed.

[Dr. Howells]

The amendments are intended to ensure that the moratorium does not prejudice the existing modifications of insolvency law relating to "money market contracts", "money market charges" and "related contracts" as defined in the Financial Markets and Insolvency (Money Market) Regulations 1995, and "system-charges" as defined in the Financial Markets and Insolvency Regulations 1996.

The amendments are necessary to enable financial markets to continue to function in the event of the insolvency of one of the market participants. The Government do not believe that these exemptions will have a significant effect on the operation or effectiveness of the moratorium, because it is to be an option for smaller companies that would not normally participate in such markets.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 6, in page 11, line 40, at end insert—

'"related contract" has the meaning given by the 1995 regulations,'.

No. 7, in page 11, line 42, at end insert—

'"system-charge" has the meaning given by the Financial Markets and Insolvency Regulations 1996,'.

No. 8, in page 12, line 11, after "contract", insert—

', a money market contract or a related contract'.

No. 9, in page 12, line 12, after "charge", insert—

', a money market charge or a system-charge'.—*[Dr. Howells.]*

Mr. Chope: I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 13, leave out lines 6 and 7 and insert—

'(a) such information as is necessary for a nominee to be able to judge if there is a reasonable prospect of drawing up a workable voluntary arrangement which warrants being submitted to creditors,'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 16, in page 13, leave out lines 16 and 17 and insert—

'(a) there is a reasonable prospect of a workable voluntary arrangement being drawn up which warrants being submitted to creditors,'.

No. 34, in page 13, line 16, leave out "the proposed" and insert "a".

No. 17, in page 13, line 24, at end insert—

'but he shall take steps to assure himself independently of the validity of information submitted by directors in relation to sub-paragraph (2)(b).'.

No. 44, in page 13, line 35, at end insert—

'(iii) a statement from the directors of the company stating that the nominee is independent of the company's officers, the company, its subsidiaries and associated companies.'.

No. 35, in page 13, line 39, leave out "the proposed" and insert "a".

No. 36, in page 20, line 6, leave out "the proposed" and insert "a".

No. 37, in page 20, line 27, leave out "the proposed" and insert "a".

No. 38, in page 33, line 39, leave out "the proposed" and insert "a".

No. 39, in schedule 3, page 39, line 5, leave out "the" and insert "a".

No. 40, in page 39, line 5, leave out—

'which the debtor is proposing'.

No. 41, in page 40, line 2, leave out "the" and insert "a".

No. 42, in page 40, line 2, leave out—

'which the debtor is proposing'.

Mr. Chope: The amendments are motivated by the unanimous recommendations of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. They are designed to ensure that a moratorium works better in practice than we fear that it will work under the Bill as drafted.

Paragraph 19 of the report refers in detail to the concerns that were expressed to us by, among others, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. We reached the conclusion that a balance is required between the recognition that a moratorium may be needed urgently to give time for a nominee to sit down with directors and others to find out whether proposals can be put to a creditors meeting with a chance of acceptance, and a limitation on the possibility of making the protection of a moratorium available simply on demand. In that case, there would be no chance of other arrangements subsequently being accepted. Unfortunately, the Bill does not deal with that concern in the way that we hoped it would. Despite having talked about consultation, the Government have dismissed rather peremptorily the concerns that have been expressed.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales supports a moratorium as part of the existing procedure for company voluntary arrangements, but it does not believe that the Bill will achieve the right result. It says:

In order for the company to obtain the moratorium, the directors are expected to submit to the nominee the terms of the proposed voluntary arrangement and a statement of the company's affairs. The nominee is expected to provide the directors with a statement indicating whether or not, in his opinion, the proposed arrangement is reasonable and the company is likely to have sufficient funds available during the moratorium.

The institute—the experts—went on to say:

The implications of these requirements are that, before the moratorium begins, the directors will have to have obtained all the information they need to formulate a proposed arrangement and to prepare the statement of affairs. Similarly, the nominee is expected to have been able to form opinions before the moratorium begins. This seems contrary to the purpose of the moratorium which is to allow time for the directors to put together a voluntary arrangement. We consider that all that should be necessary to obtain a moratorium would be a requirement for the directors to submit to the court a petition giving the reason why a moratorium is necessary, the name of the nominee and a letter of acceptance of appointment from the nominee and a funding proposal for the 28 days of the moratorium.

If the Government had listened to the evidence that the Select Committee received, and taken note of the Committee's conclusions after it had heard that evidence, the Bill would be more likely to succeed in its avowed purpose. It would be much improved if the amendment were accepted.

Mr. Butterfill: I support everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) said. The evidence that we heard at the Select Committee hearings was very powerful. The Committee was

unanimous in its concern that a moratorium would require funding. A moratorium is not of itself necessarily a panacea—indeed, it could make the situation of creditors worse.

The fact that there is a 28-day delay while a funding proposal is produced is frightfully important. In a large number—if not the majority—of cases the rescue attempt will probably not succeed. That is not to say that it may not be worth trying, but if the procedure is used frequently, and, in particular, without sufficient deliberation beforehand, some people may end up worse off than they would have been. That is why the Government should have taken more notice of the Select Committee's recommendations and why I support the amendment.

Dr. Howells: The obtaining of a moratorium will result in significant restrictions being imposed on the exercise of creditors' rights. For that reason, we consider it important that there should be reasonable grounds for confidence that a voluntary arrangement is likely to be approved and implemented at the end of a moratorium. The formulation of amendment No. 16 would only require the nominee to express a view on whether what is likely to be put to creditors would be workable. It does not ask him to say whether he thinks the directors' actual voluntary arrangement proposal, once provided, is likely to be approved and implemented.

The requirement is important because the moratorium is not intended to be a refuge for hopeless cases. A proposal could be workable but it might be evident that it would not be acceptable to creditors, perhaps because it would pay them less than they would get in a liquidation. Only companies that are eligible and whose rescue proposals have a reasonable chance of success should be able to obtain a moratorium. That is why we believe that a company should not be able to obtain a moratorium unless the nominee considers that a voluntary arrangement proposal, as provided by the directors, stands a reasonable chance of being approved and implemented.

Given the key role of the nominee in that regard, it would not be acceptable to expect him to express such a view on anything less than a properly worked out proposal. Therefore, information indicating that it might be possible to put a proposal together once a moratorium has started will not be enough. We wish the nominee to be able to see exactly what the directors propose by way of a voluntary arrangement and then use that document as a basis for expressing his opinion on whether a successful rescue is likely to result.

If a company is to have the benefits afforded by a moratorium, there should be reasonable grounds for confidence that a voluntary arrangement is likely to be approved and implemented. There was disagreement in the Committee about whether the amendment that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) proposed to the paragraph would introduce a lower or higher hurdle, but I do not think that there is much doubt about whether the amendment would result in an easier text; it does not offer that assurance, and I therefore urge the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) to withdraw it.

Mr. Chope: We again have the Minister's views on record. At least he is being consistent by taking the same line that he took in response to the Select Committee report, which is more than can be said for his approach to an earlier amendment. Although the debate occasionally seemed like a dialogue of the deaf, in the atmosphere of benevolence that is developing, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

6.30 pm

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 18, in page 16, line 33, after "enforced", insert—

'against a liquidator representing interests including interests of creditors of the company at the time of the moratorium'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 19, in page 16, line 33, leave out "that" and insert "the".

No. 20, in page 16, line 33, after "time", insert "of its grant".

No. 31, in page 16, line 34, leave out "it" and insert—

'the consideration for which the security was granted'.

No. 32, in page 16, line 34, at end insert—

'or if, at any time, the security is approved by the committee established under paragraph 35(1) or, where there is no such committee, by the nominee.'.

Mr. Page: The amendments touch on matters that I raised in Committee, and to which I believe it is important that we return.

The parts of schedule 1 that provide for invalidating a security to be granted during a moratorium seem at first glance to be sensible enough. They would ensure that a company under the protection of a moratorium would not be able to grant security to one preferred creditor to the detriment of others. That is fair enough. However, there is the fundamental point that the company's other creditors need protection primarily in circumstances arising from the failure of the moratorium. If the moratorium succeeds, cheers all round. The loans will be safe and they will be repaid in due course.

In its present form, the schedule seems to protect companies under the aegis of a moratorium irrespective of the outcomes. A company that has experienced a moratorium and subsequently has grown will be under no obligation to meet its freely negotiated dues if the schedule is unaltered. I believe that the amendments address the issue. They will remove an anomalous and unnecessary advantage that may accrue to companies that successfully recover from a moratorium. There is no good reason for creating that extra protection for companies and I would be glad to hear what the Minister has to say, working on the assumption that I have interpreted this part of the Bill correctly.

Amendment No. 32 is closely related to amendment No. 18. It deals with the key issue of the likelihood of banks or other institutions lending to small companies during the moratorium. It is clear from the present drafting of the relevant paragraph in the schedule that the Department has missed the point. Under these provisions, the banks will be less likely to advance funds available during the moratorium rather than more likely. It will be on the banks and other lending institutions that the duty of determining whether there are reasonable grounds for making loans will fall.

[Mr. Page]

Hon. Members on both sides of the House who have experience of running small firms will know how lengthy and time-consuming such inquiries can be. Lenders will not have access to the papers and statements that are available to the nominee, and may not necessarily be able to rely on information offered by the directors. Quite often it is the breakdown in communication between the directors and the banks that is partially responsible for the situation arising in the first place. In these circumstances it is understandable that banks will be highly cautious about lending.

It is one of the potential ironies of the Bill that it may reduce the flow of money to small companies when they are most likely to need it. A little experience in business suggests that that could well happen. The amendment will go some way to remove a future difficulty. I hope that the Minister finds it in his heart to accept it.

Dr. Howells: The purpose of amendment No. 18 is not clear. It appears to suggest that security granted by a company during a moratorium could be enforced only against a liquidator. That seems not to make sense. Security granted by a company over its assets is enforced by the holder of the security against those assets and not by a liquidator. Furthermore, a liquidator would not have been in office at the time that the security in question was given because a moratorium was in force. So we are left asking ourselves what security could be enforced and against whom if the amendment succeeded. The proposal could also be read as suggesting that security is generally enforceable other than against a liquidator. If that was what was intended, the amendment does not seem to achieve it.

It is also not clear what interests in addition to the interests of creditors it is intended a liquidator should represent. We consider that paragraph 14 should not be amended in that way.

Amendments Nos. 19 and 20 are simply unnecessary. The use of the phrase "at that time" in paragraph 14 is a clear reference to the time at which security is given by a company during a moratorium. Both amendments would only add unnecessary words.

Amendment No. 13 adds nothing. The granting of a security and the security itself are inextricably linked. A security could be of benefit to the company only if the company got something in return for granting it—for example, the funds necessary to enable it to finance a viable business. That security will either be of benefit to the company, or it will not. If it were not, we would want the security to be enforceable. Therefore, no more is needed to achieve the intended effect and I hope that the amendment will be withdrawn.

Mr. Page: In view of the Minister's response, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendments made: No. 10, in page 19, line 33, at end insert—

'a money market contract or a related contract,'.

No. 11, in page 19, line 35, after "charge", insert—

', a money market charge or a system-charge'.

No. 12, in page 19, line 46, after first "charge", insert—

', a money market charge, a system-charge'.

No. 13, in page 22, line 8, leave out from "period" to "and" in line 9 and insert—

'for the time being specified in paragraph 8(3))'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 30, in page 28, line 33, leave out—

'to the value of £500 or more'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 21, in page 28, line 35, leave out—

'to the value of £500 or more'.

Mr. Page: One of the penalties of growing older—albeit not old—is that one's memory starts to play tricks with one. I have a persistent memory of the then Labour Opposition claiming that they would be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime—indeed, I seem to recall their making such statements in government.

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Mr. Page: Perhaps my hon. Friend is about to tell me that my memory is not playing tricks and mention the reduction in police numbers.

Mr. Butterfill: I am tempted to do so, but I think that I should be likely to incur your wrath, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were I to pursue that route. However, I can confirm that my recollection of the Government's words is precisely the same as that of my hon. Friend.

Mr. Page: I thank my hon. Friend for assuring me that I am right, which enables me to proceed with greater confidence—I would have hated to start on dodgy or shaky ground.

In Committee, I definitely remember the Minister defending the £500 minimum in respect of the offence of removing any part of a company's property. He appealed to the provisions of insolvency law dating back as far as the Bankruptcy Act 1914.

Dr. Howells: I have no desire to delay the House, but I am delighted to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that we have tracked back as far as the Bankruptcy Act 1824, which also imposed a £10 threshold.

Mr. Page: I am glad to learn that the Minister has been ferreting around, but I, too, have done a little ferreting and it may be that I shall be able to trump him by going back a few more years.

The Minister has now told us that the £10 threshold was in place almost 100 years before the Act to which he referred in Committee was passed. However, my historical research has revealed that, in 1811, Members of Parliament debated at some length whether stealing goods from a house to a value of more than 40 shillings should be a capital offence, whereas the threshold in respect of stealing from a shop was only 5 shillings. Evidently, they were worried about their servants stealing from them—the Minister will understand that problem. I wonder what punishment those Members of Parliament would have

thought appropriate had they heard today's news that a wedding gift worth £1 million has gone walkabout from a house in London.

However, life moved on and in 1860, stealing goods worth £10 or more led to hard labour or transportation. The judiciary was obviously having difficulty in obtaining convictions leading to capital punishment for the theft of sums larger than 40 shillings, so transportation was introduced. As the crime was stealing goods worth £10 or more, that meant that we were sending only the bigger and better operators over to Australia. That must be the genetic reason why the Australians regularly thrash us at all forms of sport.

I make no apology for returning to the subject. Although the Minister's historical examples were extremely interesting, they were not matched by the soundness of his arguments. He told us that during a moratorium, directors were unlikely to spirit away the various assets. Human nature being what it is, if a director thinks that the moratorium will fail, the temptation to spirit away assets during that period of grace will in certain cases become irresistible.

As I understand it, it is the nominee's duty to monitor the company's affairs so that he or she may come to an opinion whether a proposed voluntary arrangement has a reasonable prospect of being approved and implemented. Furthermore, the nominee is required to be satisfied that the company will have sufficient funds to carry on its business during a moratorium. In reaching those conclusions, the nominee must rely on the information supplied by the directors.

I am therefore curious to learn where in the Bill the nominee is granted powers to make his or her own inquiries and to watch over the physical assets of the company worth £500 or more. The Minister surely does not believe that the directors or anyone intending to remove property from the company's premises will be daft enough to inform the nominee of the plans.

A moratorium may provide more opportunities for a director or employees to remove property than would occur when an administrative receiver or provisional liquidators were appointed. It would be so easy to get the proverbial white van up to the door, open it and steal items worth up to £499.99. It is still not clear from the Bill whether a blind eye will be turned to the removal of items with a cumulative value of £499.99, or whether that represents a single item. I naturally condemn such offences.

In certain respects the Government have been generous and given a 100 per cent. write-off. A piece of electrical equipment could appear on the books at zero, having been written off during the year. If such an item were stolen from the company, would that be stealing, or would it be taking away nothing? I do not condone such activities, but they are a fact of life.

We discussed the matter in Committee. I raise it again in the hope that since then the Minister will have read his various manifesto commitments and will present a more powerful argument, supporting our police force and the law and order of this land. I look forward to his response.

There is another gap in the Bill which we did not discuss in Committee. I refer to the concealing of part of a company's property worth less than £500. We hope that the Minister will tell us what he intends to do to block that loophole. If it is not blocked, it will be exploited by unscrupulous people during a moratorium.

Under the Bill's provisions, holders of floating charges cannot appoint administrative receivers. I remind the Minister that administrative receivers have powers to prevent directors from concealing any part of a company's property. In the Bill directors are given the open door. Small items will undoubtedly go missing. We do not believe in turning a blind eye to crimes. We do not believe in supporting moves that will enable the white van to come to the door and pick up goods that will later be sold as having fallen off the back of a lorry.

The Government have an opportunity today to eschew the spin and put some substance behind their law and order policies.

6.45 pm

Dr. Howells: This issue was raised in relation to previous amendments, which were debated extensively in Committee and another place. We are puzzled by the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the £500 limit referred to in paragraphs 41(4)(a) and (b) of proposed new schedule A1 to the Insolvency Act 1986. I put it to him that such provisions have worked perfectly satisfactorily for at least the 176 years that I managed to track them back, and I do not understand why he should find the £500 limit unacceptable.

I remind hon. Members that similar offences exist elsewhere in the 1986 Act, which was enacted by the previous Government. Both measures involve a £500 minimum limit and have worked perfectly satisfactorily. Those provisions were introduced by a Conservative Government, and I find the hon. Gentleman's objections odd.

Mr. Burnett: For the benefit of those hon. Members who were not in Committee, does the Minister agree that it might be wise to remind the House that there is such a thing as the Theft Act 1968, and that the theft of any item, of any value, is an offence and is punishable as such?

Dr. Howells: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman gives us a valuable lesson in the law—and for free, despite the fact that he is a lawyer. We should be grateful for that.

The amendments do not address the issue across the piece. There are similar offences in sections 206 and 354 of the 1986 Act, but the amendments would not apply to them. The issue has been debated extensively in Committee and in another place and I give the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) the undertaking that we shall consider it in the context of the two reviews that my Department is conducting. I hope that that will satisfy him and that he will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Page: In view of the fact that the Minister will consider the matter in the context of the reviews, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment made: No. 53, in page 30, line 21, at end insert—

'( ) Where paragraph 39(3) (implementation of voluntary arrangement) applies, the persons who may apply to the court include the Authority.

( ) If a person other than the Authority applies to the court under that paragraph, the Authority is entitled to be heard on the application.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

6.47 pm

Dr. Howells: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill contains all the provisions necessary to deliver what we intend. In particular, it will ensure that the rescue of a small company will not be lost for the want of a short breathing space within which a rescue plan could be agreed. When there is agreement between the Secretary of State and an unfit director, disqualification can be achieved without the need to involve the courts.

The Bill contains other important provisions, but I shall not detain the House by repeating them. Those provisions were considered by a range of interested parties before the Bill was introduced in Parliament. The Trade and Industry Committee also considered them closely and they were scrutinised carefully in debate in the other place and in this House. As a consequence, the Bill has been amended as it has progressed through Parliament. It is better and more effective legislation because of that scrutiny and amendment.

I thank all Members on both sides of the House who participated in our good-humoured and interesting debates on the detail of a very technical Bill.

6.48 pm

Mr. Burnett: I, too, shall not detain the House for long. The Bill's main thrust is to introduce a moratorium, which is welcome, although the approach is pretty half-hearted. If creditors disagree with members, the courts will decide. Obviously, the strength remains with creditors, and the moratorium could be said to be too short. Nevertheless, we agreed in Committee that our business culture is particularly creditor friendly. The Bill represents a small step in the other direction and, as such, is welcome.

6.49 pm

Mr. Chope: I should like to make only a few brief remarks—particularly on the retrospective element remaining in the Bill after the Minister's insistence on rejecting amendments moved in Committee and, today, by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page). I hope that we will see the Bill again in this Session, after amendments are passed in the other place to remove that retrospective element. That element vitiates what is otherwise useful legislation, piecemeal though it is.

6.50 pm

Mr. Page: We broadly welcome the Bill, which obviously aims to widen the range of rescue provisions available to small business. However, we have made it perfectly clear that, as anyone listening to today's debate will know, we have considerable reservations about some of the Bill's detail—including the significant matter, with which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has just dealt, of retrospectivity.

It is not clear from our debates whether Department of Trade and Industry Ministers really understand how small businesses work and the effects that the Bill may have on the practices of those who lend to small businesses.

As we said, this is only half a Bill. We wish that there had been another half, to create a full picture and to endorse some of the amendments moved by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). Although we are worried about how some of the provisions may work, we will support any action to try to help small business and companies in need of rescue. As such, we support the Bill's passage.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed with amendments.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No.118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the Social Security Amendment (Capital Limits and Earnings Disregards) Regulations 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2545) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.

RAILWAYS (SAFETY CASE) REGULATIONS

That the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2688) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

CSA Deductions (Ministry of Defence)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

6.51 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to initiate this short but important debate, which arises from a case that I took up on behalf of one of my constituents. I have subsequently realised that the issue at stake affects many families who have a former partner employed in the United Kingdom armed forces. Today, before I entered the Chamber, I conducted a straw poll at my table in the Tea Room, and two other hon. Members—my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Liz Blackman) and for Gedling (Mr. Coaker)—confirmed that they had had similar problems in their constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces is acquainted with the case that I shall use to illustrate the problems created by current armed forces minimum pay regulations, and I appreciate his co-operation in not mentioning the name of my constituent—to whom I shall refer as Mrs. X—to protect the identity of the children. I have made a similar request to the media.

My constituent was married for more than a decade to a serving Army non-commissioned officer, a staff sergeant. Like any Army wife, she followed her husband's career, which included postings in Europe and the far east. Unfortunately, as is the case with many married service personnel, their relationship broke down: they separated and, in December 1996, Mrs. X gained full custody of their two children.

In August 1997, the Child Support Agency imposed an interim maintenance assessment, but no payment was received. Eventually, in December 1997, a deduction of earnings order was imposed for £530 per month. The first payment was received in February 1998. After a total of four payments had been received, the CSA informed Mrs. X that the Army's minimum pay regulations prevented the withholding of more than 25 per cent. of the father's pay. An arrangement whereby Her Majesty's armed forces can use one regulation to undermine a court order imposed under other legislation must make them unique among employers nationwide. Every month that that arrangement applied, the arrears grew. That means that minimum pay regulations established in 1955 to guarantee a minimum income to a service person's family now have the perverse effect of limiting financial support for dependants.

Parliament has established in law a father's responsibility to contribute to the financial maintenance of his children, and created the Child Support Agency to uphold those rights. Her Majesty's armed forces, however, can choose to ignore the best efforts of the CSA and the courts, all in the name of family welfare. In Mrs. X's case, the result has been that, from 1998 until now, her child support payments have been paid at a lower rate than the CSA and the courts have requested. By September 2000, the arrears had reached £7,000.

In all such cases, the Ministry of Defence and the relevant commanding officers have consistently maintained that, although they are bound by the 25 per cent. ceiling on deductions, they will encourage service men to honour their CSA payments. Well, honour has not got my constituent very far. Indeed, deductions of earnings orders would not be imposed at all if honour had anything to do with the case. Deductions of earnings orders involve compulsion, because the payments are not volunteered. That compulsion is being undermined by the minimum pay regulations.

My constituent can confirm that not one voluntary additional payment has been made since the deductions of earnings order was introduced. I wonder how the Army encourages service personnel to honour such obligations. Are personnel encouraged by a stiff talking to, or by a quiet word, to open their cheque books for their children? Whatever form that encouragement takes, I can tell my hon. Friend that it has not produced tuppence extra for my constituent, and every month the millstone of underpayment grows.

What will the agency do if the deductions of earnings order fails Mrs. X and her children and other former Army, Navy and Air Force families? Baroness Hollis, the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, informed me that a liability order or bailiff's action is the next recourse even in the case of service personnel, except that no bailiff will be allowed on to an Army base to seize the goods owned. "Join the Army and escape the CSA" is hardly a great advert for the armed forces. Morally repugnant it may be, but the financial incentive is clear.

I cannot understand why the maximum deduction in the Army is 25 per cent. I understand that that can now also be extended to 50 per cent. in certain circumstances—I shall say more about that later—yet in the Royal Navy, for example, the figures are 43 per cent. and 75 per cent. respectively. Why the difference? Are rates of pay so different between the forces that the Navy needs to allow a greater slice of pay to be deducted?—I think not; it is another historical anomaly.

I have been informed that the minimum deduction can be 50 per cent. in certain circumstances. To determine whether it is 25 per cent. or 50 per cent., we have to look at the Army's marital status categories, of which there are five. For example, marital status 4 includes service men who are divorced or separated without care of children but who are providing support under a court order, including CSA awards. Under that category, 50 per cent. can be applied, but under category 1, which includes those who are married with children, only 25 per cent. can be applied. My constituent's former husband appears in both categories, as he has since remarried and has another child.

In some respects, if category 4—50 per cent.—were applied, my constituent's problem would appear to be resolved, but the Army has chosen not to apply that category. It seems odd that CSA payments from a previous relationship do not take precedence over, or have any parity with, a second marriage and subsequent dependants. That favourable interpretation has cost my constituent dear.

I am also advised that the Department of Social Security and the CSA were under the impression that only up to 25 per cent. could be removed. There needs to be discussion between the Ministry of Defence and the DSS to ensure that everyone is clear about which payments can be applied and which amounts can be deducted.

What are the Government going to do about all this? In March 1999, the Minister for the Armed Forces informed me that Parliament would review armed forces legislation

[Caroline Flint]

by 2001; that there would be full consultation with other Departments; and that the need to amend the legislation would be considered in the light of any concerns expressed. In April this year, the Minister confirmed that those matters were under review. In July 1999, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security stated that he was

> keen to amend the position where there are limitations on the amounts that can be withheld from service personnel's pay.

He promised to keep me informed of progress. In October this year, a letter reaffirmed the Department's desire to amend the position and stated that the matter was still under consideration.

Are the minimum pay regulations included in the review of forces legislation? What stage has that review reached? What is the outcome of discussions with the DSS, among others, to bring the child support legislation and Army, RAF and Navy regulations into line? Does my hon. Friend agree that minimum pay regulations were never contrived to thwart obligations for child support payments? Indeed, they make specific reference to them, but they are in need of an overhaul.

This is a modernising Government. I have welcomed their willingness to take a new path and their ability to act across Whitehall Departments to ensure joined-up thinking. I welcome their family policies, which represent a radical improvement on the past. However, the Ministry of Defence has something to prove in that respect. I have no doubt that, with application, the Ministry can honour the moral obligation to parents with custody who are the former partners of service personnel. Given the rates of family breakdown in the armed forces, it is too great a problem to be overlooked. It is also too great a problem to hide behind red tape—or, even worse, behind Army red tape, exempt as it is from the full legal redress of the courts, which can be applied to almost any other employer in the land.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Caroline Flint: For Mrs. X—a hard-working constituent of mine trying to raise a family and move on—there is a £7,000 millstone around her neck that cannot be collected while the Army protects the salaries of those with such liabilities to their offspring.

The Ministry of Defence says that only 1 per cent. of child support payments are not made in full, and I welcome that. It is not too great a hope that the Department will not provide the camouflage for the 1 per cent. who wish to avoid being fully accountable for their children's welfare. For Mrs. X—someone with no place to hide and nowhere else to turn—the burden of underpayment grows by more than £77 for every month that the Army underpays her ex-husband's deduction of earnings order.

I have raised the case of Mrs. X in detail with my hon. Friend's ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State. In his last letter to me, the Under-Secretary suggested that owing to changes in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, the problem will go away. But that is the case for new cases coming on-stream and it may be the case for when those concerned eventually get round to reviewing existing cases. But that does not help my constituent—and many other people around the country—who find themselves within the present procedures.

I am concerned that the marital status categories have been used to disadvantage the children of my constituent, and that Ministers are being advised on the basis of inaccurate and sometimes inappropriate comments about my constituent and the lead-up to the family breakdown.

More pertinently, I do not believe that it is the role of the Ministry, the Army or Members of Parliament to be moral arbiters or judge and jury in distressing cases of family breakdown. This is not just about Mrs. X's children; in fact, she has been determined to pursue the matter because it is her desire to protect other former Army wives and their children.

It is our moral obligation to see that the CSA's and the courts' wishes are upheld on behalf of the welfare of children. Our obligations to service personnel and their dependants do not exist in some separate moral universe: they are part of the same equation. If, to accord with the judgments of the CSA and the courts on behalf of children, out-of-date minimum pay regulations have to be revised in the name of modern sensible family policy, so be it. This is a matter that I intend to raise with the Select Committee on Defence as part of its review of personnel procedures in the services.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): The Select Committee has been examining the issue of a review of personnel matters. We have had senior officers before us who take family matters seriously. Can there possibly be a difference between the children of serving officers in our armed forces and children of officers who are now not together with their partners? Surely there should be no distinction.

Caroline Flint: I agree and I would not like to suggest that the Ministry and the various branches of the services do not take family matters seriously. However, this is one of the areas where they are found wanting and an area they must address. In the present day, people can have families in which they live with their children, but they also have responsibilities to the families and children with whom they are not living. As a responsible employer, the Ministry of Defence should attend to that and make sure that its systems do not discriminate against those children.

Before I arrived in the Chamber tonight, I was able to have a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) who raised his concern about the Territorial Army and its approach to CSA payments and the families of existing personnel. I will be encouraging many of my colleagues who have had similar problems to report to the Select Committee so that we can collate a larger and more diverse example of the practices which, unfortunately, are going on. I urge my hon. Friend not to close the door on reform in the vital area of pay and family responsibility and not to wait for changes in the child support legislation. I urge him to do something about the families who are affected by the present legislation and the regulations that are currently used in the services.

The moving ceremonies across the nation last weekend were a reminder that, as a nation, we owe a debt of honour that is in keeping with the ideals of those who gave their

lives. We also owe a debt of honour to the injured, former prisoners of war, widows of the fallen, service personnel and their families and the children of service personnel. Let the innocents not be the casualties of those out-of-date rules.

7.5 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I should like to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing a debate on this important issue. I know that she takes a great interest in the service families in her constituency and, as she said in her excellent speech, the Government came to office committed both to putting people at the centre of defence policy and planning and to family policies.

We have delivered on that commitment. The strategic defence review set in hand a wide variety of initiatives aimed at improving the lot of the men and women in our armed forces across the full spectrum of their needs and those of their families. Among those was the service families taskforce, which was set up two years ago. As I reported to the Chamber on 2 November, the taskforce has been doing excellent work in resolving issues of concern to families. It has taken a real lead in bringing the expertise of different Departments to bear on cracking problems that had been written off as insoluble.

That does not mean that we are complacent. The taskforce is continuing to work hard to resolve outstanding issues and to ensure that all the families of service personnel are treated fairly. I am sure that the House will agree that we ask a great deal of our service personnel—ultimately we may require them to sacrifice their lives—and they do not let us down. It is only right, therefore, that we take good care of them and their families.

In that context, my hon. Friend raised an important and sensitive issue. As the case that she outlined showed, the break-up of a marriage is always difficult and can be exacerbated when children are involved. It is essential that correct financial provision be made for the children, which is why the Child Support Agency can issue deduction of earnings orders to employers regarding ongoing maintenance and arrears payments. Those orders stipulate the rate of deduction that may be taken from the earnings of a non-resident parent. They also set a protected earning rate, which is the amount that the non-resident parent must be left with after the deduction has been made, to provide the non-resident parent with key living expenses. In cases in which the employer is unable to make the maintenance deduction in full because it would take the earnings below the protected earnings rate, the outstanding balance is rolled forward to the next week or month.

Child support legislation, however, does not provide for deduction of earnings orders to be imposed on personnel in the armed forces. Instead, there is a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Defence and the Child Support Agency to ask the Ministry of Defence to make deductions for maintenance. I am pleased that, overall, there is a very good working relationship between the Ministry of Defence and the Child Support Agency, which ensures that deductions from the pay of service personnel are made quickly and accurately—indeed, I understand, far more so than with almost all other employers. The Ministry of Defence has an exemplary record in meeting its obligations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley mentioned that the full amount is not deducted in only 1 per cent. of cases. That is my understanding as well: in over 99 per cent. of cases, the full amount awarded is deducted. That compares favourably with those outside the armed forces, where 22 per cent. are paying only a part of their assessment and 29 per cent. pay nothing at all. The Government are doing something about that, which I shall come on to later.

The very few members of the armed forces who are not meeting the full amount payable—as I said, we believe that they are fewer than 1 per cent. of all cases—are doing so as a result of the minimum rates of pay set by Ministry of Defence legislation, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out. Minimum rates of pay were introduced around 50 years ago to ensure that service families were properly looked after. In fact, the Royal Navy regulations date from 1947, while the those for the Army and the Royal Air Force were brought into force in 1955. Those minimum rates of pay were introduced as a result of the experience of the second world war.

During the war, service personnel were encouraged to make an allotment of a fixed weekly sum to their families. Not all did, with obvious consequences. For those who did receive an allotment, the sum was not guaranteed because deductions from the pay of service personnel could mean that there was insufficient to cover the allotment—and this caused substantial hardship. To prevent those problems from recurring, new regulations were introduced. For example, two separate provisions were added to the Army Act 1955. One established a minimum rate of pay and the second gave the service authorities powers to make immediate deductions from the remaining pay for the maintenance of the spouse and children.

The provisions were designed to protect the whole family and continue to do so today. The amount of separation experienced by service personnel means that day-to-day financial planning within service families remains very difficult compared with that within the civil community. Civilians have recourse to the courts if they are being overburdened with deductions from pay, so that the amounts that they pay can be varied to take account of their circumstances. Service personnel, particularly if they are deployed on operations, cannot easily access the courts. In addition, the application of the Discipline Acts means that service personnel may face fines for a range of military offences that do not apply to civilians.

The powers that I have outlined have been made available to the service authorities so that the families of service personnel are properly supported. For example, deductions can be made to ensure that service personnel meet their responsibility to their families. These are often used when relationships break down to ensure that service families are properly cared for prior to the CSA making an assessment. They are the key tools which enable us to respond to CSA assessments, but they are also of utility in other circumstances. For example, they were used recently to make an immediate payment to the wife of a soldier who suffered a massive stroke before he had had time to set up any method whereby she could access his bank account.

As my hon. Friend said, the minimum rates of pay calculations differ slightly between the services, but in all three the principle applied is to take account of the

[Mr. John Spellar]

circumstances of the individual. For instance, it is only right that any children from a second relationship should have some protection.

Caroline Flint: The CSA also takes into account any subsequent families and their children, so why did not the Ministry of Defence find a balance between the marital status 1 category and the marital status 4 category, which would have met the needs of both families concerned?

Mr. Spellar: I understand that my hon. Friend has been in correspondence with my ministerial colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Defence on the particular details of the case in question and the circumstances surrounding it. I am outlining the general principles under which we operate, including the fact that we have responsibilities not only to the children of the first relationship, but also to the children of the second relationship.

Caroline Flint: I must press my hon. Friend on this point. When the 25 per cent. rule was applied, my understanding was that the service man in question had not remarried and did not have a child. That was when the first order was imposed. I gather that at the time the Army had the discretion to apply category 4, which would increase the deductions to 50 per cent. So there is a real issue about the judgments being made in deciding which marital status category to apply.

Mr. Spellar: I shall certainly draw my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State.

The Army regulations allow for up to 50 per cent. deductions from pay where there are no other children or dependants. However, in circumstances where the soldier is legally married and living with his or her spouse, or where the soldier is widowed, divorced or separated and has care of the children, or the soldier does not have care of the children but is providing voluntary financial support, there is a limit of 25 per cent. deduction on pay. It is only in very rare cases that this limit is not sufficient to cover CSA maintenance awards. The statistics that I outlined earlier bear that out.

The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 will introduce a more efficient, customer-focused child support system built around a much simpler method of assessment. The new system will calculate maintenance based on a percentage of income after taking into account an allowance for children in a second family, and will then impose flat-rate deductions on the income that remains.

When the new system is in force, it will require there to be three or more children and the absent parent to be in arrears before there is any difference between the maximum that the CSA might impose and the maximum that the armed forces could deduct from earnings. That shortfall could be up to 5 per cent. in the worst case. It is very important to emphasise that, even if arrears occur, minimum pay regulations do not absolve the parent from meeting the CSA assessment. Accordingly, the debt remains and can be recovered subsequently and by other means.

Caroline Flint: I have highlighted an individual case, but the principle and the policy would apply regardless of who was affected. When there was recourse to the courts for a liability order, and two such orders were instigated, it led to bailiffs being sent to the barracks to retrieve goods to the amount that was owing, but they were refused access to the base. Even with a liability order, the courts do not seem to be able to pursue these matters with the individual in question. In an odd sort of way, the way in which the system is organised seems to be aiding and abetting an individual to default on payments.

Mr. Spellar: I reiterate that the debt, even then, is still not liquidated and can be recovered subsequently. Indeed, it can continue after the immediate obligation is ended. The courts have various means of trying to secure payment, of which bailiffs are but one.

We expect the number of cases in the armed forces in which the full amount imposed by the CSA cannot be met in full to be extremely small, but we realise that, in such cases, an extra strain could be added to what may already be a very stressful situation. However, as my hon. Friend knows, our armed forces give up a lot of the comforts and privileges often taken for granted in civilian life, in the service of their country, and it is only right that they and their families should be properly looked after. I assure my hon. Friend that the Ministry of Defence will continue to liaise closely with the CSA to ensure that maintenance cases involving members of the armed forces are dealt with quickly and sensitively.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 17 November 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Motion made and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. McNulty.*]

Embryology

9.33 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I am pleased to open today's debate on stem cell research and the human fertilisation and embryology regulations. These are important issues, and the debate will be extremely interesting.

The Government announced last August that they intended to introduce regulations to extend the purposes for which human embryos may be used in research in response to the report by the chief medical officer—the Donaldson report—entitled "Stem Cell Research: Medical Progress with Responsibility". I shall say more about that report later.

The regulations will be placed before both Houses and decided on a free vote. Although the timing of the regulations has yet to be decided by business managers, the Government felt that it was important for these complex and emotive issues to be fully aired in Parliament before any votes took place. That is why I am pleased that the House has a chance to debate the matter today. We regard this as the beginning, not the end, of the debate.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Given the emotive nature of the issue and the prejudices that many people rightly hold, would it not have been better to have avoided the use of regulations, which are unamendable, and to have introduced primary legislation, which is amendable?

Yvette Cooper: The issues were fully aired in the House during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, which provides for such regulations to be made. The possibility of allowing regulations to be made was fully debated at that time, so making regulations is in keeping with the conclusions that were reached in 1990.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I was a Member of the House at that time, but I cannot recall a debate on cloning. Will the Under-Secretary refer me to that provision in the Act and confirm that the vote will be taken on the Floor of the House, not in a Delegated Legislation Committee upstairs?

Yvette Cooper: I can confirm that there will be a debate on the Floor of the House and a free vote—the matter will not be decided in Committee. I shall later discuss cloning, therapeutic cloning and stem cell research.

Mrs. Winterton: I asked the hon. Lady a straight question. In her opening remarks, she asserted that the 1990 Act provided for cloning—the misuse of the word "therapeutic" is neither here nor there—and the letter circulated by the Department of Health also says that that was so. Where is that provision in the Act?

Yvette Cooper: No, I did not say that at all. I said that provision was made in the 1990 Act for regulations to be extended in such a way. The regulations do not make therapeutic cloning legal or illegal; nor do they refer to therapeutic cloning or the technique known as cell nuclear replacement. They do not differentiate between cell nuclear replacement and embryos created through in vitro fertilisation. I will cover those complex issues later. However, the 1990 Act clearly allowed for the regulations to go ahead in their current form.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): It is perfectly clear that if recommendation 1 of the Donaldson report were brought before the House through the regulations, and if the regulations were not within the 1990 Act, progress could not be made on that basis.

I strongly support the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), which was granted by the Under-Secretary, for a debate on the Floor of the House, not tucked away in a Committee. Will the Under-Secretary also confirm that Acts of Parliament would be required to implement many other recommendations in the report? I suspect that she will confirm that the real reason for using regulations is that the proposals would probably pass through the House more easily than if implementing recommendation 1 involved an Act of Parliament. That would involve a re-run of many of the issues that were properly discussed in the House during the passage of the 1990 Act.

Yvette Cooper: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's last point. We are using regulations because the 1990 Act gives us the power to do that. He rightly said that other issues raised in the Donaldson report could not be implemented through regulations. The principles behind those issues have never been discussed by the House and it would be right to do so in a debate involving primary legislation. However, that does not affect our decision to use regulations in this context. Clearly, a free vote in the House is necessary. If the House and the other place reject the proposal, the regulations will not be made. All hon. Members will have the chance, in today's debate and in that which will precede the vote on the regulations, to consider the issues and to decide the right thing to do. If Members do not want to proceed through regulations, they can vote to that effect.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): Will the Minister give way?

Yvette Cooper: I give way for the last time on the process issues because I want to get on to the substance of the debate.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The Minister will be aware that this matter was discussed recently in the European Parliament,

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

when many contrary statements were made about the state of law in the various member nations of the European Union. Will she take time to comment on that debate and the state of law within Europe?

Yvette Cooper: It is true that the matter has been aired in discussions throughout Europe and that different member states have different positions on all the issues. Many other member states are going through discussions around the issues, too. If the hon. Gentleman allows me, I will cover that matter in my closing speech. I have more information to give to the House, but I would like to make some progress on the nature of the regulations that will be before the House.

Like the 1990 Act, which the regulations will amend, the issue will be decided on a free vote. It is not a party political issue. There are Members from all parties with strong views on both sides of the issue. I hope that Members will have the chance to consider the complex questions before deciding how to vote.

Difficult scientific and moral questions are at stake. Some Members will be opposed to the regulations as a matter of strongly held principle. Those who oppose the 1990 Act will doubtless oppose the regulations, too. Those who oppose any form of research with embryos will oppose the regulations. Those who oppose the creation and, inevitably, the destruction of embryos through IVF treatment will also oppose the regulations.

I have considerable respect for those views and I shall listen with attention as they are raised and aired in debates in the House. However, I disagree with them. I recognise and respect the fact that many Members will feel, as a matter of conscience, that they need to vote against the regulations, but the moral arguments cut both ways and there are strong ethical arguments in favour of the regulations, given their potential to relieve the suffering of many thousands of families. Many hon. Members like me feel that, as a matter of conscience, we need to vote in favour of the regulations. For those who support the 1990 Act and IVF treatment, there is a strong case for supporting the regulations, too.

Before I return to the arguments surrounding the regulations, let me set out the current law and the changes that the regulations would introduce. Under the 1990 Act, the use of human embryos in research is permitted, but only under certain strict conditions. Embryos may be used in research for only one of five clear purposes: advances in the treatment of infertility; increasing knowledge about the causes of congenital diseases; increasing knowledge about the causes of miscarriage; developing more effective contraception techniques; or developing methods for detecting the presence of gene or chromosome abnormalities in embryos before implantation. The research is permitted only up to 14 days, or before the beginning of the first sign of neural development, and if the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is satisfied that the use of embryos is necessary for the purposes of the research; otherwise, the HFEA will not grant a licence for the research project.

In most cases, the alternative to research would be to let the embryos perish. Thousands of embryos created for IVF each year are not used in treatment. Perhaps they are not the right standard for treatment; perhaps they are surplus to the needs of the couple concerned. Ultimately, many of those embryos will need to be destroyed. Between 1991 and 1998, 763,000 embryos were created for IVF. A total of 48,000 were used in research and 237,600 were destroyed. The remainder were used in IVF treatment or stored for future use.

The proposed changes to the 1990 Act form the Government's response to the Donaldson report. The expert group that drew up the report was set up last year, following a report from the HFEA and the Human Genetics Advisory Commission, to examine the scientific, health and ethical issues surrounding stem cell research. The regulations that the Government will lay before the House will be to implement the report's main recommendations. The regulations will introduce a sixth category to the currently permitted purposes of embryo research—increasing understanding about human disease and disorders and their treatment.

It is important to be clear that the strict constraints of the 1990 Act will remain. The HFEA must still license every research proposal and it will remain illegal to use embryos in research after 14 days. The HFEA will also have to ensure that the use of embryos is necessary for the research and, therefore, that the research cannot be carried out in any other way.

The Donaldson report says that we have no reason to believe that that will lead to a large increase in the number of embryos used for research. A separate application must be made to the HFEA for each individual research project, but the aim is to produce stable collections of embryonic stem cells that can be used as a replaceable resource without having to use, or to create, embryos for each study. The Donaldson report set out a series of reasons as to why it believed that that was so valuable and such an important thing to do.

The new category of research would allow research into embryonic stem cells. Stem cells are early cells that have not yet differentiated into any particular sort of tissue. They have huge potential because, if scientists can understand how they work, it may be possible to re-programme adult cells, providing the potential to develop treatments and cures for all sorts of degenerative diseases.

The chief medical officer's report listed a range of new therapeutic possibilities for the repair of diseased and damaged tissue to which stem cell research could give rise. They include: replacing lost heart muscle cells; replacing bone cells lost through osteoporosis; replacing liver cells lost in cases of hepatitis; repairing nerve cells lost through Parkinson's disease and stroke; replacing insulin-producing cells lost through diabetes; and changing the outcome of spinal cord injury and multiple sclerosis.

It is important to recognise how many people's lives could be transformed by such a breakthrough. A total of 50,000 people in this country suffer spinal cord injuries. Most, when those injuries occur, are aged between 15 and 35. If the spinal cord that the bones protect is damaged, paralysis is likely. There is as yet no cure. A total of 120,000 people suffer from Parkinson's disease and could potentially be spared the debilitating and distressing effects of the disease, and the impact on 1 million family members and carers. A total of 1.4 million people with insulin-dependent diabetes could be spared the regular routine of injections and all the complications of that

illness. The prospect of an early death from childhood onset diabetes could be ended. Should the stem cell research lead ultimately to treatment for Alzheimer's, nursing homes throughout the country could be emptied.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Can the hon. Lady say whether patients who have either Parkinson's or Alzheimer's—to give two examples—and their relatives, have been consulted about the Government's proposals? It is my understanding that the societies have not consulted their members.

Yvette Cooper: We have received correspondence from many people throughout the country, including those suffering from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and from different societies involved. As the issues have been debated over the past few years by the HFEA when it produced its report and by the expert group that produced the Donaldson report, it has been open for all organisations to come forward with recommendations and proposals. The hon. Lady should put her questions to the Parkinson's Disease Society and to the Alzheimer's Disease Society. The question for the House is whether, recognising the impact on those who are suffering from those diseases, accepting the proposal is the right thing to do.

Many people who recognise the huge benefits that stem cell research could bring ask whether it could be done in another way, avoiding the use of embryonic stem cells. They argue that, surely, research on embryos should be avoided if the same research could be done on adult cells. I agree that the research should be done in other ways, where possible. In fact, that is enshrined in law under the 1990 Act. The HFEA needs to assess every research proposal presented to it before licensing it to ensure that the use of embryos is essential to the research.

We asked the Donaldson committee to examine that issue in considerable detail. It did so and concluded that, yes, stem cells can be obtained from a number of sources, but none of them have the potential of embryonic stem cells.

Stem cells are available from a number of sources, including umbilical cord blood, some foetal tissue, and some adult tissue. Stem cells from bone marrow, brain, skin and blood have been used in treatment for many years—for example, for leukaemia. The view of the chief medical officer's expert group was that the long-term promise of stem cells from adult tissue could equal or surpass that of embryonic stem cells. However, to understand how adult stem cells work and to reach the point where new treatments may be possible, many scientists believe that research into embryonic stem cells is vital.

Embryonic stem cells appear to have the potential to develop into a far wider range of tissues than adult-derived stem cells. That makes them far more valuable in research and in developing understanding about cellular development. So there is far greater potential to lead to breakthroughs in a far wider range of diseases, and those breakthroughs could be achieved much more quickly.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Lady began that argument with the assumption—she stated it clearly—that if the research could be done in any other way, it should be. Does not that very assumption imply an acceptance that there is something unsavoury or unnatural about such research?

Yvette Cooper: The 1990 Act endorsed the principle in the Warnock report that a measure of respect should be accorded to embryos and that research involving embryos should be subject to particular moral constraints and regulation. That is absolutely right. However, it did not state that any form of research using embryos was therefore wrong and immoral in principle. That was the conclusion in the 1990 Act, and it is the position that I take today.

The 1990 Act embodies the principle that, in every research proposal involving embryos, their use must be necessary to carry out the research, otherwise the HFEA will not grant a licence. That principle is embodied in the current legislation, but the Donaldson committee concluded that much of that extremely valuable research would not be possible without using embryonic stem cells. That is the crux of the matter, which hon. Members need to consider before deciding how to vote.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Is the hon. Lady saying that, had such research been possible, it would probably have been included in the limited number of uses made legal under the 1990 Act? Is she is saying that, once the research has been done, therapeutic treatments are likely to use not embryonic cells but those from adults?

Yvette Cooper: Clearly, not having been a Member in 1990, it is hard for me to comment on what the House might have thought then. However, the fact that, under the 1990 Act, the regulations could be extended to cover new, developing research shows that the House anticipated the possibility of new forms of research, for which there might be a strong case for extending the purposes of research. Had such research been available then, the House would certainly have considered it.

The hon. Gentleman's second question involves two elements. It would not be legal to use embryonic stem cells in treatment. The regulations purely allow the possibility of research using embryonic stem cells. Treatment is a separate matter that the House would need to consider separately. Many scientists and researchers believe that the purpose of carrying out embryonic stem cell research is to discover techniques and treatments that could be applied using adult stem cells, and that could be the holy grail that could allow huge breakthroughs in the treatment of degenerative diseases.

Many people have raised the extremely important issue of whether the regulations would give the go-ahead to cloning. It is absolutely untrue that the regulations would give the go-ahead to reproductive cloning. I want to make it clear that reproductive cloning is illegal. It will stay illegal. The HFEA will not license the implantation of a cloned embryo. We also believe, and have stated in the Donaldson report, that we want to embed the ban on reproductive cloning in primary legislation as well, because people across the country clearly find it unacceptable that we should contemplate reproductive cloning.

The creation of embryos by cell nuclear replacement—so-called therapeutic cloning—is a separate issue. The 1990 Act already allows research using embryos created

[Yvette Cooper]

by cell nuclear replacement, but only under the regulation of the HFEA. The cells must be used for research and not implantation. The research can be carried out only up to 14 days and must be for one of the same five purposes, such as infertility or contraception. The HFEA must be satisfied that such replacement is necessary to the research.

The 1990 Act does not distinguish between embryos created through cell nuclear replacement and those created through IVF—the same regulations and constraints apply to both. Likewise, no such distinction is drawn in the regulations. They therefore do not make therapeutic cloning legal, because—strictly speaking—it is already legal, but only under the strict conditions of the 1990 Act. The regulations would simply change the purposes of research for which cell nuclear replacement could be used.

The regulations covering the use of embryos in research in this country—whether through IVF or cell nuclear replacement—are extremely clear and strict, and rightly so. Many people are understandably concerned that science should not simply march on unfettered by ethical debate. I agree with that and believe very strongly that such advances in research should be permitted only within a very clear and enforceable ethical framework. It is right, too, that Parliament pauses to reflect deeply on the changes we are proposing. There should be moral reflection as well as scientific argument. There should also be proper regulation in such a sensitive sphere.

I want to make it clear that the 1990 Act and the regulations will keep in place exactly that kind of moral restraint and regulatory framework. The existing controls operated by the HFEA will apply. In addition, in the case of cell nuclear replacement, the HFEA would need to take particular steps to satisfy itself that there are no other means of meeting the objectives of a research proposal. Couples donating embryos would need to give specific consent to their embryos being used for stem cell research, not just general consent to their use in research.

Mr. Bottomley: Can the hon. Lady tell us when the regulations will be laid before the House? Is that likely to happen during this Parliament or this calendar year?

Yvette Cooper: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact answer on the timing of the regulations, as that is still to be discussed by business managers, but the intention is certainly to do so during the current Parliament. The House will be given that information as soon as possible.

Finally, I ask the House not to regard this issue as an argument between ethics and science, because it is not. The ethical arguments cut both ways. On one hand, some argue that it is always wrong to carry out research with embryos because it involves human life. I respect those views. On the other, there are ethical arguments about the potential to end the suffering of people who are already alive by the use of embryos that would otherwise be destroyed. There are ethical arguments in both directions. We should consider for a moment the very real suffering that it could be in our power to end by carrying out possible ground-breaking research.

Among the many letters that we have received on this subject is one from a woman with young children who is suffering from Parkinson's disease. She writes that those considering their votes on this issue ought to have a word with my little girl and ask her about the value of life. All she wants is that I am freed from this awful disease so that she has a mother able to care for her throughout her young life, rather than one who is increasingly disabled by a disease for which there may be a cure if this research is allowed to proceed.

None of us knows exactly what discoveries stem cell research could lead us to—scientists do not know, ethicists do not know, and parliamentarians do not know—but potentially revolutionary treatments lie within our grasp if this House and the other place give these regulations the go-ahead. All hon. Members must weigh up the complex arguments for themselves, but we must be aware of the power that we could be holding in our hands as we consider these issues.

10.1 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I, too, am glad that we have the opportunity to debate these issues ahead of the time when the House will be invited to vote on them. I am grateful to the Minister for confirming once again that when that time comes, there will be a free vote and that it will be for the House to decide whether it is appropriate to proceed on this matter by regulation.

The Minister said that she saw this debate as the beginning of a process, not the end. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) asked for an indication of the overall time scale of that process. I suspect that the Government may have had in mind a rather shorter time scale when they embarked on this process, and that they now realise that they have underestimated the strength of public opinion, which is being made known to me—and, I am sure, many other hon. Members—through our constituency postbags. The statement earlier this week by the Leader of the House that the time scale is likely to be longer rather than shorter perhaps reflects that fact.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend has raised an important point that has perhaps been hidden by the Government. I suspect that many people who want this measure to be voted through do not want that to happen until the public are aware of the issues that Parliament is discussing. Although people may have attended the Royal Society presentation and others that took place in the House, the general public do not know the extent and purpose of the extra research, and this debate will help to inform them. My hon. Friend is right in saying that having a little more time before the regulations are introduced will be important to people on both sides of the argument, and will help people who do not know what the argument is about.

Mr. Hammond: There are two sides and a middle to this debate. A large number of people who are listening carefully to the argument have not yet determined their view, and it is certainly in their interests that there be adequate opportunity for the issues to be aired and discussed before the House and the other place make a decision.

I am grateful to the Minister for attempting to set out the arguments on both sides of the debate, but she comes to the Dispatch Box with a clear position on behalf of the Government. They seek the House's approval for the regulations. As hon. Members have already said, this is not a party political issue. I come to the Dispatch Box aware

that views on the Conservative Benches—and, indeed, across the House—are divided. There are those whose abhorrence of the exploitation of human embryos as a tool for other ends—abhorrence of the creation of life followed by its destruction—leaves them with a clear view against the procedure that the regulations would allow, without any need to analyse the detailed issues. I characterise that as the moral position against the proposal.

At the other extreme of the argument, there are those whose instinct is clearly to support—

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): If I heard the hon. Gentleman rightly, he seemed to imply that what is being proposed is immoral. I hope that he will reconsider what he has said. I think that there are huge moral and ethical reasons why this proposal should be supported.

Mr. Hammond: As the hon. Lady will hear, I shall now put the other point of view. I did not say that it was immoral. I said that many Members take a clear moral view on this issue, because their abhorrence of the creation and then the destruction of life as a tool to other ends leads them to the view that the proposal is immoral. Those people will have a clear view of where they stand in this debate without needing to analyse the arguments.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I want to give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to clarify his remarks. I recognise that those people hold that view on the basis of their moral principles, but that is a moral argument against the regulations. Many of us are morally committed to the principles behind the regulations. There are moral and ethical arguments on both sides.

Mr. Hammond: I accept that, and I hope that the tone of my remarks will show that I acknowledge that there are two sides to the debate. I was about to say that there are those whose instinct is to support the demand that science must not be impeded in its search to improve the human condition, and there are other people who are torn between the desire to treat the dreadful degenerative diseases that blight the lives of one in 10 of the population at some time during their lives, and their alarm at the apparent amorality of the exploitation of the human embryo. They may also be alarmed at the danger of embarking on a journey the destination of which is unclear to many of us at this point.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Let us try to lay this point to rest. I am sure my hon. Friend does not intend to imply that those who are against the proposals have a moral position, whereas those who are broadly in favour of them have an instinctive position, which is what he seems to be saying. Will he put it on the record that he accepts that the moral dimension to this issue can apply in either direction? People are capable of having a moral or ethical position in favour of minimising suffering, and that would lead them in the direction of supporting the proposals that the Minister has set out. Would my hon. Friend be content with that?

Mr. Hammond: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Members on both sides of the argument have genuinely deeply held positions, and some feel that there is a strong, moral imperative to relieve suffering whenever that is possible. I acknowledge the sincerity of those who hold positions on both sides.

I anticipate that this non-party-political debate will show the House of Commons at its best. I look forward to hearing the arguments from both sides of the debate. It is not for me to set out a position from the Opposition Dispatch Box, but rather, perhaps, to present some of the counter-arguments to the points that the Minister has raised, which hon. Members may want to consider in determining their position.

The Minister rightly said that the basis of the issues before us lies in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. She outlined the provisions and powers of that Act. It is true that it already allows embryo research. As she explained, substantial numbers of embryos are created under the provisions of the Act and subsequently destroyed. It will strike some people as odd that under the terms of the current legislation it is possible to use human embryos to conduct research into contraception, but it is not possible to use them for research into degenerative diseases that undermine and impair the lives of many millions of people. I acknowledge the Minister's comment that anyone who supported the 1990 Act, and supports its operation today, must believe that the proposals are only a logical extension of that Act.

I also accept—I am happy to reiterate it—the potential value of benefits that may result from the changes in the proposed regulations.

Many hon. Members, however, will feel that the 1990 Act itself is flawed. As I, like the Minister, was not a Member of Parliament at the time of that debate, I am not qualified to comment—as some right. hon. and hon. Members may be able to do later—on the climate in which it was held or on the issues that were raised.

Nevertheless, I sense that much has changed in the climate of public opinion since 1990. I sense that public opinion has awakened to some of the potential dangers of the advances of science, and that public opinion has therefore moved. I also suspect that in 1990 the very word cloning was not well understood by the public, but was only a science-fiction concept. Recent developments and examples of cloning in action have given the general public a much greater interest in and awareness of the issue.

The BSE crisis—remote as that might seem—and the genetically modified crops debacle have all caused the public to re-evaluate the role of science in our society. I suggest that the age of deference to scientists is over. It will seem to many people that science has failed us in many spheres, and the fact that there is a lack of proper control over scientists is—with, as always, the great benefit of hindsight—obvious.

Undoubtedly, other hon. Members will tell the House what feedback they are receiving from their constituents, but my constituency correspondence, of which there has been a considerable quantity, has been 100 per cent. against the proposed changes. I have not had a single constituency letter supporting the changes.

Mr. Forth: I wondered how long it would take before the postbag made its appearance in the debate. In that context, can my hon. Friend make any judgment at all on how many of the letters that his constituents have sent him arose from a genuine individual interest in the matter, and how many may have been prompted by interest groups or even—who knows—by faith groups?

Mr. Hammond: I suspect that my right hon. Friend is right that some of those letters will have been prompted

[Mr. Hammond]

by interest groups, but I do not regard them as any less legitimate for that. What has surprised me is that the interest groups which clearly do exist on the other side of the argument, representing people suffering from the types of degenerative diseases that may be affected by the proposed regulations, seem not to have mobilised their members to write, at least to me—I cannot speak for other hon. Members.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Would the hon. Gentleman care to say how his constituents' letters influenced him in voting on the Stem Cell Research Bill or in the hunting debate?

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that I voted against both proposals, which I am not sure have anything to do with the issue that we are debating now. I am trying to outline some of the arguments that hon. Members who are not committed on the issue—many will already be committed one way or the other—may wish to consider. Later, with the indulgence of the House, I shall express my personal view. What I seek to do now is to set out some of the issues as I see them.

Dr. Harris: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that merely considering the letters on either side of the argument is rather perverse, especially when one considers the situation of people with degenerative disease? I do not think that I have ever had a letter, typed or otherwise, from someone suffering from Alzheimer's disease. People with Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's disease have organisations to speak for them. The hon. Gentleman might mention whether any of those organisations have taken time to see him as representatives of vulnerable people who are often not able to lobby their Members of Parliament.

Mr. Hammond: I accept that point, and I am not suggesting that any hon. Member should or would vote simply on the basis of counting items in his postbag. However, I should also hope that we all regard our constituents' views as an important factor in addressing such issues.

One of the important issues in this debate is the wider relationship between science and society. I think that it would be very dangerous, and very dangerous for scientists, if science were constantly pushing ahead of where the body of society is comfortable and happy to be. It is incumbent on those who seek to make such changes to carry public opinion with them.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight—which is a wonderful thing—it must seem entirely obvious to the layperson that it is unnatural to adopt, for example, cannibalistic feeding practices in agriculture. The very thought, now that we are all focused on it, seems abhorrent, but that was not apparent at the time. At the time, public opinion was not focused on the issue. However, I think that we are entitled to ask ourselves whether scientists should have focused on the issue before they did.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument with great interest. Clearly, however, cannibalism in animals was a matter not of science but of a lack of regulation, and of regulations not being informed by science. That example does not support his own argument.

Mr. Hammond: I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He may consider the issue from a scientific point of view, but I suspect that until relatively recently, the majority of people in our society have assumed that scientists were focusing on those issues, were attending to the public's best interests, and were able and prepared to protect them.

It must now be obvious that field-scale trials of GM crops are an irreversible action. Such developments may be good or bad. My point is that science has been moving ahead of the political and moral consensus. I rather feel that today's debate is about that issue. My fear is that, unlike some hon. Members, we mere mortals whose science careers never progressed beyond the third-form chemistry lab are being asked to sanction action on the basis that it might be justified by outcomes, whereas history teaches us that actual outcomes may be very different from those that were envisaged.

We are being asked to build on current legislation about which many of us have deep reservations and to move rapidly into uncharted waters. We do not know quite how rapidly we are being asked to move, but, as the Minister said that she expected the matter to be voted on within the lifetime of this Parliament, it may be in the next few months. We are being asked to decide before many of us feel sufficiently secure about the far-reaching potential consequences.

There are two reasons for scepticism about the proposed regulations. I shall call them the upstream and the downstream concerns. The upstream concern is about the use of embryos or embryonic tissue—the creation and then the destruction of life for other purposes. That is a legitimate and deeply held concern. The downstream concern is about potential abuse of cell nuclear replacement technology—cloning. That is the "genie out of the bottle" argument—the recognition that, while any scientific advance may bring benefits, it may also bring disbenefits that are impossible to control. For example, nuclear fission delivers apparently cheap forms of energy but has disadvantages of which we are all aware.

The 1990 Act already permits the creation of embryos through in vitro fertilisation and through cell nuclear replacement, but only for specific limited purposes that may seem slightly bizarre—I have already alluded to research into contraception. The Government are now proposing a significant extension of the powers under that Act. Why? We are told that substantial benefits could flow from stem cell research. I have already confessed to my very limited scientific capabilities, but as I understand it, the objective is to carry out a limited amount of research on embryonic material so as to gain the ability to regress adult cells to their non-specific form, allowing therapies to be developed using the patient's own cells.

Other avenues are open to achieve those objectives. There are other sources of stem cells from non-embryonic tissue. The Minister gave the example of blood cells from the umbilical cord, and some adult tissue can be used. Researchers in Canada and Italy have turned neural stem cells from an adult mouse into new blood cells. If the technique could be applied to humans, it would be a major

step forward. Apart from anything else, the use of a patient's own stem cells would greatly reduce the likelihood of rejection.

An Italian group has reported that nerve stem cells from an adult proved more flexible than they were believed to be, and could give rise to skeletal muscle. The *British Medical Journal* reported in January last year that the use of embryonic stem cells

> may soon be eclipsed by the more readily available and less controversial adult stem cells.

I recognise that there are scientific problems, but they are not insurmountable. The Donaldson report recognises that recent research appears to contradict conventional wisdom on the restricted potential of stem cells derived from adult tissue to differentiate. It says:

> It may well be that the long term promise of stem cells derived from adult tissue will equal or even surpass that of embryonic stem cells.

I must acknowledge that it also says that reaching that stage may require knowledge that we do not yet possess. Perhaps research going on elsewhere will deliver that knowledge.

We are not debating whether embryonic stem cell research should happen. It is a long while since the writ of this Parliament ran that wide. Whether we like it or not, the research is already happening in the United States, and the legal system and regulations there will permit it to continue. The pharmaceutical industry is probably one of the world's most international industries. The question is not about whether to continue down this route in the fight against degenerative disease, but whether we want to take the moral and ethical decisions that will foster that research here in the United Kingdom.

Clearly, there are moral arguments on both sides. Some feel that it is imperative that we do not sanction the taking of human life through the use of embryos to further research, while others feel that there is a moral imperative to carry out that research in order to try to relieve human suffering.

Those are difficult arguments to weigh up, but it seems to me that we are talking not about balancing the moral argument for research against the moral hazard of exploiting embryos, but about balancing the moral hazard of exploiting embryos, within the remit of this Parliament, against the risks to our biotechnology and pharmaceutical research industry of not proceeding. I find it hard to see that as a moral dilemma, although I accept that a Government who have responsibility for that industry can legitimately be concerned about it.

The issue is not for or against stem cell research. Rejecting embryonic research, which is already under way in the United States, does not close the door to these scientific developments, although it could possibly slow down the process. The research will continue, whatever we decide.

Dr. Brand: If, for the good moral reasons that the hon. Gentleman has been elucidating, we ban such research here, should not we logically also ban the results of that research to people living in this country?

Mr. Hammond: No, I do not think that that is logical at all. The logical next step would be to ban the use of any therapeutic material derived directly from embryonic stem cells, but my understanding is that there is a research step that could perhaps be done more expeditiously using embryonic cells, which will lead to our being able to use therapies derived purely from adult stem cells, which do not present any of the upstream moral questions that I have outlined.

The question is not whether the research will be done but whether it will be done in the United Kingdom: whether we, within the limited scope of our jurisdiction, wish to sanction such activity in order to promote our pharmaceutical and biotechnological research base.

For those with an a priori position against the use of embryos or embryonic tissue, and for those who believe that we have already gone too far down the path of interference with nature and natural processes, the answer will be clear; and we must respect their positions.

The question—the difficult question—is for those whose minds are still somewhat open. For them, when we vote, the question will be "What proof do we require to justify embarking on this potentially dangerous path?" The issue for them will be whether a strong enough case has been made to overcome what is perhaps a natural resistance to the idea of harvesting and then using embryos. They will wonder about the destination of the route on which we would embark in adopting the regulations.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend may be right, but let me put a point to him. Recommendation 2 of the Donaldson report says that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the body that would have to license the research, would have to consider whether there were other means of achieving its objectives. It is not just a case of the House deciding, when the regulations come into force, to add one more category of permitted research; it will be up to the HFEA, if recommendation 2 is adopted in the regulations, to decide whether there is a practical alternative for the purposes to which the research is to be put.

I do not expect my hon. Friend to go into this today unless he wants to, but I should like to know the House's attitude to recommendation 3, which concerns informed consent. The Minister may want to tell us—but perhaps not during this debate—what is the Government's developing view.

To many of us, the most important question is whether the public understand what we are proposing. If I thought that they did, I would find it far easier to support the regulations. Until now, I have not thought so, and I expressed that view at the time of the ten-minute Bill. I thought that the public did not have a clue about what was being considered—that only the experts knew. The experts may not necessarily be right, but what they have to say should be known by the public before we cast our votes.

Mr. Hammond: I suspect that other Members will have something to say about informed consent. It will, of course, involve issues of concern. My understanding is that it is proposed that all the embryonic material that we are discussing should come from the so-called surplus embryos created during the in vitro fertilisation process. That process has financial implications: many people have to pay. The issue of informed consent would clearly become mixed up with the question of availability of IVF for people who were willing to give their consent to making available their surplus embryos.

[Mr. Hammond]

My hon. Friend seems to be saying that, in approving the recommendations, the House would abdicate its responsibility for deciding whether embryonic stem cell research is necessary, and would delegate that power to the HFEA. I am not confident that we would want to rely on an agency to make the decision. The evidence I have seen suggests that it can be argued that alternative methods of proceeding already exist. No doubt such arguments will be aired this morning, but I think that the House should decide for itself on the basis of the available evidence.

Dr. Harris: In deciding whether there is a reasonable alternative ready to be used now that does not require the use of embryonic stem cells as an intermediate research step, is the hon. Gentleman swayed to any extent by the view of the Royal Society, the Wellcome Trust, the Association of Medical Research Charities, the Medical Research Council and the British Medical Association? All those scientific bodies think it important to allow the research to continue, albeit perhaps as an intermediate step, if the benefits of adult stem cell therapy are to be reaped.

Mr. Hammond: I am aware of the views of all those bodies, and have considered carefully what they have to say. Recommendation 2, however, states that

> the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority should satisfy itself that there are no other means of meeting the objectives of the research.

That strikes me as an absolute test.

The question in the mind of the uncommitted Member will be whether there really is no other way—whether the benefit to be derived is great enough, certain enough, and clearly unachievable by other means. We must be certain, because there is no turning back.

I have sought to set out some of the issues as I see them. At a personal level, I would like to place on the record the fact that I approached the debate with an open mind, and with no predisposition to believe that the issue should be determined one way or the other. I have considered carefully the arguments on both sides, and I do not believe that a case has been made with a standard of proof that is adequate to overcome my real moral concerns and fears about where this road will lead us. My current intention is to vote against the regulations, on the basis of the evidence and arguments available to me.

10.36 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I think we are having a good debate this morning, and may continue to do so for the rest of the current Parliament.

I welcome the fact that new research and potential technologies are subject to debate here, and open to scrutiny, before being put to use. I think that the debate will precipitate a wide-ranging discussion to which the public will contribute vehemently, understanding the issues before forming a view one way or the other. Scientific and medical groups are agonising over these questions, and—as was suggested by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond)—deciding how best to engage the public in such detailed and technological debates. I assure the hon. Gentleman that people are trying very hard to find out how members of the public can form opinions, discussing the possibility of consensus conferences and even focus groups. There is a great deal of activity going on, and no one has a brilliant solution, but the problem of getting the issues across to the public is clearly recognised.

The public are not duped by technological language or, indeed, arrogance from politicians—as well as scientists and others—who purport to say what is best for them. They are quite up to understanding that.

It is essential that issues such as stem cell research and its potential development are judged on the basis of straightforward information, and not coloured by scare stories involving human cloning and the creation of Hitlers, David Beckhams and so on—stories that we often see in the popular press. Incidentally, I do not know that David Beckham is worth cloning after this week—or any Scottish footballer.

Mr. Swayne: Are not cases brought to our attention ad terroram, in order to persuade us that terrible consequences will follow unless we act, and that people will continue to be afflicted by terrible diseases? What we need is a clear estimate of the real probabilities of cures being achieved through the adoption of new research, as against the probabilities of their being achieved in other ways.

Dr. Gibson: I do not think that any scientist or medical expert would be arrogant enough to say that the issues are ever black and white. I do not think they operate in an environment in which it is possible to say that. What they can say is that there is a consensus that one thing is happening and another is not. We would not be able to turn the lights on if scientists had not discovered electrons and so forth and predicted that we might be able to illuminate our lives. One can never be sure, and the final decisions should be made not just by scientists and medically trained people, but by the public, politicians and others. Such consensual debate is the only way we can make progress during this century.

The language in this debate bothers me somewhat, as we hear references to such things as neo-cannibalism and the trivialisation of life, which do not help the debate. Such views have not been enjoined today but are discussed in newspapers and so on, and do not assist with the rational and reasonable debate which, I believe my hon. Friend the Minister agrees, we need to have.

Since May 1997, the Government have approached scientific and medical advances with careful analysis through inquiries, consensus reports, public opinion surveys and so on, and have adopted the precautionary principles in relation to, for example, mobile phones, as a mechanism for deciding to ban something or allowing it to operate under certain restrictions. In the past three years, the Government have specifically addressed the issue of trying to get a basis for making decisions. There has been a sea change in our analysis of and approach to science, whether that involves genetically modified food, telecommunication masts or other matters. We have been honest in saying what we know, what we do not know and what we need to find out. Science and medicine operate in that spirit at the moment. We need a cold interpretation of the data so that we can move forward.

On the issue of stem cell research, I make a plea to all the groups who influence our debate from outside. Will they please get their act together and give us one

document, as we do not want 50 documents all saying the same thing? There have been more diagrams of nuclear transplants into cytoplasm in the past week than nuclear transplants done in scientific labs in the past five years. I am fed up with seeing that diagram and want those groups to get their act together. I am sure that goes for those on the other side of the debate as well. It would be helpful for Members of Parliament to have one document instead of 100. We could take a leaf from the book of Congressmen and Senators who are lobbied not by pairs of people, but by groups of 300. It helps to focus their minds when everyone is joined together. That is a plea to the lobbyists who, no doubt, are listening to our debate.

The terminology in this field is dire. As soon as one mentions therapeutic cloning, a series of David Beckhams, Hitlers and so on comes to mind. Cloning is a difficult term to define. One can clone cells, organisms, organs and so on, and it is important to know what we are defining when we discuss this issue. There is also confusion about the terms "embryo" and "egg", which are often used interchangeably although, scientifically, they are different. The literature that we get does not help us to understand that difference. If we are confused, the public will find it difficult to understand the difference.

Human cloning, as my hon. Friend the Minister said, is illegal and will remain so. There will be no more David Beckhams or Hitlers, even if such cloning was ever possible. The environment has a strong effect on the expression of genes. Genes are not everything, as one is brought up in an environment that helps to develop one's brain, organs and so on, and physical training also has an effect. It is therefore difficult to say that the same genes make different people the same type of person, and we should put that idea to bed immediately.

As has often been said and, I am sure, will be said again, stem cells can be developed into specialised cells that make up organs and tissues such as kidneys, skin, liver and brain. We have a lot to learn in that field, as there is much that we do not understand about growth factors and how we can use them interchangeably to stimulate cells to move in a certain direction. There is much to be done in relation to both adult and embryonic cells. There is not an either/or situation, as there is serious research into adult cells and embryonic cells, which will move us towards the ends that Members on both sides of the House are trying to meet. I shall explain later why I think that, at this stage, the embryonic cell usage argument is much more productive and more likely to lead to an understanding which, as my hon. Friend the Minister said, will we hope in turn lead to the holy grail of using someone's own adult cells to replace his or her defunct tissue.

Research at the Johns Hopkins university in Baltimore, Maryland has produced interesting results with immature stem cells that were injected into the spinal fluid of rats and mice that were unable to walk because of neuro-cell degeneration. In humans, that condition is called spinal muscular atrophy. Fifty per cent. of the mice and rats recovered the ability to walk. Research into Parkinson's disease and so on has dealt with locating specific cells in a brain or organ that one wants to repair but, in this case, the whole spinal cord showed effects that operated in a normal manner, so there was a spread-out effect. We do not understand that mechanism but clearly it is an exciting development.

Anita McCaulay, the executive director of the Jennifer Trust for Spinal Muscular Atrophy, said of the research:

> This is exciting news and will be well received by families of people with the condition.

One in 40 individuals carries the gene for this condition in this country. Anita McCaulay continues:

> it could make the day when SMA is a thing of the past that much closer.

In my opinion, Anita McCaulay is right.

Why not use adult stem cells? That argument keeps coming up. Apart from the fact that it is difficult to obtain them, as there are not as many in the human body as other cells, it is difficult to show good results with them. I have never seen any explanation for that in the literature, but shall put one forward. When a stem cell develops into an adult organism it is affected by ageing, which many hon. Members will recognise in their own bodies. Stem cells age, and part of that ageing process will be mutations and chromosomal changes. If one tries to use an adult stem cell, one is running up against nature, as changes have taken place in it. That probably explains why such cells do not work as well as fresh, young, embryonic cells. Work is going on in that field which I have discussed with eminent scientists. Indeed, they are looking at the changes that occur in adult cells, as that will contribute to understanding how the holy grail of using them will come about. We are a long way from doing that and, at this stage, the most exciting results will certainly come from embryonic cells.

Finally, I shall say a few words about the IVF eggs used to obtain the immature stem cells before the 14-day cut-off point, which will still remain. It is rarely pointed out that we are not talking about the small ball of cells growing in a uterus, for example, which are subject to hormonal influences and so on. People often think that a ball of cells growing in vitro in a petri dish or a test tube is the same as one growing in the uterus. I know that the ball of cells growing in the uterus has a potential to develop into a human being, but I also know that the uterus is a hostile environment and that many of the egg cells do not survive the vicissitudes of the uterus and all the biochemical events that go on there. That process is not often recognised, but it is a natural process that has been talked about for some years.

We are discussing IVF involving ex-utero cells in culture in test tubes which will be obtained by IVF technology and used with the donor's permission in experiments. Scientists will need a licence from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to produce and carry out research on those embryos and cells. That will not be given for trivial research as firm regulation is in place, which will still operate in this process.

From past experience and arguments in this field, I know that some people think that that in vitro ball of cells has the potential for life like the cells in utero. I respect that point of view, but I cannot convince those who hold it that the word "potential" means just that, as they equate it with human life, humanity and so on. I think that potential means potential, and many problems can arise before that ball of cells develops into a natural human being, as many biological hurdles have to be jumped.

On one side of the argument, potential is associated with life and humanity. I cannot agree with people who believe that, as I think that potential means just that and

[Dr. Gibson]

there is no guarantee that there will be a human being. There has to be a cut-off point and, in previous Parliaments and the country at large, the 14-day limit was argued for as the point at which one could make such a decision.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the cells to which he referred are human?

Dr. Gibson: Yes. Animal cells from mice and rats have been used, but the experiment has been done in all sorts of organisms.

Mrs. Winterton: Even in the case of humans?

Dr. Gibson: Yes.

The opposition thinks that the potential for life is equated with life itself. However, could those who think in that way stand before patients and tell them that they were unable to provide research or technology that would improve their lives? Could they also stand before patients and say that they are going to be denied a certain drug? If patients are denied cancer drugs, there will certainly be a hoo-hah, just as there was recently over some of the decisions of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The Government's plans to extend the Act and to make sure that the regulations are operable so that we can continue with the development of knowledge and the pursuit of human happiness are what we and the country should be discussing today.

10.50 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I very much welcome the opportunity afforded by today's debate—

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand).

Yesterday, the Leader of the House announced a debate on a motion on the Immigration and Appeals (Family Visitor) (No. 2) Regulations 2000. The measure has been prayed against by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), some Liberal Democrat Members and myself. My hon. Friend and I appear among the top six names. If the Government propose that the prayer against the regulations is only in the name of the Liberal Democrat Members, could I ask that by Monday someone could look into whether it is proper and appropriate to exclude concerned Back Benchers from the Order Paper? It is not an issue on which I expect an immediate answer, but I expect it to be considered.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving me notice that he might raise that point of order. Unfortunately, it was insufficient notice for me to give him a considered answer at this moment, but I shall ensure that an answer is provided by Monday.

Dr. Brand: Obviously that pressing business was more important than the debate.

I congratulate the chief medical officer on his report, and the Minister and her colleague in another place on a clear and succinct resumé.

No matter where one stands on the subject, it is quite clear that there are moral and ethical arguments on both sides of the debate. It is also clear that the scientific arguments are all on one side, which is to extend the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. I hope that when we have a substantive debate and the opportunity to vote on these matters, hon. Members will not try to rerun the 1990 Act, the Abortion Act 1967 or the Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia) Bill that was promoted by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), who is not in her place at the moment, but will stick to the extension of the 1990 Act by regulation to make sure that opportunities in scientific research are not only available but, more important, controlled.

I cannot accept the argument of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that we in the United Kingdom can sit back and duck out of our moral responsibility in these matters, let the dirty work, as he might see it, be done by others and then reap the benefits on behalf of the people whom I am sure hon. Members on both sides of the House would like to see helped—those with Parkinson's disease and other degenerative problems.

Mr. Hammond: Would the hon. Gentleman extend that and suggest that any country that did not have a pharmaceutical research base should be denied the treatments that derive from such research work?

Dr. Brand: If a country decided on moral grounds that it would not have a pharmaceutical research base because it did not believe in the product of the pharmaceutical industry, one would expect it to do just that. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that sections of our population are totally against intervention by modern medicine of any sort and are prepared to follow their beliefs to such an extent that they deny even their families and their children medical treatment. The argument that we can afford to stand back really does not wash. I do not think we can accept it.

Mr. Hammond: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but does he accept that the key issue at stake in the Government's introduction of these regulations is the defence of the United Kingdom's pharmaceutical and biotechnological research base?

Dr. Brand: I am now totally confused. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was working from a high moral position, which clearly I respect, but he now appears to be arguing that the most important part of the debate and the need for the extension through regulation is to support some economic factor for the country in respect of employment. The hon. Gentleman is pointing at the Minister. I am quite sure that all countries which have the capacity to develop this technology are having debates just like this one, or have had them in the past. It is no accident that the European Parliament considered the matter. Unfortunately, however, there was the usual north-south divide on largely religious grounds on some of the approaches that were being taken.

It is not good enough to say that we will let other people do it, or to say that because our biotechnology industry needs to be supported we should allow it to do

shady things. We should make a decision on principle, and I am suggesting that that principle should be that we accept the 1990 Act.

I really find it very difficult when hon. Members' personal, deeply felt opinions—which I respect—form the framework for denying other people opportunities. I know that it is right that in all we do in our personal lives we should be guided by our beliefs, but I have some difficulty when those beliefs are imposed on others.

I do not believe that foetal cells have the same status as a unique human being. If we are going to be theological about it, I do not think that the divine soul enters when an egg is fertilised. The process, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), is so wasteful. Some 20 per cent. of implanted fertilised eggs are wasted. Does that mean that 20 per cent. of souls are suddenly lost? Probably 40 to 50 per cent. of fertilised eggs are wasted and lost before implantation. If we look at the process of embryology before the fertilised egg develops to the blastocyst stage—there is some very helpful revision material available in Professor Donaldson's report—we see that it goes through a morello stage where at some time it is capable of becoming four individuals but is then reabsorbed. What happens to the four unique souls who then have to merge into one?

Mrs. Ann Winterton: I am intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's theory about unique souls. I do not think that anyone else has mentioned them and I rather suspect that the hon. Gentleman does not believe that people have souls anyway, so I suggest, with respect, that he might get back to the main thrust of his argument.

Dr. Brand: I would be very sad if I did not believe that I had a soul, and I would be fairly hypocritical being here for prayers. My point is that there is a great difference between foetal material before 14 days—or indeed, a foetus up to 22 weeks—and a born child. One has to accept that because it is accepted in law. I know that some right hon. and hon. Members do not, and I respect their views. However, they use every opportunity to impose those views on processes that are essential if we are to make scientific progress.

I enjoyed the anti-science rant—no, it was really very reasoned—from the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. Of course knowledge is a dangerous thing. Eve had much to be blamed for when she made Adam eat the apple of knowledge.

Mrs. Winterton: Oh, so it is all our fault, is it?

Dr. Brand: Well, I am only going by the available sources that inform us on these matters, and if they are sexist, there is not much that I can do. Even Galileo has been pardoned by the Catholic Church.

I understand the concept of Frankenstein and the fear of cloning. I am not so fearful that Beckham will be cloned as much as Dolly the sheep—much more aggressive than Beckham, I think, and possibly more effective on the football field. The other concept of immortal cell lines rings out as if scientists will take over the world. I believe that these regulations are about the control and management of science. We are talking about development, not an immediate application.

It is right to have a vision or a goal. Columbus had a vision; he failed absolutely miserably—he found no gold at all—but he had a vision of finding El Dorado and he increased knowledge. It would be very Luddite of the House of Commons to deny opportunities, provided that they work within a framework. To suggest that recommendation 2 hands too much power to the HFEA, should there be an extension, is nonsense. Even as a well-informed House of Commons, we could not possibly be informed well enough to deal with all the questions that arise.

I am not going to speak on the science of embryology—I am a clinician, not a scientist. I leave that sort of thing to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), who is far cleverer than me and who made a very valid contribution in a somewhat ill-timed ten-minute Bill debate. I hope that after this opportunity to air the issue on a wider basis, a subsequent vote will reflect people's intellectual assessment of the problem rather than their gut instincts.

Mr. Hammond: Could the hon. Gentleman help me in respect of recommendation 2? Does he understand the requirement to be that there is absolutely no alternative to the use of embryonic material or merely that it would be efficacious for researchers to use such material? That is the kind of distinction that I would have concerns about leaving in the hands of an agency.

Dr. Brand: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I was slightly worried about recommendation 2, which could be used by those who argue that all the answers lie in adult stem cell research or alternative stem cell research coming up with the solutions. That is possible, but it seems silly to deny one the opportunity to get at an answer from a different direction, or much more quickly, if one can use foetal cells that are less differentiated and thus have much more potential to teach us what processes might work best in the more differentiated cells. *[Interruption.]* It is not convenience, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge says from a sedentary position, but a way of furthering knowledge.

I am not a pure scientist; I think that humankind should be as informed as possible, which will, I hope, allow us to lead our lives and create our societies in a better way. However, as a clinician, I am concerned with the ultimate goal. We have had enormous breakthroughs in communicable diseases and sanitation and our next challenge—keeping people fitter, if not necessarily alive, longer, and providing them with a better quality of life—is to tackle some of these very nasty degenerative diseases. This sort of fundamental research is the only help that I can see. If foetal stem cell research helps us reach that goal five or 10 years earlier, it would be irresponsible, amoral and unethical, as well as unscientific, not to take those opportunities.

This issue will, of course, be a matter for a personal vote for members of my party. I know that some will not accept all the arguments, but I shall certainly recommend that they look at them very closely. I have no doubt that to benefit the greatest number and to take life forward, one should take every opportunity. Rather than destroy spare foetal material, which is what we are talking about, we should use it for the benefit of mankind.

11.6 am

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate. However, I give notice that if the debate lasts until the usual time, I will have to leave slightly early to get back in time for surgery in my constituency, for which I apologise to the House.

I welcome the Donaldson report and the Government's intention to extend the currently permitted grounds for embryonic research to include the treatment for a wider range of human diseases. I share the concerns alluded to by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) about the potential for the deliberate creation of genetically identical individuals—reproductive cloning. It is frankly abhorrent. The idea that society or scientists in particular should be able to determine the features and characteristics of individuals prior to their birth strikes at the very heart of respect for human dignity and diversity. It is an idea whose potential might appeal to the far right or the racial supremacists; it goes against the very notion of equality among human beings.

I welcome the view expressed in the chief medical officer's report that the ban on reproductive cloning should be reinforced. That helps to close the door even more tightly on those who might find reproductive cloning an attractive scenario.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that there is undoubtedly concern among the public at large about cloning in general. I think that there is a fundamental difference between reproductive and therapeutic cloning. Although there is a similarity between the two in terms of the medical techniques used, therapeutic cloning is entirely different in purpose, impact and motivation. It could, as others have said, generate the tissue for bone marrow for leukaemia sufferers, the muscle tissue for repairing a damaged heart or the neural tissue for treating degenerative diseases.

If reproductive cloning is about creating a particular type of human being, therapeutic cloning has the completely different objective of improving the quality of life of those suffering now or who will suffer in the future from a range of serious medical conditions. Although I recognise that there are strongly held opinions, I do not believe that there is any great new ethical issue here. The issue before us is not whether we should conduct research on embryos. As the Minister said, that issue was debated at length during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. That legislation already allows research on embryos for certain medical conditions such as congenital disease or genetic abnormality.

At the time of the 1990 Act, no one envisaged the possibility of solutions through therapeutic cloning for, say, Parkinson's—certainly a disease, and certainly abnormal. If research on embryos is acceptable for promoting knowledge about the causes of congenital disease or advances in the treatment of infertility, why should we not widen the rules to include promotion of advances in the understanding of other human diseases and disorders and to allow the possibility of research to develop new cell-based treatments.

I do not believe that the Donaldson recommendations will undermine the sanctity of life, although I recognise that that view is not universally held. The proposals do not alter the special status of the embryo. Embryos of up to 14 days, the current cut-off point for research, are much smaller than the head of a pin, and the 14-day point is crucial, because that is the earliest point at which the first parts of what will become the central nervous system can appear.

We must recognise the importance and value of the embryo. The rules governing research on the human embryo must be tightly drawn, as, thanks to the 1990 Act, they already are. Given the huge potential benefit to health that stem cell research could bring, the value that we attach to the embryo should not prevent carefully regulated and controlled research, but may improve the quality of life of some of our constituents. If we close off opportunities for that research, are we not implying that we do not value existing life highly enough? Existence in itself is surely not enough. If the quality of life of some of our constituents could be massively improved by stem cell research, do we not have a moral obligation not to walk by on the other side—if I may use a Christian analogy—but to ensure that the research is carried out?

Another argument, made today by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, is that research on adult stem cells probably renders embryonic stem cell research unnecessary. Research on adult stem cells appears to offer exciting possibilities, as suggested in last January's *British Medical Journal* report. I hope that the potential is fulfilled, and that there will one day be no need for embryonic stem cell research. For now, however, it is far from clear that adult stems cells offer opportunities and possibilities for new treatments equal to those of embryonic stem cells.

Mr. Hammond: Has the hon. Gentleman just said, in effect, that we do not know whether embryonic stem cell research is necessary, but that if we wait and see, we may find that it is not?

Mr. Thomas: Information currently available does not satisfactorily explain what the possibilities are for adult stem cell or embryonic stem cell research. My point is that we should not close off an avenue of research into embryonic stem cell research just because adult stem cell research might be less controversial to the hon. Gentleman and others.

Mr. Hammond: I am sorry to press the hon. Gentleman, but we are not talking about closing anything off. The Government propose to open something up. Unless the hon. Gentleman can deliver an argument that stands up to scrutiny to show that that is absolutely required, what justification is there for suggesting that we open up a new possibility?

Mr. Thomas: The justification for opening up the possibility of embryonic stem cell research is that it, more quickly that adult stem cell research, may provide a solution to diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. To delay taking a decision on that would seem to me to be wrong. Given the expertise available to the chief medical officer and the conclusion drawn by his expert group that embryonic stem cells appear to have the potential to develop into a far greater range of tissues than adult-derived stem cells, we do not have the luxury of not allowing embryonic stem cell research.

The most recent medical study of the potential of adult stem cells by the Milan Institute for Stem Cell Research suggested that they were far more flexible than we had

thought and could give rise to skeletal muscle. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge alluded to that report in his speech. The director of the institute, Dr. Vescovi, thought that the findings were exciting, but added that at this stage his research was far from showing that adult stem cells had growth potential and plasticity equal to that of embryonic stem cells. He said:

> Common sense dictates that it is not possible to decide which approach is more promising until both have been explored.

My interest in this issue arose not from a scientific background, such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), or from the variety of interests of those on both Front Benches. Mine is a much more reluctant interest, which has arisen from my having had to get to grips with the consequences of Parkinson's disease over the past 12 years. Both Cardinal Winning, in *The Daily Telegraph*, and the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), when he opposed a ten-minute Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), quoted C.S. Lewis, who bears repeating. Lewis wrote:

> The softest route to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without signposts.

That is a very apt description of the experience of Parkinson's. Hell in that case is an end to normal life as we know it. It means the end of an ability to work for someone who cannot rely on his or her body to carry out the most basic of functions—standing up straight and still, without jerking, or articulating thoughts clearly to those he or she manages. Forced medical retirement comes next, and a gradual restriction of the social circle. Next is a declining ability to participate in conversations. There is a slow drop in the number of times the person can leave the house. There is an ever-increasing reliance and dependence on others—help with food, with getting into or out of bed, with going to the toilet, with going on holiday and for simply spreading one's wings.

Hell means not knowing from one visit to the next what state the Parkinson's sufferer whom one knows will be in. Will he or she be on, or off? Will he or she be likely to switch on shortly? Will he have the confidence to go out to the rugby match that you know he has always enjoyed? Has he fallen over today? Is he sleeping properly? How is his mood? Hell, too, is worrying about those who care for the Parkinson's sufferer. Are they sleeping? How much are their lives being affected? What is the impact on their finances and morale?

Drug treatments have had some success in alleviating symptoms among some Parkinson's patients and in reducing disability. They can reduce the slope of decline. The most effective drug, levodopa, tends to lose efficacy after between four and seven years, and the decline sets in once again as patients deteriorate and experience unpredictable fluctuations in mobility. Another drug, selegiline, may delay the need for levodopa. Some think that it slows the progression of the disease, but it does not stop it; it just changes the rate of decline.

For those for whom the drugs do not work, or for those for whom the drugs have lost their bite, surgical interventions can make the decline more gradual. Pallidotomy means drilling into someone's brain to use an electrode to destroy the cells that reacted adversely to medication. However, that does not end decline; it just helps to manage it. Deep-brain stimulation involves electrodes implanted in the brain, which the patient can switch on or off as symptoms require.

None of the drug treatments and none of the surgical interventions currently available to us can end the misery for the Parkinson's sufferer. Some 120,000 people in the United Kingdom have Parkinson's. As the Minister said, up to 1 million family members and friends of those people live with Parkinson's too. An estimated 10,000 people are diagnosed with Parkinson's each year. Even the most encouraging analysis of stem cell research suggests that we are at least 10 years from practical application. As a non-scientist, I cannot know whether even that analysis is right. I do not know whether stem cell research—adult or embryonic—will ever deliver a solution to Parkinson's. However, we should allow those who have identified potential in that route the chance to realise the ambition of a solution to the disease.

11.20 am

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I too apologise to the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I have to travel to Cheshire, and travel arrangements are extremely difficult at present, so if I am not able to remain in the Chamber until the end of the debate, I hope that you, the Minister for Public Health and other hon. Members will understand the reason and forgive me.

There cannot have been one Back Bencher who did not applaud our former Speaker, the right hon. Betty Boothroyd, when she reminded us in her resignation speech that the function of Parliament is to hold the Executive to account. Ministers, she said, should never overlook the primacy of Parliament.

I mention that because of the cynical manner in which the Executive have treated both Houses in their attempt to legalise what they choose to call therapeutic cloning. Far from taking the words of our former Speaker to heart, they deliberately introduced the Donaldson report to the public at a press conference on 16 August—about three weeks after Parliament had risen for the summer recess, thus denying Members of Parliament the opportunity to carry out their duty by questioning a Minister on a statement on the report in the House of Commons. The Government's subsequent actions were even worse. They chose the same occasion to publish their response.

The reason why soon became obvious, even to the most naive observer: publication of the Donaldson report and the Government response was followed by a carefully co-ordinated propaganda campaign, with one group after another—the Royal Society, the Medical Research Council, the British Medical Association, the BioIndustry Association and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics—announcing their support for human cloning. The Minister and Professor Donaldson constantly remind the press and the public that all those fine-sounding bodies support the chief medical officer's expert group on human cloning—a word that they always avoid, although that is what they demand; instead, they refer constantly to "nuclear cell replacement".

I draw the attention of the House to the threat made this week by the bio-tech industries—as reported in *The Times* on 15 November—that because of hostility to genetic engineering and other constraints on research, companies will move to countries such as Brazil and China. If the industry cannot persuade people by seductive promises—and it has made many—it will try to coerce them through threats to employment and investment.

It is well known that the public is very much opposed to human cloning; that fact explains much of the reasoning behind the publicity campaign. Every public

[Mrs. Ann Winterton]

opinion survey has shown that opposition, to the point that a pro-cloning article in *The Independent* on 20 August—that newspaper could hardly be described as being pro-life—referred to the public being "vehemently opposed" to cloning.

Joan Ruddock: Does the hon. Lady agree that when the public think about human cloning, their perception is that it will produce a baby or a human being by some method that would give the common genetic complement to that new human being? I do not think that they perceive that we are talking about a small collection of cells that might be produced in a period as short as 14 days.

Mrs. Winterton: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) made the valid point that members of the public should be made aware of precisely what is at stake.

That point is echoed in a report issued by the Wellcome Trust, which highlighted the fact that public opinion on so-called therapeutic cloning is generally supportive until people realise what is involved. The report stated that many people did not understand the terminology used by doctors and scientists. It noted that

the language chosen when describing scientific research has a major impact on participants' responses to the ideas . . . (but as their) awareness increased, so did their concern and apprehension. It was unclear whether many participants realised that an embryo created for research would be a genetic extension of a living individual. However, for those who did grasp this fact their concerns were further heightened . . . it was felt that there could be the potential to mislead participants, it being accepted that several aspects of the scientific research would not in fact be "therapeutic".

It is thus not surprising that obscure language should be used in the report of the chief medical officer's expert advisory group on therapeutic cloning. For example, throughout the report, cloning is referred to as "cell nuclear replacement"—a morally neutral term. As part of the spin, the report also tells us—almost with a fanfare of trumpets—that the Government will introduce specific legislation to ban reproductive cloning, even though it is already illegal, so putting that forward as an assertion gives the impression that the present Administration are tabling legislation to protect respect for human life.

Members of the Government, including the Prime Minister, have sent scores of letters to voters, declaring that the Government will introduce legislation to reinforce our laws against reproductive cloning. As there has been no suggestion that reproductive cloning would be introduced, that claim is obviously a defence tactic—a smokescreen designed to obscure Government policy that supports the manufacture of clones for the production of cells and for other purposes.

Dr. Brand: I am sure that the hon. Lady does not want to mislead the public—or, indeed, Members of the House—but she has mentioned human cloning several times. Will she give us her definition of human cloning? I should like to know how different it is from my perception of that term.

Mrs. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman has picked on a most important point. If he will be patient, I shall deal with it later.

Before discussing the ethics of cloning, I shall refer to the manner in which today's debate was organised. As a result of the debate on the ten-minute Bill presented by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), on 2 November, the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), called for a fuller debate on stem cell cloning. In view of subsequent events, some of us feel that the reply given to my hon. Friend was not as informative as might have been expected. The Leader of the House said that the Government would

bear it in mind and perhaps discuss it through the usual channels.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 855.]

I do not regard the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon as "the usual channels". Moreover, I am confident that many Labour Back Benchers, and many Liberal Democrat Members, will agree. Yet on 7 November, only three parliamentary days after the Leader of the House made that reply, the hon. Gentleman addressed a meeting on cloning, organised by the all-party science and technology group, and announced that the Government were arranging a debate on cloning on 17 November. It was not until 9 November, however, that the House was informed that the debate would be held today.

The hon. Gentleman also declared that a statutory instrument would be tabled within three weeks and there would be a vote on the subject before the end of the year—a statement he confirmed on Tuesday, when he spoke to a journalist from *The Tablet*. It will be interesting to find out whether the hon. Gentleman's second assertion is correct—that he does indeed have inside knowledge, despite the Minister's comments at the beginning of her speech. It will be interesting to hear whether—perhaps in the light of the contributions to this debate—the Government come to the conclusion that they should not push this measure through the House with undue haste. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West made a valid point when he said that the public should be made aware of and understand the issues being decided on their behalf in this House.

Dr. Harris: I can reassure the hon. Lady that although I have tried to get information from the Minister's office, it has been like trying to get blood from a stone. At no point has the Minister's office confirmed to me any of the dates. At the meeting to which she referred, a rumour about a debate this Friday was provided by the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) whose connections with Government thinking are, understandably, more in tune than mine. Finally, I do not remember speaking to anyone from *The Tablet*, although I indicated that I would be happy to do so. But I have no authority, except to report the rumours that I have heard—perhaps the hon. Lady has heard them, too—about when the Government will make the regulations.

Mrs. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman's comments are interesting and the House will take note of them. Perhaps many will feel a little sceptical, as I do, about what he had to say.

Many Members of all parties would have taken the trouble to attend today's debate but, due to the lack of notice, found it impossible to cancel constituency and other engagements. With further modernisation, and the parliamentary week being made ever shorter, this problem

will grow worse in the future, as constituency engagements will become more important and the affairs of this House perhaps less important. On the other hand, it is obvious that with greater advance notice, members of the all-party science and technology group have been able to muster their supporters. I believe that the Government must have been aware of this.

Given the size of the defeat of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon, it is important to pause, reflect and consider these matters more thoroughly. A vote before Christmas would be precipitate and would not reflect the Leader of the House's statement to the House that these matters should be thoroughly aired.

I shall refer briefly to the techniques of cloning. Perhaps that will answer the question posed earlier by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand). A human clone—which we all know has not yet been achieved—would be an exact genetic copy of another human being; likewise, a clone of any animal species would be an exact genetic copy, and can be produced by two techniques.

The nucleus from an oocyte—an unfertilised female egg—is removed and replaced by the nucleus of a cell taken from a donor animal, which, in fact, will be the genetic twin of the new clone. This was the technique used to produce Dolly the sheep. It is, however, extremely hazardous, and out of more than 400 trials—some of which produced malformed sheep—only one, Dolly, succeeded. In the event, Dolly was found by chromosomal analysis to be six years old at birth, the age of the donor sheep.

Cloning can also be achieved by splitting an embryo's cells at a very early stage of development, thus creating one or a number of clones. There is no difference between the techniques for reproductive cloning and so-called therapeutic cloning. The difference lies solely in the purpose for which the clone is created—whether it is to implant into a woman, so that the embryo can develop in the normal way as a baby, or if it is intended to use the clone in the production of stem cells or biochemical products.

In both cases, the clone would be genetically completely human. Even the Warnock committee stressed that

> the embryo of the human species ought to have special status.

Cloning—the manufacture of a human embryo for the sole purpose of bit-part treatment and other destructive experiments—completely denies this.

It is important to repeat that stem cells can be obtained from adult tissue, the umbilical cord of a new-born baby and from embryos. There are no ethical problems in using adult stem cells or those from the umbilical cord. Unlike ordinary cells, stem cells have the capacity constantly to renew themselves and to form or to differentiate into the different cell types needed by the body. That is why stem cells may be used to replace tissue in cases of severe burns or in cases where the tissue has been destroyed by cancer or through diseases such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.

A human embryo has been described as

> a stem cell par excellence.

It is a most wonderful being, which has the capacity to initiate, sustain, control and direct its own development. Its cells will provide each and every different kind of cell and tissue which make up the human body—skin, nerve, muscle, bone and other organs.

As a mother and a grandmother, I must confess that I become quite emotional when I think of the beginning of life for children; each on the first day after conception no bigger than a full stop, yet miraculously sustaining, controlling and directing their own development in the production of every different type of cell and tissue to bring them to what they are today. The fact that we have scientists who think of these, who are definitely human, simply as a source to be exploited in obtaining cells and tissue, I find frightening.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Winterton: I think that I have given way enough, and I would like to make progress.

The chief medical officer's advisory group described stem cells as

> unspecialised cells which have not yet differentiated into any specific type of cell and tissue.

This is surely somewhat short of the mark. Stem cells are pluripotent; they can

> proliferate with almost unlimited potential, maintaining a pool of growing and dividing cells, with the added ability that some of the daughter cells can differentiate into specific cell types.

That quote comes from David A. Prentice, professor of medical and molecule genetics at Indiana state university, in his testimony to the American Congress in February this year.

It must be pointed out that the pathway of differentiation from stem cell to a specific cell type varies according to the cell type required. Without a clear understanding of such differentiation pathways, it would be extremely dangerous to implant undifferentiated stem cells into an adult human. In comparison, however, evidence now suggests that adult stem cells are easier to manage, and if transplanted into their normal environment—for example, brain cells into brain tissue—they will produce only the cell types necessary for the tissue. This information comes from an article by Vogel printed in *Science* in February.

One of the most serious criticisms of the Donaldson report is that it was already outdated when it was published. For example, it claimed that

> stem cells derived from early embryos have the greatest potential to develop into most types of tissue . . . stem cells can be extracted from some adult tissues but their potential to develop into other kinds of tissue is also likely to be limited.

Yet by the time the report was presented to members of the Government—and subsequently to the public—a number of papers showing this to be incorrect had already been published.

Why at the press conference to launch the report on 16 August did the Department of Health spokesman—and Professor Donaldson in particular—not admit that advances had been made in the use of adult stem cells? In any event, research is now continually emerging from Scandinavia, Britain, America and elsewhere on the uses of adult stem cells, showing the Donaldson report to have been completely eclipsed.

Why did the Department of Health have to wait until this week, when they organised two emergency briefing sessions for Members—for which we were given totally inadequate notice—before it admitted that the long-term promise of stem cells from adult tissue could equal or surpass that of embryonic stem cells? None the less, it

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still justifies its demands with a number of claims, including the assertion that many scientists believe that to understand how adult stem cells work and to reach the point where new treatments are possible, embryonic research into stem cells is vital. On what research do those scientists base their belief? Can the House be given the annotated work on which they base their claims?

There are many other points that I would like to pick up in the latest documents that we were sent by the Department of Health this week, but there are many aspects of the work that I must cover. However, I will refer to the fact that its latest document appears to accept, contrary to original assertions, that a majority of research scientists now consider adult stem cells to be "pluripotent"—that is, of almost unlimited potential.

For at least a year, adult stem cells have been used either exclusively or in combination with other treatments to achieve significant health care benefits for sufferers of the following conditions: brain tumours, ovarian cancer, solid tumours, multiple myeloma, breast cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, multiple sclerosis, systematic lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, anaemia, stroke, blindness and immuno-deficiency. A number of papers demonstrating the therapeutic use of stem cells had already been published well before the Donaldson report was presented to the public.

In comparison, the only material published so far on the use of embryonic stem cells has been in the form of promises—the promises of salvation in the future. They have been made by the Royal Society, the Medical Research Council, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the British Medical Association, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority—in fact, uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all.

The House will forgive me if I appear sceptical about the current efforts. I was a Member in 1990 when we were subjected to an almost identical campaign, which was exploited by many newspapers. The present campaign is little different. For example, despite the evidence regarding adult stem cells, *The Times* of 8 November this year reported that the Royal Society had produced a report on therapeutic cloning that suggested that

there is no scientific justification for the rejection—

of the Donaldson report—

and that to do so would send an ominous message about the future of research in Britain.

Not surprisingly, Germany has the strictest regulations regarding human vivisection, including embryo research and cloning, of any country in Europe. Yet, its biotechnological industry has outstripped the industry in the United Kingdom.

I hope that Members will learn from the 1990 experience. Fellows of the Royal Society, spokesmen for the Medical Research Council and other bodies seduced parliamentarians with their promises of cures for genetic diseases, degenerative conditions and other tragedies if experimentation on human embryos were made legal. Ten years later, we are still awaiting the realisation of those promises, whereas therapeutic advances have been, and are being made, by the application of ethical methods of research. Yet the empty words of the experts have resulted in the destruction of countless human embryos.

In 1990, at meetings in both Houses, fellows of the Royal Society and others told Members of Parliament that a conceptus was not a human life until the 14th day after fertilisation. Before then, it was only a pre-embryo. That propaganda ploy was used persistently in some newspapers and convinced many parliamentarians. However, once the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 became law, no more was heard of a pre-embryo. The term was dropped completely and many of today's Members of Parliament will be totally unaware of its usage.

As Members, we have to be more realistic in our assessment of scientists and doctors. We have to recognise that they are not above commercial considerations. We also have to recognise that the potential rewards in biotechnology are overwhelming. As already stated, the human embryo initiates, sustains, controls and directs its own developments by virtue of its ability to synthesise a whole range of biochemical products that could be used in other aspects of biotechnology. These can be extracted, refined, purified and sold to the highest bidder in the worldwide biotechnology industry. Such products could be used in many sectors of basic biological research and in the pharmaceutical industry. The Wellcome report, to which I referred earlier, accepted that several aspects of the scientific research would not, in fact, be "therapeutic".

The commercial pressures to give the go-ahead despite ethical concerns are clear. On 10 November this year, *The Times* reported that ReNeuron, a recently formed company whose shares had just begun trading, had raised £18 million and were likely to raise a further £3 million by an over-allotment option. It is planning to be the first to begin trials using cloned human stem cells derived from aborted foetuses. This is a case of commercial scientists seeking by force majeure to ensure parliamentary and public approval.

Moreover, although the Government assert that they are completely opposed to reproductive cloning—I imagine that everyone in the House must take that view—Lord Winston, among other fertility experts, has affirmed that

therapeutic cloning will lead to reproductive cloning within twenty years.

His words should be heeded.

In 1990, several hon. Members suspected that possible commercial interests might dominate some sections of the medical and scientific community. As a result, we tabled a series of amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 so that research on human embryos would be confined to the development of cures and treatments for genetic diseases and other problems for which scientists claimed that embryo research was vital. I know that many Members will not be surprised to learn that every amendment was bitterly opposed by the scientific community and failed to reach the statute book. We have no doubt that the same tactics would be used today if the House had the opportunity—which it does not—to table such amendments.

It is important to ask why Donaldson did not refer to the possible commercial stakes in cloning. They are well documented—and it was United States commercial scientists who first established a technique to keep embryo stem cells alive in a culture. To what extent was the motive for their work dominated by commercial considerations? Nobody seems to have posed the question, but the reply must be obvious to one and all.

When it is claimed by the Donaldson committee and others that our scientists will lose out if we do not give the go-ahead, we need to ask: if their sole interest is therapeutic, to whom will we lose out? As things stands, Britain is totally out of step with the rest of Europe in the matter of cloning. Cloning is completely outlawed in Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland and Slovakia. In the last three years—between March 1997 and 7 September 2000—the European Parliament has voted for a ban on human cloning, and it was not just a north-south divide; Germany is the greatest opponent in Europe of cloning. The latest resolution called on the United Kingdom Government to review their position on human embryo cloning, and called on Members of Parliament to

> exercise their votes of conscience to reject the proposal to permit research using human embryos.

In addition, the United Kingdom will not benefit from research moneys provided by the European Union. That is our own money being recycled, so we will lose out even though the decision was made by the Council of Ministers and agreed by the Prime Minister. As many hon. Members will know, the Council of Europe has also condemned human cloning.

The Donaldson committee was preceded by a joint working party of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the Human Genetic Advisory Commission. Its four members had all expressed pro-cloning views before joining the committee, and two had pecuniary interests connected with the pharmaceutical industry. The 14 members of the Donaldson committee also appear to be totally biased in favour of cloning, and their constant reference to the expertise of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the strict controls that it maintains is quite ludicrous.

The history of that organisation—or quango—demonstrates utter incompetence. Five years after the Act came into operation, the authority was forced to admit that it had lost all track of thousands of parents of frozen embryos. Since then, there have been many reports of inefficiency and neglect. Only last weekend, *The Sunday Times* carried a story that

> At least 100 women have been mistakenly implanted with another couple's embryos because of incompetence by infertility clinics.

Rather than express concern, *The Sunday Times* reported:

> The HFEA denied that there were widespread problems in infertility clinics and said any errors were a tiny fraction of the total number of IVF treatments.

It would be a major disaster for all those couples who had been implanted with another couple's embryos to learn what had happened, and the attitude of the authority is to be deplored.

A number of members of the authority are also involved in the IVF industry, and for many years parliamentarians have complained of the fact that the poacher is playing gamekeeper. The history of the authority shows it to be incapable of policing cloning, which could have sinister connotations. Yet in its naivety, the Donaldson expert group promises us the "same stringent controls" on cloning as the authority has exercised over IVF and embryo research.

Finally, it is important to question the way in which legislation and changes to regulations are presented to Parliament. The change in regulations under the Act to allow human cloning for so-called therapeutic purposes will be presented as an affirmative instrument. In principle, both Houses of Parliament will be able to debate the issue, but with a straight yes or no vote. There will be no opportunity to amend the details.

It is outrageous that such an instrument should be used to make a major change to the Act on a matter that was not fully debated during the Bill's passage through Parliament in 1990. Surely that is an abuse of Parliament. I took part in the debates, and no one seriously considered the possibility of cloning. The Government, however, claim that the Act makes it legal to carry out cell nuclear replacement, one of the techniques of cloning. If the Minister cannot say today what section permits that, perhaps she will write to me.

In contrast to the manner in which so-called therapeutic cloning is being introduced through the back door, the Government's handling of reproductive cloning is altogether different. The move to strengthen our laws against that, as the Government claim to be doing, will be presented to Parliament as specific legislation. That will be fully debated and voted on, with Members given the opportunity to table amendments.

The whole exercise is futile, because reproductive cloning is already illegal—but that approach gives a positive spin to the Government's activities. It is obviously intended to make it appear as if they are taking action to strengthen respect for human life. Happily, many Members of all parties have become alert to that. I suspect that that is why this week we were offered two Department of Health briefing sessions, with only 24 hours' notice, which was probably a sign of panic. The Government have become concerned about the overwhelming defeat—by more than two votes to one—of the Stem Cell Research Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon, and are aware that many Members are seriously worried about cloning.

Hon. Members recognise—just as the Wellcome report tells us that members of the public do—that a clone is a genetic extension of a living individual, and that aspects of the scientific research would not be therapeutic. Like their constituents, hon. Members are becoming increasingly concerned. I hope that they will stand firm and join us in opposing the Government's plan to thrust human cloning on the nation by means of an affirmative resolution. I urge hon. Members not to give way on this vital issue.

11.56 am

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): It is in the nature of Friday Adjournment debates that there is a wide-ranging discussion and an opportunity to explore fundamental questions in greater depth. Today has been no exception, and I am pleased to take part in such a considered debate.

It is important to be clear about the central proposition that will come before the House for a decision. That proposition will be simple. It will be limited in its scope and, I believe, easily understood. It does not require an understanding of the finer points of embryology or, indeed, stem cell research. However, I recommend the parliamentary Office of Science and Technology's note of June this year on that subject.

The reason for the debate is that we anticipate new regulations, the effect of which will be to extend the purposes for which human embryos may be used in

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research. The exacting framework and rules of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority will, as the Minister clearly stated, remain in place. There will have to be conditions of consent and there will only be a permission for usage up to 14 days, and only when no alternative effective method of research is available.

The change proposed by the Donaldson report is not fundamental, but, as the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) illustrated, it means revisiting some of the most fundamental arguments of the original debates, which culminated in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Like the hon. Lady, I was also in the House during the passage of the Bill, but of course I voted for it and have a settled view. I am satisfied that it has provided a proper framework to govern the everyday work of people who seek to assist childless couples.

The authority has carried out its duties in an exemplary way, given that it is working at the forefront of science and in difficult circumstances. It has faced up to the tough challenges of Diane Blood and, more recently, the Scottish couple who wanted to determine the sex of their embryo. We cannot underestimate the ethical dimensions of the work and the concern of the general public. I certainly do not.

In the context of genetically modified crops and foods, the Government tell us that their decisions will be based on sound science, and it is reasonable for us to ask what is sound science. If it were simply to be objective, accurate and peer reviewed, it would not necessarily be ethical. The public understand that. We must bring human judgment to bear on scientific decisions.

We have rights as individuals and as a society to insist on moral frameworks within which science is carried out in our name. I am a strong opponent of the way in which GM foods and crops have been introduced into the food chain and our environment. I do not believe that science should be allowed to go unfettered. In my youth, I was an experimental scientist in genetics for a few years. I know that there are cavalier scientists. I also understand the enormous excitement of working at the forefront of science, and I know that scientists often become so focused on their work that they exclude all other influences. We are therefore right to be cautious.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) mentioned BSE. Of course, the tragedy of BSE has been a disaster for scientists and has done much damage to their reputations. However, I suggest that it was more the fault of politicians and administrators than of scientists. I also know that, but for the extraordinary achievements of our scientists, engineers and technologists, human beings in this country and throughout the developed world would still be living nasty, brutish and short lives.

As legislators, we have a duty to grasp the developments and progress of science, and to ensure that our legislation, in setting appropriate frameworks, keeps pace with them. As human beings, we want better health for ourselves and our loved ones. We want our pain alleviated and, as we move inevitably to our deaths, we hope to avoid the most disabling conditions and the dependency that they bring. We constantly will our medical services to provide ever more effective care and cures. As a society, we cannot hold those attitudes and aspirations without facing the responsibilities of making decisions about the fundamental research that makes future cures possible.

The issue of experimentation using stem cells arises because of the huge advances in understanding degenerative diseases. No one proposes that embryos be donated for unspecified research purposes. As the Minister confirmed today, the Donaldson report has made a limited proposal for the use of donated embryos, which would otherwise be destroyed, in the service of the living. I believe that that is an ethical purpose.

Furthermore, we must keep at the forefront of our minds the reasons why embryonic cells are available. It is not the reason that is suggested in one of the letters that has been circulated to us from a woman called Pauline Egan. She says:

> Can you not see how we are condoning the manufacture of an underclass of human lives to serve us? We are creating a 21st Century style slave trade. Surely it is time to ask, "Why are embryos stockpiled" . . .

She goes on to say:

> If we accept it . . . then we send a clear message to future generations—that it is acceptable to destroy vulnerable human life as a means to an end.

That is an extraordinarily emotive and exaggerated view of the proposed research.

We are not considering human beings in the sense that most people perceive them—as foetuses, babies, children and adults. We are talking about a relatively small mass of cells. Yes, they are human cells, and special consideration and respect should be shown them, but in no way can the sentiments of the letter that I cited be applied to the proposals that the House will consider. If those sentiments were true, I would certainly oppose the sort of cloning that that letter suggests.

There is no suggestion that women should be asked to donate eggs for scientific research. The eggs and embryos that are the subject of the debate arise in the laboratories of doctors who attempt to assist those who are infertile. We should remember that assisted conception is the motivation for the production of embryos, and all those involved have to give their express consent. I think that the majority of people in society believe that people have the right, within the safeguards of the 1990 Act, to create those embryos. In the current state of science and practice, the number of embryos created exceeds those used in the treatment.

As someone who has experienced the pain of childlessness, I believe that I can understand the feelings of those who seek IVF treatment. More than most, they have an acute sense of what life is. They also have lengthy and close contact with medical science and an appreciation of the efforts of those who work in the service of human health and well-being. Those are the people who would be asked to donate eggs and embryos that would otherwise be destroyed. My guess is that many of them will feel that, for up to 14 days, their human cells can be used for alternative and ethical purposes that would advance the common good. As the Minister explained, that common good is research into degenerative diseases.

The hon. Member for Congleton spoke of adult stem cells as the alternative. She misunderstands science if she believes that a spate of papers, which suggest that adult stem cells can be used to produce cells for different sorts of tissue, means that there is no need for other

fundamental research. A sound body of opinion in the scientific community believes, for reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) outlined, that it is not an alternative but an addition. At the moment, some fundamental research can be done most effectively by using embryonic stem cells.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Does the hon. Lady believe that research should be conducted on primates, which are nearest to human beings, before embryonic research is undertaken? Does she agree that that is the right way forward? It has been the traditional way forward, and can provide extremely helpful data and information before the move on to embryonic research.

Joan Ruddock: As the hon. Lady knows, I do not work in that field. We would have to ask for the judgment of scientists who do. I rely on their judgment, and they believe that some fundamental research can best be done using embryonic stem cells. I stress that that has arisen only because of the progress in understanding human degenerative diseases. There cannot always be application across species to advance that science. It is for the House to decide whether such research should be added to existing legislation. There will be a free vote, but my opinion is that the House should take a positive decision. We have a duty to society and to the sufferers of degenerative diseases.

I conclude by quoting from a letter that I received from Maureen McHugh, a 44-year-old woman with a boy of six and a girl of eight. She is in her fifth year of Parkinson's disease and writes:

> I am a Soil Scientist by profession, but now . . . I am unable to work.

She says that Parkinson's disease

> is a cruel and complex degenerative neurological condition that devastates lives. Drugs allow us to function after a fashion, but provide symptomatic relief only, while the side effects which can be crippling, invariably increase in severity over time. People endure untold miseries and the outlook for younger sufferers in particular is intolerably bleak. Embryo stem cell research offers one of our best hopes for real treatment and I believe that it is vital that this work is allowed to proceed.

I agree with Maureen McHugh, and feel a great sense of duty to all those who suffer from such conditions. I take seriously the views of the Donaldson committee and others who suggest that we should in due course extend, in the proposed very limited and specific way, the purposes for which research is permitted on embryos.

12.10 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Only two of the Members present took part in the debates during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. It is a pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) in the Chamber. It is noteworthy that she and I took opposing views then, and we shall do so again today. It is important for the House to have some continuity in its arguments.

One argument that always worries me on such occasions is the postbag argument. My postbag has not bulged with letters on this subject: I have received only 34 from my 100,000 constituents although, of course, I pay extremely careful attention to their views. We need to be rather careful in this context—perhaps we should also refer to the e-mail postbag and to confrontations and discussions in the street. If we are talking numbers, it is important to recognise that, at the height of the debate, 17 out of 659 hon. Members were present in the Chamber, and not one represented a Scottish or Welsh constituency. Should we take that as a guide to the strength of the House's opinion on the matter? It is also significant that precisely nine hon. Members are present at the moment, including you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The various issues that we have discussed include the rather interesting assertion that science should not press ahead of the body politic. Well, Aristotle would have had something to say about that, as would Galileo—the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) pointed that out—and Darwin. I was a member of the Medical Research Council in 1990 and during the gestation of the 1990 Act I recall discussing with the most distinguished scientists in the land the impact on public opinion of the legislation, which the Conservative Government knew was necessary. The argument was about how much should be included in the legislation, how far it should go and whether the country was ready for cloning.

It is nonsense to argue that cloning was never considered during the passage of the 1990 Act—of course it was. I recall a distinguished scientist saying that it would take 20 years before we started talking about therapeutic cloning. He was wrong—it took 10. The Government of the day made the informed judgment that it was not appropriate at that stage to go quite as far as we are now being asked to go because scientists were years ahead of the body politic and of public opinion—they always have been and always will be.

As a veteran of that debate, I recall that I said that the scientists would return to Parliament. Scientists are, largely, very responsible people. They know that they have to operate within the law and that laws quickly become outdated. They must come clean and say, "That provision simply does not apply any more. We have gone further and discovered more." That is why they are back today.

The debate 10 years ago was full and fierce in Parliament and outside, and it has continued over the years. Questions about embryology in various guises were, at least in my constituency, general election issues. They were minority issues, but they were important to the people who raised them in 1992 and 1997, so I cannot accept the argument that the nation is only just waking up to them and that we need much more time to consider them. We have been discussing them for a decade. Anyone who is remotely interested in the subject, whether from a moral, religious, ethical or scientific point of view, has had ample opportunity to argue for that.

Last summer, the debate started again, in the context of the Donaldson report. I did not mind that it was published in the middle of August. It gave us a nice long period to read the darn thing, to think about it and to discuss it while the House was not sitting, rather than having the five-minute wonder of an instant statement, 30 to 40 minutes of questions to the Minister and then saying that Parliament had done its job. I do not doubt that it was convenient for the media manipulators in the Government, too, but I do not read into that a conspiracy theory.

Given that we will have at least six months before we are asked to come to a decision following the publication of the Donaldson report, it is extraordinary that anyone should accuse the Government of rushing Parliament into

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the discussion or debate. I have read carefully, for example, the background paper dated 16 August. That seems pretty close to the publication of the Donaldson report. By 16 August, the Church of Scotland had reached its moral and ethical conclusions, which it circulated. I am grateful to it. It has done much good work, but I was surprised that its background paper should say:

> We welcome the Government's decision to put these questions to a free vote, but the autumn is too soon. It is clear from surveys and experience that few of the general public or MPs at present understand these complex issues. It will therefore need a far wider public discussion before Parliament should put it to the vote. A recent House of Lords report highlighted the need, in these post-GM days, of a close public involvement over biotechnology decisions. These issues are too large and too far reaching to be scrambled through by a rushed parliamentary procedure.

Where have the Churches been for 10 years? I notice that so few Members are here today. It is a pity.

Those who are ill and in pain cannot wait. We should not be dilatory, but what causes concern to our constituents? I have had 34 letters—28 against and six for—on extending cloning to therapeutic cloning. I shall list some of the arguments as to why I should not support the proposal. People felt that human cloning was degrading. They said that we should use adult cells. Someone said that there was no basis in science for denying full protection to the foetus. There was the slippery-slope argument. I was told that we should not allow "farmed for organ tissue". I was told that it was abortion. I was told that there are other ways of dealing with the problem. Someone said, "This will legalise cloning." That person was 10 years out of date. Others said that it was "cannibalisation". Someone said that it was abhorrent to God's law and human morals.

Then there are those in favour. A lot of constituents with particular diseases are in favour. We have all received passionate letters from individual constituents. We all have many constituents with such degenerative diseases—there are thousands in each of our constituencies. Some of the letters that I have had opposing the proposal are somewhat lacking in compassion for their friends and neighbours, whom we all know.

The medical charities cannot all be wrong. There are about 100 of them; they are members of the Association of Medical Research Charities. They include the Alzheimer's Disease Society, the Arthritis Research Campaign, the Breast Cancer Campaign, the British Heart Foundation, the Cancer Research Campaign, the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, Inspire—of which I am a patron, and which is located at the Duke of Cornwall spinal treatment centre in Salisbury—the Marie Curie Research Institute, the Migraine Trust, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Parkinson's Disease Society, the Psoriasis Association and the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Those are all everyday charities. They cannot all be wrong in believing that the proposal is the right way to go.

I felt that it was not appropriate for the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) to introduce a subject of this gravity as a ten-minute rule Bill. I attended the debate throughout and listened to both sides. I did not vote and I was not alone; less than a quarter of Members voted on that day.

Inevitably, constituents have offered me conflicting advice. Some have written from specific moral or religious standpoints, while others have shared their personal experience. That places on me and on each of us a heavy responsibility to come to an informed judgment.

I have listened to many people. I have listened to pressure groups, to charities, to different Christian views and to moral philosophers. I have my own religious, moral and practical views, based on my active membership of the Church of England and on the challenges faced by my wife and me on the birth of our first child, who died of a rare genetic disorder after only a few days with us. I thank God that we went on to have three strapping children as a result of the genetic counselling that we were given at the time and of the advances that were no doubt made.

Thus our advisers are many, but hon. Members can reach only one view and we can each cast only one vote when the time comes. The practical benefits of supporting the Government's recommendations are easy to follow. As I have said, our constituencies include thousands of people, whom we know personally, who could benefit—and, if they could not, someone younger could. The Minister and others have put the medical arguments very clearly, and I shall not repeat them.

Whatever the science involved, the love that makes a child is miraculous and awe-inspiring, but when does a life begin? I take the traditional Christian view that human life is a continuum, and it does not start at the moment of conception. Apart from being the logical scientific and evolutionary view, that is also the philosophical tradition of Christians. Aristotle believed that an intellectual soul could exist only when a recognisable human form had grown at 40 days, at least, for a male, and I regret to say that he believed that it was 90 days for a female. St. Gregory and St. Augustine preached that view, as did the Celtic Church, and it was entrenched in canon law in the Catholic west and in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. In 1869, Pope Pious IX published a papal bull, which remains the basis of Roman Catholic teaching today, asserting that human life, body and soul, starts at the moment of conception. As a Protestant, I find it strange to point out that the Catholics are the revisionists in this matter, but that is the fact.

Of course, it is only in the past 50 years or so that we have known enough to make judgments based on scientific fact. I am completely convinced that not everything that can be done by science should be done by science. That is where Parliament becomes involved, representing the conflicting views of our people and adjudicating on how far science should go. The moral arguments for and against permitting research using human embryos turn on the status accorded to the pre-14-day embryo.

As Baroness Warnock has said,

> Is the fact that, under certain circumstances, they may develop into human beings sufficient to make us regard them now, at the stage they are at, as full human beings—in which case of course they should be protected from exploitation and certainly from being used as research material, just as other human beings, including children, should—or is the fact that they have no human attributes, and if left in the laboratory, no chance of acquiring such attributes, enough to allow us to treat them more as human tissue than as human persons?

There is no doubt that they are human, but are they human tissue or human persons?

I share the view of the former Archbishop of York, John Habgood, who has argued that the value that we attach to the lives of human beings—a value that is the root of all morality—increases as human life develops, and that we are therefore entitled, morally, to hold the life of a recently fertilised egg as less to be protected than that of a foetus at a later stage or a baby when it is born. The Archbishop argued that not only is that morally acceptable, but that it is in fact what we do.

Nature is profligate. We do not mourn for wasted sperm and eggs, alive though they are; nor for the three quarters of fertilised eggs that are lost before implant, half of which are genetically impaired. As the Bishop of Oxford has said,

> If every fertilised egg was indeed a soul, that is, an immortal spiritual reality created independently of the biological process, then, according to these figures, three quarters of heaven would be populated by souls that lived for less than a week. This does not seem congruous with what we know of a God who has chosen to create persons through a process of development.

What of the slippery slope argument? It depends whether the slope goes up or down. I share the view that the slope for science is mostly uphill—two steps forward, one step back. Even if one believes that the slope is downhill, if the first step is taken, is it inevitable that the next step should follow? Is it morally right to prohibit the first step? There is no logical necessity that demands that the second or third steps should follow the first. That is Parliament's job, and it has generally done the job well. Moral philosophers such as Baroness Warnock recognise that. She has written:

> We are not nothing but our genes. We must recognise that we are conscious beings able to form our own purposes, with powers both to understand and to control the laws of biology, as well as of physics. It may be our moral duty to scrutinise, criticise and regulate the projects of biological scientists in the light of our concept of a common good. It cannot be our moral duty to repress and prohibit altogether the exercise of their inventive and creative genius.

I agree with the Bishop of Oxford, who said:

> It is good that we can interact with nature, as God's co-workers, in bringing about the health which he wills for humanity and those healthy children that he desires.

Theologically, I believe that the human intellectual abilities that allow us to understand and manipulate our world are God-given powers. To scientific knowledge and the powers it confers we must add wisdom to accept the good and refuse the bad. I believe that the benefits that may be achieved in healing the sick in this case outweigh the down side of using cells that may have the potential for a full human life. If the Government ask Parliament to decide on a free vote, I will have the moral confidence to exercise my judgment in favour of extending research on embryos to include therapeutic as well as reproductive purposes.

I should like to explore the concept of scientists playing God. In the Reith lecture broadcast earlier this year, Prince Charles spoke for many when he rebuked biological revolutionaries for drawing us into areas that

> belonged to God and God alone.

The argument ran that God created natural laws and the proper boundaries between species, so it is necessarily immoral, even sacrilege, to try to change the genome of any species. He urged scientists to be humble in the face of nature, and to discover, if they like, how nature works, but not to change it. We human beings should know our place. We are part of the natural world, and to understand and conserve it is a moral duty—we should not arrogantly try to dominate it.

To me, such strictures are not wholly sufficient, because part of what it is to be human is that, unlike other animals, we can change the way things are, and we have always done so. We have tamed nature to a great extent for our own needs, just as we have tamed and domesticated other animals so that we can milk them, eat them, clothe ourselves in their skin or wool, ride them, drive them and race them for our pleasure and profit. For the sake of all those purposes, we have over time genetically modified the plants and animals that we have used by selective breeding. If we left nature alone, we would be not even savages, but back with our ancestors the apes. We are necessarily separated from nature. If that were not so, we would have no moral law, no aspirations and no interest in the common good.

To argue that something is morally wrong because it is unnatural has always been common enough—we need think only of the designation of homosexuality as an "unnatural vice." The 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, said that it is really no argument at all, for the word "natural" is fatally ambiguous, being opposed sometimes to the miraculous, sometimes to the unusual, and sometimes to the artificial. The concept of nature, especially since the late 18th century in the days of Rousseau and the beginning of the Romantic movement, exercises a curious fascination for us all. We have discovered in nature our deepest longings and our highest aspirations. I recognise that, for many, nature has come to stand in for God, providing them with a foundation for a secular religion.

We are uneasily aware that our lives have moved far away from the primitive, and even from the relative simplicities of a pre-industrial world. Now, in a largely secular world, the boundaries that gave meaning to life even into the 19th century seem to be breaking down. The breach of those boundaries induces what I can only describe as panic, which makes us cling to props and planks, and to apparent certainties by which we hope to save ourselves. If we are not careful, we become fundamentalists hanging on to a few dogmas that we do not intend to examine and which we will not give up. Those who demand that we should do only what is natural are fundamentalists. Hence, the constant attacks on biological scientists for playing God.

If we are to prevent ourselves from being swept along on this emotional tide, I believe that, rather as the British philosopher Bishop Butler told us in the 18th century, we should sit down "in a cool hour" and consider our human nature, our human capacities, how we aim both to control our own lives and to ameliorate the lives of others, and how, being human, we are able to form aspirations and imperatives of our own.

If we can hold out hope for some alleviation of the miseries of diseases such as Alzheimer's, then, being human, we have a duty to do so. If that involves cell transplant or genetic manipulation, let us pursue such goals. Let us recognise that, in changing some genes in some human beings, we are not changing human nature.

12.30 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): We have had a fascinating debate, although the number of hon. Members has not been many and is certainly depleted

[Dr. Evan Harris]

now. It is particularly disappointing, if not distressing, to see that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) has left the Chamber. She had much to say about the views of others, and I had hoped to challenge her to justify some of her own views.

We have heard discussion of both the scientific and the moral—the so-called moral and ethical—dimensions of the issue, and I think we are better for that. I think it has now been generally agreed that there are moral arguments on both sides of the issue. Even the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) was driven to accept that point, after he had initially suggested that the arguments against the proposals were based on morality, whereas those in favour were based on science. That is certainly not the case.

I am driven to my view on the issue not by the science, although that is an important factor, but by the ethical duty I believe we as representatives have to do what is right. After careful examination, I have judged that, although it will entail the curtailment of the rights of some early embryos, allowing research into life-saving therapies is the right thing to do. The issue is one of balancing rights. I think that if the balance of good and of rights weighs in favour of the proposals, we are ethically obliged to vote accordingly.

Those who are against the proposals have argued forcefully that embryos, like adults and live babies, have the right not to have damage done to them. Although those who are on my side of the debate might disagree with that argument, we respect it. I believe, however, that those of us who take the view that the proposals are ethically right should be speaking very loudly about the needs of people with fatal diseases and disabling conditions, and asserting their right to have their interests considered.

In that light, the speeches particularly of the hon. Members for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and for Salisbury (Mr. Key) were very welcome. They passionately made the case, which should be made passionately, that patients and their carers have the right to have their interests considered. They also made the point that we should first consider the scientific facts, and then, from our own moral perspectives, weigh the rights of people with the diseases and conditions that I mentioned against the rights of early embryos.

It has been said that the theological arguments on the issue have been made only by those who are against the proposals. That is not true. I am not a theologian, or anything like one, and I shall not attempt to comment directly on theology, but I should like to quote from a text that was sent to me by the author, Professor Reverend Robin Gill, who is a leading Church of England theologian. He said:

> I believe that we should give a cautious but genuine welcome to the prospect of stem cell research for therapeutic purposes and to the Donaldson Report. Although most of my twenty minutes will be spent looking at ethical problems, it is important to emphasise that there is the prospect of real good for very vulnerable people emerging from this research. Sometimes genetic scientists are pictured in demonic terms and their work is decried as being deeply destructive of the natural order. I do not share this position at all and am convinced that the aims of the stem cell research envisaged in the Donaldson Report are fundamentally beneficent. Anyone who has pastoral or personal contact with those suffering from, say, Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease will surely wish to find a cure and will welcome scientists who are attempting to do this. Where people differ is not usually about the ends of research but about the means.
>
> Some will be convinced that, since the early stages of stem cell research involve the creation and subsequent destruction of embryos, then this research is intrinsically wrong whatever therapeutic benefits it promises. I respect this position—it is after all held by many deeply religious people—but I do not hold it myself. Others will argue on a purely utilitarian basis that the therapeutic advantages of stem cell research simply override any scruples about human embryos or fears about human reproductive cloning. Again this is not my position. What I will argue more cautiously is that our duties towards the sick and vulnerable (which I take to be at the heart of Jewish and Christian ethics) should finally be given priority over our duties to those embryos that should never be implanted.

Mr. Swayne: The learned theologian prefaced his remarks, however, by saying that, in his estimate, there was a real probability of advances being made. I assume that the hon. Gentleman was quoting the professor because of his expertise in ethics, but what qualifications does he have to enable him to make an estimate of the probability of real good coming out of the scientific research?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman raised that point earlier, and I will deal with it because it is an important matter. To weigh the benefits, one must be reasonably certain that the research is not a complete dead end. That is a legitimate point, but I think that it can be dealt with.

It is necessary to recognise that Church bodies are not only on one side of the argument. Briefings from the Church of England, which supports generally the provisions of the 1990 Act, are clear about the benefits. There is no automatic—Anglican, at least—theological objection to the proposals. My local bishop, the Bishop of Oxford—a near namesake, Richard Harries—has clearly said to me, and is willing for me to report, that he supports the proposals, although he recognises the ethical concerns. I suspect we will find that, although the Church of England's board of social responsibility represents different views, the Church is generally supportive both of careful regulation and of progress being allowed when there are no new ethical issues.

The hon. Member for Congleton—who, I regret, is no longer here to participate in this debate—suspects some conspiracy. She feels that it is somehow wrong for the Medical Research Council, which is entitled to its view, to hold meetings, issue briefing papers and, indeed, send those papers to Members of Parliament. She believes that it is wrong that, around the same time, the Association of Medical Research Charities, which enjoys the huge participation of many of our constituents and is funded by their generosity, should set out its view. She thinks that the British Medical Association, the Royal Society and the Wellcome Trust, which are fully engaged, should not be allowed to communicate their view to Members of Parliament without its being seen as a conspiracy.

It is the right of those bodies to advise us and inform our debate, just as it is the right of the Scottish cardinal and the Archbishop of Birmingham, both of whom have written to me, to make their views known. I have had messages from Right to Life, from Life and from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, and I have read them carefully. I see no deleterious conspiracy arising from that. The hon. Lady should not see conspiracy in people putting their views when the time

comes to debate these matters. I find it hard to understand it when she says that she does not accept any assurances given by scientists about the future, except for one view—which she probably misquotes—of one scientist, Lord Winston, whom she reports as saying that, 20 years down the line, we will have reproductive cloning. She cannot have it both ways. She must either take the advice of the majority of scientists, or say that she will reach her own view.

The hon. Lady made some comments about the extent of my knowledge of the Government's timetable. She said that I had given an interview to a journalist from *The Tablet*. Since she made the allegation, I have searched in my diary in the hope of finding even someone who might have masqueraded as such, but I can find no reference to any such interview. I repeat that at no time have I said that I know the Government's intentions; indeed, I have perhaps been as frustrated as the hon. Lady by the difficulties created by Government business managers, such as the short notice that was given of today's debate. The hon. Lady really ought to stick to issues about which she is certain. If she does not, she risks passing on the misinformation that she has been given to the House.

The hon. Member for Salisbury has already dealt with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge that science must wait for public opinion. He cited the difficulties that that would have created for Galileo and Darwin. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that the cannibalistic feeding of animals to other animals was abhorrent, and that it should have been foreseen that it was wrong. I do not think we can say that the eating of animals by other animals, even members of the same species, is abhorrent or unnatural—as we see on television, it happens in the animal world. Animals eat animals, even those in their own families. What has become obvious is that the idea of feeding animals to their own species in the context of farming was not sensible. I do not want to go into the details, but those who have examined the matter suggest that it was politicians who were unwise not to heed that.

It is important to look at the history of this measure. In December 1998, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the Government's appointed authority—the House's appointed authority—produced a report jointly with the Human Genetics Advisory Commission, the Government's advisory body. The report concluded that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 should indeed be amended to allow two more purposes of research.

I think that the Government should have started a parliamentary debate at that time, or at least indicated their willingness to present regulations and engage in debate on them. We now have the report of the Donaldson committee that the Government set up. I urged the Government, as did Members in every part of both Houses, to publish it in July, while Parliament was still sitting. If they had done so, we could have had the debates that we are having now at the time of publication, when press coverage was informed and balanced and there was a certain amount of discussion in the media. Parliamentarians, however, were not present to hear a statement from a Minister. On 16 August, many parliamentarians were out of the country, and no Minister was found to speak on the subject. For that reason, Parliament fell behind in the debate, and we are now having to catch up.

It is because there was no sign of the report's publication in July that I applied for the opportunity to present a ten-minute Bill. In retrospect, I agree with the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) that the time was not convenient, but until Back Benchers are given more power to decide the timing of private Members' Bills, it is a little unjust to suggest that that was an avoidable factor.

Having said that, and having reflected on the matter, I am not at all embarrassed about the ten-minute Bill. It provoked a debate in Parliament and in public, and it made constituents on both sides of the argument understand that the issue would soon be before the House. I am willing to apologise to those who felt rushed into having to decide how to vote on the principle—that was not my intention when I tabled the Bill—but if my action pushed organisations supporting the measure into telling MPs that they supported it and why, and if it prompted patients' organisations and patients able to make representations to do the same, it will have done some good. Indeed, if we have to lose one vote but win the next, I am pleased that my own measure was defeated on a low turnout and hope that the Government measure will be passed. That exercise was therefore useful.

I shall deal with an important argument against the proposals which involves adult stem cells. I accept that some people have fundamental objections to embryo research, and I do not think that I will change their minds, those of my constituents who have written to me on the matter or, indeed, those of people in my constituency who have gathered signatures for petitions. I respect their views, but I have a fundamentally different view about the rights of an early embryo. Early embryos have some rights, but they are not the same as those of babies or adult human beings, about which we have heard. People with different views about those rights make a consistent case but when they start to subvert science to support their side of the argument, we are entitled to say that they are on shaky ground.

There is not an either/or choice between adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells, as research into both kinds of cells is taking place. The proposals do not suggest that research into adult stem cells should be stopped. Indeed, I believe that that research should be pursued with great vigour. However, we cannot stop research in one area in the hope that another area may yield results. It would not be reasonable, for example, for us to stop live organ donation, such as kidney donation—often from relatives of the recipient, but not always—just because we think that adult stem cell research may produce tissue replacement therapy. There are problems with live organ donation, which is not straightforward and would not be desirable if it was not necessary. However, we should not stop research into making it easier and more acceptable simply because we hope that tissue replacement may be forthcoming from stem cell research.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has talked about the use of embryonic cells in research. Would he seek to rule out the use of embryonic cells in routine treatment? Recommendation 8 of the Donaldson report states:

> The need for legislation to permit the use of embryo-derived cells in treatments developed from this new research should be kept under review.

[Mr. Hammond]

That clearly holds open the possibility that the use of embryonic material in treatments will be sanctioned in future.

Dr. Harris: Use of embryo-derived cells as treatments may well be given the go-ahead in future, and we shall debate that then. However, the hon. Gentleman may have to deal with a more difficult question. If adult stem cells were not available for use in therapy for fatal illnesses but cells derived in cell lines from early embryos were available for therapy—although that is unlikely to be on a large scale because of the shortage of embryos and eggs—would he argue that, in the hope that something else might come along, we should not treat sick people with available treatments? The hon. Gentleman would have a difficult decision to make.

We must be clear. Scientists working in this field believe that adult stem cells may well be the way forward for therapies. However, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge and those who argue that we must not go down that path because adult stem cell research has made great progress and answers are just round the corner must accept that there have been 20 years of research on embryonic stem cells in animal models, but only about two years of research on adult stem cells, which has involved difficulties.

I may be able to answer the hon. Gentleman's question by quoting from the Royal Society's statement in November 2000. That is hardly out of date. The Royal Society asks:

> Do the recent advances in research on stem cells obtained from sources other than embryos, such as adult tissue, mean that eventually it will be possible to use these cells for all the purposes that have been contemplated for human embryonic stem cells?

It continues by way of an answer:

> Stem cells are found in some adult tissues, and these may be used as sources for specific types of specialised cells. But there are many doubts about whether adult stem cells will prove to be as versatile as embryonic stem cells, which have the potential to give rise to all cell types of the adult body.
>
> Eventually it may be possible to re-programme cells to reverse their specialisation so that they revert to being stem cells, or to force specialised cells to replicate themselves. However, much further research on stem cells and cloning technology would be needed to decide whether these are realistic possibilities.

It asks the following reasonable question:

> Could cells from non-embryonic sources ever render research on human embryonic stem cells unnecessary for the development of cell-based therapies?

It gives the answer:

> At some point, research on embryonic stem cells might no longer offer any advantages over work with stem cells from sources such as adult tissue. But much more basic research is required to find out how stem cells from non-embryonic sources can be extracted, kept alive in the laboratory, multiplied for extended periods of time, and directed to form specific types of specialised cells. The progress of this research would be facilitated by the study of embryonic stem cells.

So people who do not support the measure, but advocate adult stem cell research, must recognise that the scientific opinion is that that research will be helped by research on embryonic stem cells. It is not a question of one or the other.

The Royal Society report mentions other problems with adult stem cells. It states:

> Adult stem cells are typically present only in small numbers and replicate at relatively low rates because they are self-programmed to maintain the function of fully-developed organs and tissues. Embryonic and fetal stem cells are much more prolific and versatile and are therefore much more likely to generate sufficient tissue to replace severely damaged parts of the body. Moreover, scientists already have knowledge and experience of growing such stem cells in the laboratory.

That is the important scientific fact and the view of scientists.

The Royal Society report asks:

> Could research on human embryonic stem cells provide us with effective therapies more quickly? If so, how much quicker?

It gives the following answer:

> Again, it is difficult to make predictions. Our understanding of embryonic stem cells is more advanced than it is for most types of adult stem cells. A great deal of research has been carried out on embryonic stem cells from mice, and these results may allow work on human stem cells to progress comparatively rapidly. Therefore, initial therapeutic applications are likely to be based on transplants of embryonic and fetal stem cells that are not genetically matched to the patient and must be accompanied by the use of drugs that suppress the response of the body's immune system to the foreign tissue.

I hope that that answers the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. It is important to place it on record that researchers on adult stem cells support the use of embryonic stem cells in research as it provides some important insights.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) asked how likely it is that the research will produce therapeutic benefits, as on that basis it is hard to judge the balance. I am sure that he will get an answer to that. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority will be asking whether the use of embryonic stem cells is necessary or whether any other cells or systems, including those from animals, can be used for that specific research project.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great supporter of market forces. He should be aware that scientific research does not operate in a vacuum free from questions of funding, particularly when it is privately funded. Much research is funded from private sources and that funding will not become available unless it is clear that the research is likely to produce therapeutic and—as no doubt the hon. Gentleman would applaud—commercial benefits. Indeed, even in the public sector it is extremely hard to get funding for research projects that do not seem likely to produce benefits. So the hon. Gentleman can take solace in the marketplace.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, but there is a leap of faith involved in that we are being asked to delegate those decisions, albeit to a market or to the commissioners who decide whether the research should go ahead. Rather, I was looking for some indication at the outset that would prompt me to be willing to delegate that authority.

Dr. Harris: I shall send the hon. Gentleman the views of the Royal Society and others who say that, in principle, 20 years' work on embryonic stem cells from animal models suggest that it is a highly productive source of research and that research on adult stem cells, which,

perversely, is advocated by opponents of the measure, will be aided by that work. The HFEA will look at each application on its merits, bearing in mind whether it is likely to be fruitful research. The hon. Gentleman can, even outside the marketplace that he so loves, have that reassurance if he is prepared to read it.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that the benefits against which the concerns have to be weighed extended only to the protection of the pharmaceutical and bioscience research industry. I think that he has misunderstood. If one believes that there are likely to be therapeutic benefits—as science believes, almost unanimously—one has to accept that that factor must be weighed in our discussions. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) that it would be a dodgy ethical position to ban such research in this country and then accept therapies derived from research that took place overseas. It is perfectly legitimate for the hon. Gentleman and for the hon. Member for Congleton—whom I am delighted to welcome back to her place—not to want any therapies for them or their young children that are derived from these sources. However, this is a matter of what we want to be available for other people.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that my point was that, whatever we decide, this research will proceed elsewhere in the world? Nothing that we do or say will stop that, and nothing that we do or say will change the outcome.

Dr. Harris: I agree with that. We have to decide whether we think that this research is ethical. We have extremely effective regulation through the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, introduced by the previous Government, of whom the hon. Member for Salisbury was a well-informed and active member, and if we decide that such research is ethical, we should allow scientists to go ahead with it in this country. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge will otherwise be faced with the difficulty of deciding whether, for him or his constituents, he can support therapies for diabetes and Parkinson's disease that have been derived from work on early embryos which he has decided should not be allowed to take place in this country. That would be an unethical position. The hon. Gentleman must understand that if he does not like the idea of the research, he is saying that he does not want to benefit from the research, should it be successful.

The strong regulation in this country should make us more willing to set a lead by producing legislation on this matter. The 1990 Act is seen by many as a leading model of regulation, and I hope that other countries will follow our lead in ensuring that such techniques, which are allowed in the private sector with no regulation in the United States, should be properly controlled.

The Donaldson report is quite clear about consent, as is the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. A woman who donates an egg or an embryo for research should be given—and, with the Government's acceptance of the Donaldson recommendations, will be given—the ability to give informed consent on what happens to that embryo and that egg, and what research should be allowed on them. There will be no suggestion of a woman's eggs or a couple's embryos being allowed to be used for research that they do not support.

It is important to clear up the matter of consent. In a case decided yesterday, a woman who was having IVF treatment under the control of the 1990 Act was successfully able to sue because her consent for the implantation of only two embryos had been breached, it appears, by the clinic. I say to everyone involved in this work, and to doctors generally, that consent must be informed and must be recorded. The Government have a working party considering issues of consent. Some statutory basis may need to be given to those conclusions to avoid litigation like this and a repeat of the concerns and unhappiness that have arisen because of the retention and storage of organs without, it would appear, clear and informed consent. So consent runs right through this debate; it is a further protection for the people involved.

To the hon. Member for Congleton, I must say that the fact that we are having this debate, and that the outcome of the vote remains in the balance, suggests that the 1990 Act did not create a slippery slope towards all sorts of events that did not require parliamentary scrutiny. The fact that the law requires amendment to allow progress on this matter directly rebuts the view that careful legislation results in a slippery slope towards areas where we do not wish to go.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Would it not be better to have primary legislation before the House, as the Government propose for moves on reproductive cloning, which is already illegal? We could then have a proper debate and Members would be able to table reasoned amendments and new clauses. Would not that be a better way to proceed than by affirmative resolution?

Dr. Harris: When primary legislation is published on reinforcement of the ban on reproductive cloning, the hon. Lady may find that she has an opportunity to discuss the issues. The 1990 Act, however, which was introduced on a free vote by the Conservative Government whom she supported, set out in a schedule, amendable by secondary legislation, a list of purposes for which embryos could be used. Indeed, that Act foresaw the use of cell nuclear replacement—the hon. Lady would rather say "cloning techniques"—to create embryos, where some eggs are available, which is not the case in many circumstances. As long as we have a good debate in Parliament, I think it is reasonable to bring these matters forward in secondary legislation.

I have tried to prompt a debate on the matter, and the short debate on my ten-minute Bill attracted many more Members than are here today, even if not many relative to the full membership of the House. I regret that we cannot have this kind of debate in prime time.

Mr. Forth: It is prime time.

Dr. Harris: It is always prime time when the right hon. Gentleman is around.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, I want to make it clear that the Liberal Democrats have a free vote on this matter. It is worth pointing out that our party debated the matter in public at our party conference in September 1999. Ours was the first party to consider cloning and to produce a policy that was clearly against reproductive cloning. Indeed, we called for it to be outlawed. At the same time, however, we envisaged

[Dr. Harris]

situations in which therapeutic cloning might be of use. Again on a free vote, we recognised the benefits that that may have for patients. Our policy is generally in favour of that.

If those who oppose that policy take the view that a fertilised embryo has the full rights of a baby or an adult human being, there is no way I can see eye to eye with them. I respect their view, as does the Minister, but those people should not subvert scientific opinion. Opinion on what can be achieved with adult stem cells rather than embryonic stem cells falls clearly on the side of allowing embryonic stem cell research as a short or medium-term method of getting adult stem cells.

To those constituents who have, rightly, written to me on the matter, I have to say that I am morally unable to agree with their views. Those of us who sit in Parliament have a duty to respect their views; to examine, as I have done, the issues before reaching a decision; and to be clear and frank about where we stand. I look forward to measures being produced and to opportunities for the provision of therapy for the sometimes voiceless people who suffer serious diseases for which there is no immediate hope of cure.

1.4 pm

Yvette Cooper: As this is the first occasion on which I have stood before you at the Dispatch Box since you took on your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker, I welcome you to the Chair.

The debate has been extremely interesting, thoughtful and measured, and has covered some complicated issues. I welcome those discussions. Contributions from both sides of the House make it clear that this is not a party political issue; strong views are held in all parties. I am glad that the debate is being conducted with that very much in mind.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) set out the arguments on both sides, and expressed his personal concern at the pace of scientific change. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) pointed out that firm regulation will continue under the measures. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) described the value of scientific progress in this sphere. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) described, with some passion, the pain and suffering of people afflicted by Parkinson's disease, and talked of the hope inspired by the possibility of the treatment and cure that the regulations might facilitate.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) expressed her concerns about cloning and about the value of adult stem cell research. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) pointed out the value of giving couples the right to donate their embryos, under proper safeguards, to research that they believe will be worth while.

The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) pointed out that science moves fast; laws become out of date and need updating. Parliament must take the responsibility of deciding where on the slope—be it upward or downward—we should take our position. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) set out the case for embryonic stem cell research as opposed to research into other matters.

I should have made it clear earlier that the regulations would implement recommendations 1 and 4 of the Donaldson report, concerning research to increase understanding of human disease and treatment, and research into treatment for mitochondrial disease—we have not discussed that in detail today and I shall not do so now. The report's other recommendations are either already covered by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 or by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, or involve matters not for legislation, or matters that could be dealt with only through primary legislation.

The hon. Member for Congleton mentioned the timing of the publicising of the report and the debate about these issues. I am sorry that she chooses to see conspiracy everywhere. I strongly disagree with her analysis. The Donaldson report was published in August and received much media attention—rightly so. It was also right that there was a proper focus on the recommendations of that expert committee, in order to begin the debate. It would have been wrong for us to hold that report and delay it until the recall of Parliament in the autumn; we wanted the debate to begin and to be promoted not only in the House but throughout the country.

If the Government were able to co-ordinate the views of the Royal Society, the Medical Research Council, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and—especially—the BMA, it would certainly make the lives of those in the Department of Health easier, but I can assure the House that that idea is far from the truth.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: The hon. Lady may care to reflect on the fact that the Department of Health received the Donaldson report some considerable time before it was published. Will she contrast that with the fact that although the previous Conservative Government published the Warnock report at the end of a parliamentary Session, they gave Members of Parliament the opportunity to question the Government about it?

Yvette Cooper: We took the decision that we wanted to publish the Government's response to the Donaldson report at the same time as we published the report. We are giving the House plenty of opportunities to debate the issues; that is absolutely right.

Mrs. Winterton: Six months later.

Yvette Cooper: Yes, we are debating the matter almost six months after the publication of the report, but that is good, because it has given hon. Members—

Dr. Harris: It is three months later.

Yvette Cooper: Indeed; it is several months since publication of the report. The matter has thus been discussed in the media, and Members have had the chance to discuss it and to receive letters from constituents before we initiated the parliamentary debate.

It is important to make sure that we have a proper parliamentary discussion before the vote takes place. That is why we have held today's debate, and why we will need to hold a further debate on the Floor of the House of Commons before the vote takes place. We have held briefings this week—open to Members and peers—with

the chief medical officer on the content of the Donaldson report. We will be holding future briefings with the chief medical officer so Members can have the opportunity to ask questions and inform themselves about the detail. It is important that we have a proper public debate, and it is unfortunate that what the hon. Member for Congleton refers to as propaganda are in fact simply the legitimate views of those who disagree with her.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge went through the arguments on both sides of the debate in detail, and set up a tension between science and ethics. I would strongly disagree; there are ethical arguments on both sides, as has been clearly argued throughout the debate. This is not about science on the one hand and ethics on the other. There are separate scientific arguments that we need to address about how research can take place, and whether it should use embryonic stem cells or adult stem cells. That is the first question, and it is a scientific question on which we rightly take the advice of experts.

There is a second set of questions, concerning the ethical arguments about whether this is the right thing to do. Whatever science says is possible, is it the right thing to do? Is it right to use embryos in research? Is it right to destroy embryos if they are not used in IVF? Is it right, as my hon. Friend the Member for Deptford said, to give couples the chance to donate their embryos for research if they believe it to be the right thing to do? Is it right to turn down the prospect of a cure for Parkinson's, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and other diseases? These are ethical questions which rightly must be considered by the House.

Mr. Swayne: I am glad that the Minister has recognised that this is primarily an ethical argument on both sides, rather than a scientific argument. Does she agree that there is no difference in principle or in practice between therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning, apart from the use to which one subsequently puts the procedure?

Yvette Cooper: There is a huge difference between therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning. A particular cell nuclear replacement technique to create an embryo that is used only for 14 days is one issue. Whether or not to implant that embryo and allow the creation of a cloned human being is a completely separate issue. On the second issue, the morals and ethics are completely different. However, the science is also different, as we go through a separate process of implantation. I agree that the cloning of human beings to create new human beings is morally wrong and unacceptable, not just to this House but to the majority of the public in this country.

Mr. Swayne: I understand that point, and I agree with the Minister to a large extent. However, I was trying to get to the bottom of the actual techniques used in cloning, whatever purpose the result may be used for subsequently. Are the techniques the same or different?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is a technique called cell nuclear replacement which has been used in experimentation on animals to try to produce cloned animals. But there is a moral and scientific difference between the use of cell nuclear replacement for therapeutic cloning for the purposes of research up to 14 days, and the prospect of any kind of reproductive cloning, which, as many Members have made clear today, is illegal. It must remain illegal; it is not acceptable to the people of this country.

There are two separate arguments before us—the scientific and ethical arguments about stem cell research, and the prospect of regulations. The key scientific arguments have been raised several times in the debate. Is it possible to do the type of stem cell research that most people agree has huge potential to treat Parkinson's disease and other degenerative disorders, without carrying out embryonic research? Is the Donaldson report, as the hon. Member for Congleton suggested, already out of date? We have asked the Donaldson expert group to keep an eye on all the changing research, and it agrees that adult stem cells have huge potential; its report made that point clear. However, it also strongly supported the idea that much of the research will be possible only through the use of embryonic stem cells.

The key questions are how we understand the use of adult stem cells, and how we make the breakthrough not only in the narrow areas in which such cells have proved that advances are possible, but for a wide range of diseases and disorders where embryonic stem cells are thought to have the potential to make a huge difference. It is thought that they will increase the speed at which we obtain knowledge, increase the range of diseases that we can treat and trigger the first breakthrough that is required.

Hon. Members have asked about the probability of the research providing benefits. On that point, we have to accept the advice of the scientists, who argue that the research already undertaken in other areas suggests that stem cell research shows great promise. However, if we knew the answer to the questions, there would be no purpose to the research. We would not need to conduct it if we already knew what it would be able to deliver. That is why major scientific bodies, including most recently the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, have endorsed the considerable benefits that embryonic stem cell research could bring. They have accepted the idea that we should go for embryonic, not just adult, stem cell research.

The other major issue is the ethical one. I urge hon. Members to use their consciences to reflect on what is the right thing to do. People will take different views, but I believe that science for good and not evil means science that takes place in an ethical and legal framework. That is what the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 provides. It was introduced by the previous Conservative Government, debated thoroughly and accepted on a free vote. We need a clear regulatory framework for such research, and that is why I support the 14-day limit, and regulation by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge asked whether science was out of step with society, and whether science has run beyond the ethical debates that we can have. I understand people's anxieties about the pace of scientific change, BSE and genetically modified foods. However, I strongly urge Members not to vote against the regulations simply to make a statement expressing their anxiety about the BSE inquiry or GM foods. This is a different issue. I agree that we must have moral and ethical restraints on science, but Members should not vote against regulations that could bring huge

[Yvette Cooper]

benefits just to make a symbolic statement about the importance of such restraint. That is exactly what the 1990 Act provides, and the regulations will do so as well.

It would be a dreadful tragedy if the BSE crisis—which has led to enough dreadful tragedies as it is—affected Members' judgment of the regulations. They have nothing to do with BSE or the problems that led to the BSE inquiry, so Members should not make their decision about the regulations on the basis of other issues.

The public's views are important, and we must ensure that the issue is sufficiently debated. I hope that today's debate will lead to further debate in the public and the media. Many newspapers have already considered the issue, particularly over the past six months. It is true that the public are strongly opposed to reproductive cloning. There is no question about that. I am strongly opposed to it myself, as, I believe, are most hon. Members—but the regulations will not introduce reproductive cloning.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister has twice referred to her assumption that there is strong public objection to reproductive cloning, and said that that would be decisive in determining her view. If it turns out that there is strong public objection to therapeutic cloning, will she take a similar line and withdraw from her current position?

Yvette Cooper: All hon. Members need to be cognisant of the public's views and take into account the representations and discussions that they have with constituents when they make decisions. It is also right that constituents elect us to represent them in Parliament and to hold debates about important issues. However, we should not only reflect their views, but reflect on those views, and on the debates in the House.

We often talk with pride about the importance of the House in discussing matters of huge import to people throughout the country. We do not hold a referendum on every issue as it arises, because we understand the value of Parliament in debating important issues. Parliament can play an even more important role when there is a free vote, by airing the issues as they arise. We need to promote public debate but we also need to take responsibility for what we think is the right thing to do, so that we make the right final decision when we vote.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) asked about Europe. He is no longer in his place, but he apologised to me for having to leave and said that he would look for the reply in *Hansard*. The European Parliament discussed the issue and passed a resolution—by a narrow majority, I believe—against research using embryos created by cell nuclear replacement. However, the European Commission has confirmed that there is no European Union competence in this matter.

Some member states have no legislation on this issue. Research is carried out in Belgium and the Netherlands, but there is no legislation to regulate it. Portugal also has no legislation, but research is not carried out there. Other member states, such as Austria and Germany, prohibit embryo research. The United States is an interesting case. It is not possible to carry out stem cell embryo research using federal funds, but it is possible in the private sector, where there is no such regulation. That raises an interesting issue.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that the research would go ahead, and that the only question was where it would take place. If it did not go ahead here, it would take place somewhere else, and he suggested that that was an industrial issue, because it concerns the United Kingdom biotech industry. I disagree, although I accept that there are important questions about where and how the research takes place. It is true that if the regulations are not introduced, the research is likely to continue in other countries where there may be no regulatory framework to govern either the way in which licences are applied for and research takes place, or the purposes of the research.

Research will go ahead in other countries, predominantly in the private sector, without the prospect of publicly funded research. That would deny the possibility of United Kingdom expertise and brilliance in the subject being involved in potentially huge breakthroughs in, for example, Parkinson's disease. Hon. Members have also expressed anxiety about biotech research and the exploitation of human tissue being carried out entirely in the private sector, in the context of the human genome project.

I believe strongly that it is important to have a publicly funded research role, and that there is a strong case for public-private partnerships to ensure that the right sort of ethical framework is in place for the application as well as the initiation of research.

I conclude by reminding the House that stem cell research could lead to immense human health benefits. It could save lives and dramatically improve people's quality of life. Although adult stem cells have potential, scientists believe that embryonic stem cells hold the greatest promise. The regulations that provide for no research beyond 14 days and the HFEA controls will remain. In most cases, we are talking about creating, through IVF, embryos that would otherwise be destroyed.

Cell nuclear replacement techniques will not lead to human reproductive cloning, because that is illegal and will remain so. We have the opportunity to extend our clear regulatory framework so that research is possible, not simply into contraception but into Parkinson's disease. We have the potential to open the door to huge benefits for those who are suffering.

The alternative is to reject the opportunity. Many hon. Members will take a strong ethical position. It is right that they should do so, but I warn the House of the consequences. Research that takes place outside a proper regulatory framework denies us the opportunity to take part in providing huge benefits for the future.

Considerable responsibility lies on the shoulders of Members of both Houses. I look forward to the debate that we shall hold before hon. Members make their final decision on the matter through a free vote.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Inflation Indices and Statistical Errors

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

1.28 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): This is the first time that I have spoken while you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I welcome you to the Chair and to your new appointment?

I am grateful for the opportunity to hold the debate. Many colleagues will have seen its title and considered it to be one of the least interesting subjects, but I believe it relates to some of the most important challenges that face this country's senior policy makers. The United Kingdom and other countries may be measuring inflation and related economic statistics incorrectly, which may be undermining our economy's prospects for growth. Simple measurement errors could have genuine effects on the fortunes of families and businesses in every constituency throughout the country.

As a result of those errors, interest rates could be too high, the investment decisions of international capital might be biased against Britain, and jobs might have been unnecessarily lost. That is a bizarre but alarming claim. If experts outside the House who present that argument are right, and countries such as the United States are benefiting from incomparable international statistics while the United Kingdom is suffering, the Government must not delay resolving the matter.

Given the interesting developments in Florida, I am not sure whether we should wait for an American recount, even of economic statistics.

In case listeners or readers think that I have taken leave of my senses by making such outlandish claims, I immediately refer to a report by the Office for National Statistics, which was published this year with the snappy title, "Review of Short-Term Output Indicators". A small part of the analysis used in that ONS report relates directly to the claims I am making. Using a United States-style inflation measure, the ONS estimated growth in the United Kingdom's manufacturing output to be a massive 6 per cent. higher since 1995 than the recorded figures show.

That one reference to a highly credible source should suggest that that is not a scare story. Many other respectable analysts point to the problem, so those are serious and alarming claims. My understanding is that many senior people in the Treasury and the Bank of England share my grave concerns, but, to my knowledge, this is the first time that the issue has been raised on the Floor of the House.

Before I explain the background to my argument, I reassure those statisticians from the ONS and elsewhere who might be interested in this debate that I am not attempting to take a wide swipe at economic statistics in this country—far from it. The ONS report reviewed the quality of short-term output indicators in the UK and was generally very positive. We owe a debt of gratitude to the many hard-working and talented statisticians in the ONS, Departments and the Library. The statistics that we receive from them are of high quality.

Previous concerns include the divergence between the various measures of gross domestic product in the late 1980s and, more recently, the average earnings data series, but they were the exceptions that prove the general rule.

Despite the title of the Adjournment debate, I am not making a wholesale criticism of the public sector's statistical service. In fact, my argument rests not on criticism of it or the economic statistics it produces, but on how to achieve comparable international statistics for some key economic variables. The debate is an attempt to point out that the lack of uniformity might be unnecessarily handicapping UK plc. It would be absurd, and a concern that statisticians would surely share with us, if mere statistics could be said to be undermining economic policy making or performance.

The central question, which involves the background to the debate, is about how a country should measure changes in prices of goods and services, when those goods and services are changing in quality. That technical question about inflation measurement has major policy ramifications. The problem of adjusting inflation measures for quality changes has always existed. Consumers in 1990 were buying different items of different quality from those bought by consumers in 1890, let alone in 1790.

However, some people now argue that the problem has become much worse. Major improvements in computer technology and in communications technology make it even more difficult to compare the price of what consumers buy in one year with the price of what they buy the next, especially because purchases of information and communications technology products have taken up a larger share of consumer expenditure. That is especially significant because such products have become a major intermediate input cost to other services and goods that we buy, whose quality is also being continually enhanced by those technologies. It is argued that quality-adjustment problems for measuring inflation have become far more significant in recent years.

If every country had reacted to those problems in exactly the same way, there would be no difficulty for anyone. After all, price changes are only signals of relative changes in supply and demand, and if measurements of aggregate price changes for each country dealt with new developments in the same way, arguably nothing would have been lost. However, different countries have reacted in different ways to the measurement challenges of ICT. In America, the way in which inflation is measured has been altered recently, mainly as a result of recommendations from the 1996 Boskin commission. Key changes involve new ways to adjust for quality improvements in high-technology goods.

So-called "hedonic" pricing methods have been adopted. They strip out the effects of quality improvements in, for example, home computers, cars, clothes and televisions in new ways. Those methods break down a product into its key features, such as the memory and speed of a computer, and assign prices to those features rather than to the whole product. Thus, by controlling for quality improvements using such new techniques, hedonic inflation measures tend to show significant price reductions for technology goods, lowering overall recorded inflation for countries using those methodologies. Therefore, inflation in the United States may seem lower relative to inflation in the UK and most other European countries, but some or all of the difference may be explained simply by differences in how the statistics are compiled and how different countries adjust for quality changes.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

Some people may ask, "So what? Why should we worry if the Americans want to record inflation differently from us, so that it looks lower than ours?" The next stage of the argument is where it gets interesting.

Inflation figures are not just some theoretical measure existing in a void, published in a press release and reproduced in economic tables, gradually to be consigned to the top or bottom shelf of the Library. Inflation figures affect real things. They impact on wage negotiations, for example, and decisions on pension rises, as the Government know only too well. They impact on the decisions of those who set interest rates—the Monetary Policy Committee—so they impact on mortgages paid by families throughout the country. Presumably, if our inflation is measured higher than it could have been measured, mortgage rates—real things—are higher than they need to be.

Again, inflation rates of different countries affect the decisions of international capital about where institutional investors wish to place their cash. If the United States' inflation measure is flattering its economy and ours is under-selling Britain's, are we missing out on our share of international investment funds? Is the wider European economy and, dare I say it, the euro being undermined by over-optimistic statistical signals from the United States?

Those questions are probably impossible to answer, so the Minister can relax. I ask her rhetorically to illustrate the enormity of the issues that might be involved by different countries treating economic statistics differently. For the record and to save the Minister the trouble, I am not arguing that Britain or other European countries now measure inflation incorrectly. I am arguing that perhaps the United States is wrong, and perhaps all the countries are measuring inflation wrongly. It is a difficult concept. There is clearly more than one way to measure inflation, but the key policy issue is: why are we measuring inflation differently and could that be damaging the UK's economic prospects, at least relative to America's, just because of statistics? Perhaps we should be worrying.

I say "perhaps" for reasons of modesty. It is a complex issue and I am no statistician. I would not wish the Minister to think that I am so confident of my case that I know that it is having damaging effects. It may not be. I simply raise the real possibility that it could be, in which case the Government need to act.

Therefore, I look for two possible answers from the Minister. Either she will say that I am nuts, that I have been bamboozled by the latest economic theory and that we should not worry because Great George street and Threadneedle street have it all under control; or she will say that there is an issue of substance behind some of the points that I make and that other people have made outside the House, that the Treasury is concerned about it and is giving it serious thought.

The only indication that we have had so far of what the Treasury thinks about the matter is contained in box 1.2 and annex A of a report, published with the pre-Budget report, entitled "Productivity in the UK: the Evidence and the Government's Approach." I welcome that report. I share many of the Government's concerns about the UK's productivity performance. I do not wish Ministers to think that, because I am questioning official statistics, especially their relation to America's, I seek to undermine that productivity thesis and the stated goal that we need to do more to improve our economy's productivity. We can argue over the size of the productivity gap between America and the UK, but the fact that there is one seems relatively uncontentious.

I am concerned about the way in which the Treasury deals with the measurement issue in that publication. It is as if, because the measurement problem works against the paper's main thesis, it is stuck in the annex and the narrative tries to down play the significance of the measurement problem. I am not sure whether that is a good way in which to examine the issue.

It may be true, as the annex suggests, that the simplistic application of hedonic pricing measurements to the United Kingdom can overstate the differences that result. The paper quotes a recent OECD report, which suggests that other factors offset the impact of the simplistic application of hedonic measurements, reducing the apparent biased output and productivity figures. Although those academic charges and counter-charges are interesting, some senior people are worried about the issue. That is presumably why, in annex A, the Treasury writes:

> The ONS is at the forefront in trying to get international agreement within the OECD and Eurostat as to what quality adjustment methodologies should be used in order to allow consistent inter-country comparisons.

All that gobbledegook means that the Treasury is trying to push ahead and solve the problem, but they are not quite saying so.

Yesterday, when Sir John Kingman was giving evidence to the Select Committee on the Treasury, I asked him what he intended to do. I hope that I do not paraphrase his words too much, but he replied that he took the issue seriously and would look into it. I apologise to the Minister for being unable to stay to hear her evidence to the Committee and for not asking her some of today's questions yesterday. I hope that she told the Committee that she shares Sir John's concerns.

Although it is good that people are now waking up to the issue, I remain troubled by the timetables for the research and debate needed to put it right—there does not appear to be one. When will we get to the bottom of this? When will formal discussion papers be published? When will the changes take place? The issue matters because, if the argument is correct, it is having very real effects, now. I want the Minister to reassure me that the Treasury is making it a top priority and that the Treasury will give every possible support—if necessary, extra resources—to the National Statistician and the Statistics Commission, to resolve the problem.

It is instructive to remember how fast people moved when problems were perceived with the average earnings index. The Treasury did not wait very long then. I should like a similar fast-track resolution to take place now and the Chancellor to make this into a public issue to give it the profile that it needs. Just by giving the matter the oxygen of publicity, some of the potentially damaging effects—from appearances, not based on reality—could thereby be corrected.

I should like the Minister to go further than simply talking about timetables and how seriously the Treasury are taking the matter. I want her to tell the House that she will draw this debate to the Chancellor's personal attention and to suggest that he focus the attention of his European counterparts on the issue. He and his

international colleagues should demand that the OECD and Eurostat do not drag their feet on the issue, but get a move on.

We can all understand that major changes to vital series of economic statistics must be undertaken carefully, without political pressure, and, in this case, with maximum international agreement. There is no dispute about that, yet I am seriously worried that the Americans have—wittingly or unwittingly—already stolen a major march on the United Kingdom and Europe by changing their data. Perceptions engendering expectations can have real effects, even—perhaps especially—in sophisticated economies. It is perhaps ironic that the measurement of information technology has led to misinformation. Let us consider whether the US's over-optimistic data have contributed to the golden halo effect around the wider US economy.

Is that effect and the data at least a partial explanation of the enormous surge in the US stock market, as the dot.com mania appeared to be based on solid macroeconomic data? Was it then also an underlying cause of the subsequent fall in values, as investors realised that many of the individual firms that they had backed during that gold-rush dot.com period were actually poor prospects?

Let me stress that I do not doubt that the extraordinary performance of the US economy is built on more than mere statistical manipulation, but it is possible that some of the hype has been. It could have caused some of the froth that has sucked world investment funds out of Europe into the US. Let us face it, Alan Greenspan—the chair of the Federal Reserve—has made a virtue of not worrying about US inflation because of the USA's good productivity data. So the Americans have not waited too long to make those supporting corrections to their data with respect to the new economy. The improved perception that they have given has brought real benefits, drawing in capital and magnifying America's first mover advantages in ICT investment.

This is not the only area of economic statistics relating to new technology and e-commerce that the Government should be concerned about: I know that the Office for National Statistics is concerned about others. A member of the Monetary Policy Committee, Dr. Wadhwani, is worried about other measures. There are large differences in accounting for software investment within ICT between the United States and the United Kingdom and Europe, which could have a knock-on effect on the way in which we measure productivity. In a recent speech, Dr. Wadhwani highlighted concerns about the different measurements of capital stock. It is tempting to develop those arguments, but I hope to do so on another occasion when I try to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I shall not try your patience much longer.

This is a serious problem. Some of the articles and discussions in the technical press may have overestimated its effect, and in taking up some of their points perhaps I have done so, too. I am willing to debate that point. I hope that they and I have overestimated it, but some real issues need to be addressed. I do not think that the problem has had the publicity that it deserves, and I hope that the Minister will reassure me that the Government will try to sort it out.

1.46 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I join the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) in congratulating you on your appointment, Madam Deputy Speaker. A wise choice has been made, and I am delighted that you have become a Deputy Speaker. I also thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important and interesting issue, and congratulate him on securing the debate.

There is a public debate about whether price indices are fully taking account of quality improvements in new technology, particularly computers. Different methods of allowing for quality improvements can have a significant impact on measured economic growth. The Government, the Bank of England and the Office for National Statistics are actively involved in research on this complex statistical issue.

It is unfair for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that we have not been dealing with this measurement gap. All the bodies to which I have referred are significantly involved in dealing with this matter. That is a clear indication of the fact that we are well and truly engaged with the issue.

International comparisons of productivity have always been complicated by measurement difficulties, which introduce considerable margins of error. In recent years, these have been compounded by developments associated with the new economy. Information and communications technology has become an important driver of economic growth. Its importance has risen, not just because more ICT equipment is available, but because the quality of ICT has improved substantially.

Different countries' national statistical agencies have adopted different approaches to adjusting prices of ICT products and services for quality change. In particular, the method adopted in the US, known as hedonic price adjustment, has a significant effect on the measurement of output. Applying the same method to the United Kingdom would affect the size of the productivity gap.

Specifically, although both the UK and the US national accounts allow for changes in ICT quality, the hedonic price adjustment approach carried out in the US implies a much faster rate of decline in computer prices. That means that any given change in nominal sales or spending on computers will show up as a much larger real change in the US accounts than in the UK accounts. So there has been a growing perception that recently GDP—and hence productivity—growth in the UK may have been understated relative to that in the US. The hon. Gentleman has remarked as much.

However, quantifying such effects is less straightforward than it appears at first sight. Applying, for example, United States computer price indices in the United Kingdom accounts would increase measured gross domestic product growth by less than the effect on real investment and consumer spending on computers to the extent that they are imported rather than domestically produced. In other words, and more generally, the effects on measured GDP growth differentials of harmonising the measurement of ICT prices between countries would depend on the relative size of their ICT sectors as well as their spending on ICT.

None the less, it should be recognised that the US-UK productivity gap cannot be explained away, as the hon. Gentleman maintains, by statistical treatment. The gap is

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

too large and has persisted for too long to be a statistical artefact. It cannot be attributed only to methods of measurement.

The hon. Gentleman seemed to be saying that the information in box 1.2 in "Productivity in the UK: the Evidence and the Government's Approach", a paper accompanying the pre-Budget report, had been hidden away. As I am sure he realises, as he has read the paper, much of what I have just said is a summary of that information. Nevertheless, it is worth making the points for the benefit of those who do not have direct access to the paper.

The hon. Gentleman was also being rather unfair by saying that we had not flagged up the issue. The issue is not only flagged up in the paper, but is the subject of an annexe to which he referred that addresses in considerable detail various technical issues.

Mr. Edward Davey: I do not wish to fall out with the Minister on this. I am merely trying to say that the issue is so important that the Chancellor should be talking about it, and that—although addressing it in a supplementary publication to the pre-Budget report is welcome—the Treasury should be addressing it more emphatically, to ensure that economic commentators and the wider public take notice of it.

Miss Johnson: It is important to recognise that debates in the House are followed closely by the Chancellor, who takes a keen interest in the comments of Opposition Members. Moreover, the fact that we have addressed the productivity issue in a paper accompanying the pre-Budget report demonstrates that we recognise its seriousness.

In the light of the hon. Gentleman's comments, I should emphasise that the first national statistics quality review, "Review of Short-Term Output Indicators"—the STOI review—found that the short-term economic indicators produced by the ONS were of good quality and fit for purpose. Various detailed studies were conducted as part of that review and formed the basis of that conclusion. One of the studies highlighted the importance of correctly measuring improvements in the quality, and hence the prices, of items in the information and technology sector, such as computers.

The quality review, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, pointed out that there could be a significant impact on measured growth and investment in the United Kingdom simply by making different assumptions about the value to attribute to those quality improvements. That point was also made in the pre-Budget report publication that I mentioned.

The United Kingdom approach, contrary to what is sometimes asserted, does make quality adjustments for improved computer quality, but our approach differs from that of the United States. The United Kingdom uses two methods when considering the price of manufacturers' output.

One method is that, if an extra characteristic or option is added to the specification of a product, such as a computer, the producer is asked whether it is priced separately. If so, the overall price of the computer is adjusted downwards by half the cost of the new option. The figure of one-half is used to allow for the fact that standardising an option allows manufacturers to exploit economies of scale.

In many cases, however, a separate price for a new option or specification change will not exist. In such cases, the manufacturer is asked for his estimate of the cost of upgrading the specification, and that amount is fully taken into account in the quality adjustment of the price. That is used in a number of ways to upgrade a number of outputs.

A priority is for consistency of methods by which quality is taken into account in price indices in the UK. Thus, whether one is looking at producer price indices or export and import deflators, the user can be assured that the same or very similar methodologies are used, and any differences must be for sound methodological reasons.

Interest in this area is currently high, as policy makers look for evidence of the new economy and the associated sustained high productivity growth due to the input of increased information and communication technology—a phenomenon attributed in particular to the United States. Various research papers have taken United States producer price indices for information and communication technology and applied them to United Kingdom growth data.

The short-term indicators report came up with estimates of the maximum—I stress maximum—effect that use of alternative estimates for computer prices might have on output. The STOI study found that, had US price indices been applied to the output of the UK computer industry, the output of the production industries would have grown by a further 6 per cent. since 1995. I emphasise the fact that the figure is only illustrative, that it applies only to the index of production and that it is the upper limit. The hon. Gentleman referred to it as though it were a point on the scale, but it is at the far end of the scale.

Other effects could be offset in different ways. The report clearly states that the figure is illustrative. The fact that the topic is found in the report shows that we are engaging with the discussion, and indeed playing a central role in it. We are happy for there to be transparency and wider public awareness.

The report said:

> this review hasn't investigated the complex issues related to computer prices, nor can it recommend using the US price indices within the UK Index of Production. The analyses given here simply demonstrate the potential impact of doing so.

As I said, it is the potential at the upper limit.

I want to emphasise that the role of the review has been to identify areas for further development. By necessity, the analysis carried out during the review could not be a deep investigation covering all aspects of each area. In particular, on the impact of price indices on growth, there are some methodological issues that should be considered when assessing the studies.

It is misleading simply to take the output of the computer industry and look at how much the value added by that industry increases if prices are assumed to fall faster. Much of that output is bought by other companies in other industries, so if the value added by the computer industry rises when different price indices are used, the estimate of the value added contributed by the purchasers of the equipment will fall.

In other words, much of the effect of changing price indices is to redraw the picture of growth between sectors, with the computer industry growing faster than we first

thought and its customers growing more slowly. We do not yet know the effect on the overall growth of the economy.

It is also very important to consider the situation regarding international trade in such products. A higher value assigned to computer products will increase the import bill for such goods as well. Of course, exports will also be revalued, but as the UK is a net importer of such products, the final outcome is likely to be a bigger boost to the measure of imports than to the measure of exports, which means that there could be a negative effect on overall growth to counter the positive effect highlighted by the commentators.

There is an important international context to this issue. One of the important uses of economic statistics is to make international comparisons, so it is important that methods are consistent across countries.

Earlier this year, the go-ahead was given for a European hedonic centre, which has been funded by Eurostat. In parallel, an OECD committee—to which the hon. Gentleman referred—is producing a handbook on computer quality adjustment, and a further OECD-sponsored group, which is investigating the international transferability of hedonic models, will produce useful conclusions for the European hedonic centre. The Office for National Statistics will be an active participant in that effort. The centre will begin work in January 2001, and its first year will be devoted to data collection and construction of various hedonic models. The models will then be tested, and we might see useful results in 2002. We and the ONS aim to be key participants in all the activities involved.

It is important to note the time scale, which makes it clear that there is much work to be done. It is also important to emphasise that the ONS is, as the hon. Gentleman readily granted, at the forefront of national accounts on the international scene. I feel that the hon. Gentleman's remarks about errors in national statistics were a little misplaced. The ONS leads Europe in terms of quality and timeliness, and presentation of an integrated set of national accounts. Much good work is going on, and to ensure that it continues we must make haste slowly—or, at least, with due care.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that a significant impact could have been made in a number of ways. He spoke of the loss of jobs. It is not true that interest rates would necessarily change: there is no evidence that rates rise according to different measurements on computers. Interest rates have been very low recently, and long-term interest rates are at their lowest for some 35 years.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we were treating this as a priority. As I have said, we have produced formal papers, and formal things have been said in very public contexts. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Treasury, the Government as a whole and the ONS take the issue very seriously, and the studies to which I referred are under way.

I have mentioned the need for methods that are consistent across countries. The United Kingdom has been active in the harmonisation of economic statistics. There are no international standards at present, and the hon. Gentleman suggested that a lack of uniformity undermined economic policy making. We are actively participating in the OECD committee's work—I mentioned the computer handbook earlier—and in that of the European Hedonic Centre.

The hon. Gentleman also suggested that inward investment might be affected by errors showing a smaller growth in gross domestic product than was the case, and made a comparison with the "golden halo" around the United States. I see no evidence of that. Inward investment is at record levels: we are second only to the United States in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we were measuring inflation differently from the United States. Indeed we are, but that is not entirely true within Europe. For example, we now have a harmonised index of consumer prices across Europe, which represents our first attempt at an international standard for consumer price indices. It means that consumer inflation rates can now be compared across Europe. The ONS is actively participating in the work of the Eurostat taskforce, which developed the index.

The hon. Gentleman made comments about international comparability, some of which I have addressed. We think that comparability should be a priority, and will continue to urge our international colleagues to make progress—consistent, obviously, with thorough research within the necessary time scales. It is not currently clear how we should proceed.

I was not present when Sir John Kingman was here before I gave evidence to the Treasury sub-committee yesterday. As the hon. Gentleman said, he had left by the time I arrived, so we experienced different parts of the discussion. However, I have been given evidence that Sir John Kingman did not say that he had concerns in the evidence that he gave on behalf of the Statistics Commission. He said that the commission would investigate the concerns of the hon. Gentleman and others if it felt those concerns should be progressed in light of the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

The Office for National Statistics is giving priority to a programme of work to evaluate the different methods used to adjust for quality changes in the output of information technology industries. That project will also study the way in which computers have contributed to the growth in capital stock. The ONS will seek the advice of experts in the field, key users, its own methodologists, economists and national accountants, and will look closely at the approaches adopted in other countries. Wherever possible, the project will have as one of its aims international comparability, for the reasons that I have given. It will be essential that any adjustments made to current methods, and therefore to current estimates of growth and productivity in the United Kingdom, are based on thorough, soundly grounded research. The ONS plans to publish periodic progress reports, starting in Spring 2001 with an article in "Economic Trends".

To sum up, we have been actively involved in research and discussions on this topic. We are working with Eurostat and European counterparts on the issue, as is the Bank of England. The size of the effect suggested by the hon. Gentleman is speculation at this stage, and I hope that I have explained to the House how the issue is being appropriately addressed. At the moment, the degree of the hon. Gentleman's concerns is misplaced.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes past Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 November 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

National Parks (England and Wales)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

10 am

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): It is a great personal pleasure to introduce the debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who also requested an allocation of time to consider this important matter. The Adjournment debate is most timely, and I congratulate everyone who has been able to attend. I hope that we shall have a good debate. I intend to give the widest consideration to this important part of national life. I shall try to keep my comments brief to allow as many hon. Members as possible to participate.

I shall focus on the national perspective of the national parks movement, but I would be failing in my duty to my constituents, who enjoy the privilege of living in what is probably the most beautiful part of the country—the north Yorkshire coast—if I did not talk about how the movement affects their daily lives.

I was fortunate enough to be born in Carlisle in the north of England, on the edge of what is probably England's most famous national park. My two younger brothers and I lived on an out-of-town council estate and our lives were brightened by school trips to the national delights of the Lake District national park and the English lakes. My eyes and those of my brothers were opened by that introduction to an aspect of life that was different from the grey houses in which my family and others lived. It stimulated an early interest in the geology of the Lake district and a personal fascination with the natural wonders of glaciation, which led me to study geo-technical sciences and ultimately to become a civil engineer. National parks have formed an important part of my personal development, making almost as great a contribution as my parents and teachers. I challenge anyone in this place to disagree with my contention that our national parks are very special places.

Our national parks cover our most treasured countryside, comprising a unique blend of stunning landscape, extensive and diverse wildlife habitat, a rich cultural heritage and a distinctive pattern of land use and settlement. The environmental quality of national parks depends on the nature of human interaction with them, which goes back about 5,000 years. The parks attract more than 76 million visitors annually and are home to more than 250,000 people. It is 50 years since the first national park in England was designated and there are now 11 national parks in England and Wales. They will soon be joined by the New Forest, South Downs and, across the border, by Scottish landscapes. We hope that that will happen in the near future. National parks constitute 10 per cent. of the landscape across England and Wales and are managed by the national park authorities.

Following a detailed appraisal of our national parks a decade ago and the Edwards report "Fit for the Future", the Environment Act 1995 revised the purpose of the national park movement. I believe that national parks are constituted to conserve and embrace the natural beauty of wildlife and the cultural heritage of areas and to promote opportunities for the public to understand and enjoy their special qualities. That has been my family's experience.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned the cultural as well as the environmental heritage of the areas, and the substantial number of visitors. Does he feel that, under the present structures, a balance can be maintained between the interests of those who live and work in the park and those who come to enjoy it? Is he satisfied that the legislation he mentioned gives adequate background to ensure that there is a proper balance.

Mr. Quinn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. Indeed, the central purpose of the debate is to focus on that aspect. My constituents will have sympathy with his comments, and if he will allow me to proceed with my speech, I hope to develop that point later.

The 1995 Act gives the authorities a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities in the national parks. Indeed, in my area and that of the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), those are fundamental aspects of everyday life. We need to see a living and working community in all the national parks. If national parks do not support and sustain those communities they fail in their raison d'être. The parks' special assets need to be managed sensitively if future generations are to appreciate them. Future sustainability also depends on healthy economic circumstances and thriving communities.

Communities in these areas share many disadvantages and the problems that affect all rural communities are, if anything, accentuated in national parks. Their special environmental and cultural assets provide many opportunities for enhancement of the economy and consequently their communities' future prosperity. With the increasing recognition that environment, community and economy are linked, the parks are trying to deliver an integrated, joined-up approach to projects that meet the several objectives at once and demonstrate sustainability in practice. That can be brought about only if there is a true sense of partnership across the communities and working relationships with other authorities.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I happen to be a native of the Brecon Beacons national park. I was born and brought up there. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the agreement that has been struck in the National Assembly for Wales between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Administration provides for the direct elections of members of national park authorities from within their communities and thus makes it a far better joined-up and democratic process?

Mr. Quinn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. I am not sure whether hon.

[Mr. Quinn]

Members have somehow got advance notice of my speech this morning. Indeed that point of view will resonate throughout the debate. As I look around I see that all the hon. Members present this morning have much experience of these communities. Again, I will come to that point later.

"Partnership" is a key word, but it remains just a word unless it is delivered in practice. At the moment the parks authorities work extensively with other public agencies, local communities and the private sector such as, for example, the many land agents and managers who manage private land within the parks area. This is all about trying to manage change effectively and deliver the sustainable future to which we all aspire. Examples from all the national parks show the commitment and the ability of parks authorities to work with others for the benefit of the environment, the economy and the communities. It would be remiss of me if I did not focus on my national park, the North York Moors national park.

The key point about the work that is done on the nation's behalf in national parks is the tremendous value for money that is achieved. The grant from the public purse for all our national parks across England and Wales is a mere £26 million a year. I shall return to that important issue and I hope that it will be the culmination of my speech this morning. At the recent conference of the Association of National Parks Authorities, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), announced that there would be a policy review of national parks and their governance. I welcome that. The North York Moors national park will be able to demonstrate how good practice in governance can be helpfully used elsewhere. I hope that the Minister will examine the examples provided by that park and that we can learn from the review not only permanently to raise the quality of services but to reinforce the connection with people who live in the park area.

Demonstrating a high quality of service to local people is one of the most important activities taking place in the national parks. A debate is continuing in the rural economy about the need for diversification, particularly in agriculture. I have many letters about national parks issues, the bulk of which are really about planning. We need to consider the planning regime carefully and to consider how we might develop a working national park that would permit us to harmonise the local population's aspirations with sustaining the environment there.

The outlook is not all bleak. The main cause of correspondence between me and the authority in the North York Moors national park area has been planning. I did some research on the park authority's attitude to planning applications. In 1998-99, 87.5 per cent. of applications relating to the North York Moors area were approved. In 1999-2000, 86.3 per cent. of applications have been approved so far. Up to the end of March, of 96 applications submitted for developments relating to economic activity, 87 per cent. were approved. A sea change in the attitude of park officers has taken place. There is some realisation of the need for diversification in the rural community, away from the agricultural and tourism opportunities that have been traditional in the national park.

It would be remiss of me not to comment on the forthcoming rural White Paper. I hope that it will set out a clear vision and commitment to all rural areas, but I believe that the national parks should take a key role in carrying out the overall vision that I hope will emerge. The areas that we are considering this morning are sparsely populated, leading to social and economic underachievement, with a low level of services, and poor access to them across the board. The isolation of many of my constituents makes the services in question expensive.

We need to reconnect the most isolated communities in England and Wales to services. Investment in information technology infrastructure could provide opportunities for the parks' rural communities to gain access to information, services and training. Like many people, I shall observe with interest the development of rural post offices. However, we must not leave matters at that. We must recognise that national parks officers and the skills available in the national parks movement could make a vital contribution to the development of this important area.

In north Yorkshire a major new initiative has begun, in an attempt to make remote access a reality. It has been co-ordinated in conjunction with North Yorkshire county council and a wide range of partners, as well as the park authority. The project will enhance the local rural economy and give it a competitive advantage. It is attempting to build a shared base for capacity—an empowerment of local communities—and to maximise access to the full range of services for individuals, businesses and local organisations. The national authority is attempting to encourage tourism and to develop viable and improved access to local facilities. For example, the North York Moors national park has information points in village shops to encourage visitors to spend more time there. We want to see the brokering of integrated ticketing on public transport services within national parks.

Our authority is attempting also to engage with wider society with projects designed to mitigate the effects of social exclusion and to give better access to our wonderful landscapes to those in less favoured parts of the country. That is being done by the proactive management of the countryside and by promoting a better understanding of the parks. The North York Moors has a partnership of local disability action groups. That wonderful voluntary scheme allows local communities and the national park to work together to make footpaths and bridleways barrier free so as to allow greater access to the national parks for all, irrespective of people's physical ability.

The national park education service is developing links with urban schools in nearby Teesside and Hull. In-depth research, co-ordinated by Durham university, is being undertaken to examine how ethnic minority communities can be better linked to the national park service so that they can benefit from the recreational and other opportunities available in that wonderful part of Yorkshire.

Access to affordable housing within our national park is a tremendous problem for local residents. Parts of the park attract inward migration; people are tempted to

retire to that marvellous environment or to buy second homes there and commute to nearby urban centres. Many of my constituents cannot afford to enter the local housing market, so I am pleased that the park authorities are now working with rural housing trusts, housing associations and other local organisations to provide new, affordable housing. However, lack of affordable housing remains a significant problem for my rural community.

The average asking price for houses in June 2000 was £128,000, and only 12 properties were on the market for less than £50,000. For those agricultural workers and skilled estate workers who earn less than £200 a week, those properties are simply out of reach. Time and again, people come to my surgery and ask how our young people can get started on the housing ladder. There are 90 villages in the North York Moors national park. Social housing schemes to provide for local housing needs are being developed at a rate of less than one a year. A proactive and accelerated approach is needed to deal with that problem. I referred earlier to the performance of planning authorities, so I am pleased that the North York Moors national park and other national parks have pioneered local policies to help provide housing for local communities and that the new North York Moors local plan seeks to develop that approach.

Another key problem in rural communities is transport. Although car ownership seems to be high, I shall repeat a phrase that I have used many times before—I note that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) used a similar phrase this morning—which is that the private road vehicle is now a necessity of life and not a luxury. It is worth putting that on the record; I have being saying it for five years.

Car ownership in rural areas—and national parks, in particular—is a necessity of life for many people. We all look forward to finding out whether my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer deals with that important point tomorrow. As I said, a significant proportion of the community—particularly the young and the elderly—do not have access to a car. Some villages in my constituency are lucky if they have one bus service to Whitby per week. The put down and collection point is right outside my office in Whitby. People from remote parts of the community have limited access to the cosmopolitan delights of Whitby—in the 21st century, that is not good enough.

Increased traffic levels, stimulated by the many visitors who visit the national parks area, is another problem. People who watch television will know of "Heartbeat", the 1960s police drama featuring the mythical village of Aidensfield. It is, in fact, Goathland and receives 2 million visitors every year. On the horizon is the filming of a Harry Potter story on the north Yorkshire moors railway. In terms of the possibilities for global tourism, the Minister and his colleagues should be aware that "we ain't seen nothing yet" in our part of the world.

The national parks have attempted to provide innovative solutions to traffic congestion. The North York Moors national park has co-ordinated the establishment of the Esk valley rail partnership. It is intended to secure the future of the Middlesbrough to Whitby rail link through increased patronage and to promote the future of environmental, economic and community benefits: it has made a vital contribution to local life.

The Minister should also note the nationally acclaimed moors bus service, which has been successful in encouraging visitors to leave their cars behind. It provides recreational access for nearby local communities with low levels of car ownership and could be an important springboard for the development of park-and-ride and park-and-tour solutions. We want to encourage people to leave their cars behind and enjoy the feeling of being out there, communing with nature, rather than experiencing a bank holiday traffic jam around the parks area. Many people would recognise the importance of that.

I urge the Minister and his ministerial colleagues with responsibility for the development of transport policy to consider my plea for a multi-modal transport study on the A64 transport corridor, which will directly affect the North York Moors national park. I have already mentioned the "Heartbeat" phenomenon and Harry Potter, but we also want more sustainable tourism in our part of the world.

I have much to say, and feel passionately about my subject, but I also want my many colleagues present today to talk about their areas. I have one final point for the Minister—about financing and the national contribution to the national parks areas. We hope that the review will result in the empowerment of local communities, but it will not be successful if we rely solely on the good will of the local community; we rely on a contribution from the national purse.

I understand that an announcement on the national parks grant will be made shortly. The national parks do not expect anything dramatic but, as a Member of Parliament, it is my job to highlight important issues. That is why I want to put firmly on record my belief that the success of the national parks service over the past 50 years is due to the development of efficient systems by some of the most enthusiastic staff I have encountered in public service in my part of north Yorkshire. Members of the park authorities are especially good at connecting to local communities' aspirations. The Association of National Parks Authorities spends public money well; it has developed the ability to work in partnership with private sector organisations as well as with other public sector bodies. It has a good record of bringing external funding to the parks areas, but it has lost objective 5b money. Although the national parks are willing, able and keen to assist in developing the Government's agenda for the environment, they will need financial assistance to do so.

As I said earlier, at present, the national parks get about £26 million a year from the national purse to sustain their work. That is a contribution of a few pence a week from every person in the land to the wonderful service offered by the national parks. I hope that the opportunities afforded by future rural development regulations will provide the Treasury with a good route to help mitigate the lack of growth in the contribution from the national purse.

I hope that the national parks will be able to gain access to that important potential source of money and that the Minister will contact his colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food urging

[Mr. Quinn]

co-operation with the national parks movement, at least to prove that there is a genuine attempt to bring about an integrated public service across the board. That would mean best value for the taxpayer and enhance the future potential for this vital part of the rural economy.

The Minister is welcome to join those who are passionate about the future of our national parks at a reception in the Jubilee Room this evening, where there will be further debate on the subject. You would also be most welcome, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Many hon. Members want to take part in the debate on this interesting subject. If contributions are reasonably brief, it will allow as many Members to speak as possible.

10.28 am

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I shall try to abide by your strictures to be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on securing this important debate on a subject that is close to the hearts of millions of people who visit the national parks.

I represent a large area of the Peak District national park; we estimate on good authority that we have about 22 million visitors a year, attendance levels about which the dome would be proud to be able to brag. If we could have a small proportion of the money that has been spent on that project, we would be very pleased.

I must take this opportunity to mention my constituents who are suffering as a result of the flooding, especially those in Rowsley, Bakewell and the appropriately named Ashford in the Water.

The Peak District national park is surrounded by three motorways: the M1, the M6 and the M62, and by the A50, which has been upgraded almost to motorway standard. It is within an hour's drive of 50 per cent. of the population, and on some bank holidays it feels as if they are all there. That creates some special problems. The Peak district has a resident population of 38,000, second only to the Lake district's 42,000, which means that there is a tremendous amount of work for the national park to undertake. I examined the planning application figures in the annual report of the national parks authorities. In the Peak district in 1999-2000, there were some 900 planning applications and 800 approvals. As the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby rightly said, that often brings problems that have to be balanced and resolved.

Even if the Minister cannot respond in detail today, will he consider the problems caused by the large number of quarry applications in the Peak district? Naturally, those planning applications are detailed and complex. To consider only overall numbers of planning applications in deciding how a national park works does not reflect the amount of work involved. In normal circumstances, a quarry application takes three to four times longer to deal with than an ordinary application, creating a tremendous amount of work for the officers of the authority.

In discussing quarrying, it is important to note that a balance must be struck between residents, visitors who want to enjoy a park's beauty and, sometimes, the need to extract stone. I am not one of the fortunate few who have an office in Portcullis House, but those who have will have noticed its stone, which came from the Twyford quarry at Birchover in Derbyshire. The minerals used in some of our best buildings are extracted in the Peak district. A number of quarry applications before the national park authority are causing local residents a great deal of anxiety. It is important to strike a balance between them and other residents who are employed by the quarrying industry.

I was interested in the description of joined-up government provided by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby. Joined-up government is not practicable when it means that the Peak district has to work with four different regions. The Minister looks puzzled, but it must be the only national park covered by four different Government regions: the east midlands, the west midlands, the north-west and Yorkshire. My experience of corresponding and negotiating with four different Government regions has not led me to believe in joined-up government in relation to the national parks.

There are 125 parish and town councils in the Peak District national park, and in considering the governance of national parks—I had not realised that the Minister had made this point about governance—I believe that a balance has now been struck. For many years, there was great local animosity because there were no local people directly on the national park authority. During the passage of the Environment Act 1995, I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who was then Secretary of State for the Environment, advanced proposals to enable parish councils to be automatically represented. That introduced an element of locally elected representation, but was attacked as not being the right way forward.

Whatever the results of the Minister's review of the governance of the national parks, I hope that that element of elected representation remains. Derbyshire county council once appointed eight people to govern the Peak District national park, only one of whom lived within the park area. It is important to get a balance of local representation. It is good to appoint people because they bring a national viewpoint to the debate, but we should not underestimate the need for local representation. It is important to understand that the national parks are not simply giant theme areas, but places where people have to live, work and earn their living. I believe that the right balance can be struck and that the competing arguments for and against development can be dealt with by having an element of local representation.

Will the Minister deal with transport, which the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned? When I was fortunate enough to be drawn quite high in the ballot for private Members' Bills, I pushed for a measure to give community transport the same kind of relief received by commercial operators. I was pleased that the Government announced such a measure in their transport plan, but so far we have heard no more about it. Will the Minister let us know what is happening to that proposal and when the community transport

organisations can look forward to the fuel relief, which was announced before the House rose for the summer recess some four months ago?

The number of visitors to national parks, and the enjoyment that people get out of visiting them, should not be underestimated but neither should the problems of having so many visitors. One problem is that, despite their large numbers, they do not spend much, and so do not bring much wealth into the area. They come to the national parks and enjoy them, but they do not spend as much as we would like them to.

As the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby said, housing is a problem that must be addressed. There is a huge development at Carver Mill in my constituency, where Gleesons has restored a mill, which is being converted into homes. However, the cost of those homes is way beyond what locally employed people could afford. In addition, planning authorities may not allow planning applications for four-bedroom houses. That would restrict people whose families are growing. They might want to move around the area but face a blanket ban on such development.

The Peak district's attractive countryside undoubtedly contributes to surrounding areas, and I welcome this debate. That countryside exists not only because of the natural form of the land that we have inherited, but because of the way in which farmers have looked after it for generations. I fear for its future as I fear for that of agriculture in those tough areas, and I hope that the Minister will address some of those matters.

10.38 am

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): The Minister and I are perhaps the only Members present who do not represent national parks, although we share a great interest in them. We have almost adjoining constituencies and I often see him in one of the two northern national parks to which we are both frequent visitors. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on taking the initiative by raising the issue. I have the honour of chairing the all-party national parks group, and we will want to contribute to the review of the national parks that we understand is to be conducted in due course both as a group and as individuals.

Like the Minister, my hon. Friend and I both represent the north-east of England and we are lucky that, with a drive of an hour and a half, we can be in three of the national parks: Northumberland, Lake District and North York Moors. I know them reasonably well and spent a happy day in the summer accompanying my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby to the North York Moors national park, where I met the new national park officer, Andy Wilson, who, I am sure, will add to the excellence of the work there.

All the national parks do a great deal of good work, but I want to talk about national issues because the parks are national. Equally, we must recognise the duty of all national parks to foster the economic and social well-being of the local communities within them. Therefore, I agree with the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) that it is a question of balance.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): My hon. Friend referred to the national role of the national parks. Does he agree that, following devolution, there is a danger that the national parks, as a family, may be threatened? Does he agree that we must urge the United Kingdom Government and the National Assembly for Wales to recognise the common interests, aims and purposes of national parks, and to pursue a family approach?

Dr. Clark: It is desirable that the national parks work closely together. Indeed, all those in England and Wales do so under the Association of National Park Authorities, and we hope that those in Scotland will do so in due course. However, the devolution of power to the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament has brought about a new problem and we must ensure that the right balance is struck.

I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his courageous and, in my view, correct decision to uphold his own inspector's plan to introduce a 10 mph limit on Lake Windermere, where there are more than 6,500 registered motorboats. Life has become intolerable for those who do not use motorised boats, and the overwhelming majority of locals have applauded that decision. He should not be taken in by the vociferous group of people who are campaigning against that move, especially as I believe that the main objector is the man who has the sole concession to import the powerboats, the majority of which come from the United States.

The national parks must be national. They must also retain a responsibility for planning. We welcome the possible addition of national parks in Sussex and the New Forest, and I hope that the Government will stand firm and include planning in the remit of the national parks. Like the hon. Member for West Derbyshire, I have looked at the figures.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): My right hon. Friend has reached an apposite point. Land management is a crucial issue in relation to the forthcoming South Downs national park. Most of the destruction to the landscape that has occurred until now has been caused by common agricultural practice, which is bad practice; the deep ploughing of delicate downland soil is very destructive, not only to rare species, but to people. My constituents are suffering from run-off, which happens on ground that has been ploughed for winter cereals.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order.

Dr. Turner: I will be one moment, Mrs. Michie.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please sit down? This is becoming a speech. Only short interventions are permissible.

Dr. Turner: Thank you, Mrs. Michie. I was trying to avoid a speech by making an intervention.

[Dr. Turner]

Does my right hon. Friend agree that one vital issue that the national parks can address is proper land management, which not only preserves the landscape but protects those people who are exposed to the dangers of bad practice? They pay for farmers' profits.

Dr. Clark: Obviously, I do not want to follow that route, but I understand the point. Planning is clearly the key aspect.

I want to make two points, the first of which concerns social exclusion. The national parks have an important role because of their infrastructure. The North York Moors national park runs 13,000 bus services a year. If the Government want to encourage social inclusion, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the infrastructure within the auspices of the national park authorities, which can deliver services on time and at a price.

My final point concerns finance. We are all pleased that, following the comprehensive spending review, there will be a 10 per cent. increase in real terms in spending on the countryside and rural matters during each of the next three years and we look forward to the rural White Paper. However, I saw a letter from the head of the Wildlife and Countryside Directorate and was concerned that very little of that 10 per cent. increase is to be given to the national parks. I refer to a letter of 21 July from Miss Lambert suggesting that most of the money will go on wildlife management and laudable schemes, but if money is put into the national parks, it can provide excellent value for money and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider that.

I shall draw my comments to a close and allow hon. Members with constituency interests to speak.

10.47 am

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on initiating this important debate. It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) because he knows the national park to which I shall refer, as does the Minister, and I concur with his comments.

The purpose of my brief comments is to ask the Minister in his review of national parks to resolve the conflict between the demands of military training and the statutory obligations given to national park authorities. The Minister knows that the Northumberland and Brecon Beacons national parks have extensive military training areas and a considerable military presence. More than 20 per cent. of the Northumberland national park is owned by the Ministry of Defence. The demands of both bodies have been a recipe for conflict, which has caused considerable trouble and disquiet and has made the national park authority unpopular among local people.

When the military authorities submitted an application for substantial improvements to the infrastructure on the Otterburn training ranges, the Northumberland national park authority wanted to object, but could not for technical reasons, because the objections had to come from Northumberland county council. The duty of the national park authority is to preserve the area from such development, but the Ministry of Defence in Otterburn is the largest employer in the Rede and Coquet valleys and puts around £3 million into the local economy. That national park's stated objective is to look after the needs of local people and the conflict arises because it is opposing an essential development to maintain military training on the Otterburn ranges, which brings great economic benefit to local people.

The saga of the infrastructure improvements on Otterburn date from April 1996 when the plan was first submitted to allow the AS90 automatic mobile gun to be used in training on the ranges. The AS90 is effectively a large tank with a large gun mounted on it, and it needs special roads and infrastructure to operate on the Otterburn ranges.

The planning inquiry opened in April 1997, following the refusal of the county council to grant planning permission. A second inquiry was then deemed necessary by the Government. That ended in March 1999, when the inspector reported to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, who has been sitting on the planning application since May 1999. In the meantime, the Army has experienced serious difficulty in training troops on the AS90. Were it not for the fact that some AS90s are now deployed in Bosnia, where training is allowed to take place, the military would face a real crisis in bringing the crews operating the AS90s up to the standard required. That has led to huge uncertainty among people who work for or benefit from the Army in the national park area.

The MOD has an enviable record in maintaining the environment of military ranges. Anyone who knows those ranges—as I am sure that the Minister does—will be aware that the Army has an excellent conservation record. If military training had not taken place in this part of the national parks since 1910, I have no doubt that the whole area would have been afforested along with the neighbouring forests of Kielder and Wark. The conservation of the area can be well and safely looked after by the MOD.

A solution to the conflict between the military and the national park would be to take the military training areas out of the national park. I have favoured and recommended that solution for some time. However, that would remove 22 per cent. of the national park area and would make Northumberland national park, which is one of the smallest national parks—consisting of only some 400 square miles—unviable as a national park. The problem could be solved by including the Kielder forest, an area that was deliberately excluded when the national park was formed. When the Kielder forest—the largest man-made forest in Europe—was planted, it was deemed to be unsuitable for national park purposes because it was man-made.

That situation has changed because of the way in which the Forestry Commission is remodelling commercial forestry to make it vastly more environmentally friendly and much more attractive. The growth in tourism to the Kielder dam and the forest means that the area could happily be put into the national park to compensate for the park losing considerable powers over the Otterburn training ranges. I urge the Minister to consider that solution to resolve the conflict between the two bodies.

10.53 am

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on having secured this important debate. Its importance for those of us who do not yet have national parks in our areas is shown by the fact that four Members who represent Sussex constituencies covering different parts of the South Downs are hoping to take part in the debate—although I suspect that we have different views about the national park.

I welcome the decision by the Minister and his Government colleagues to listen and respond to the campaign that has taken place over several years to secure a national park for the South Downs, which, in 1947, was one of the areas suggested by the Hobhouse report for the first tranche of national parks and was the only area not included in the family of national parks that was created in 1949.

The history of the campaign predates that. In 1934, there was pressure for what we would now call a national park to be established for the South Downs by the landowners and the majority of the local authorities in the area, with one exception—Brighton borough council—which effectively prevented matters from going further. That was a twist of history, because Brighton and Hove council is the only local authority in the area that took the trouble to consult local residents on whether they wished to have a national park. The residents voted in favour of the proposal, which Brighton and Hove council is supporting in the face of opposition from other parts of the region.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was not expecting to avoid the point that, of the 15 local authorities that cover the proposed national park area, only one—his own—is in favour of national park status. All the others, which are accountable to their democratically elected councils, oppose it.

Mr. Lepper: I thank the hon. Gentleman for falling into the trap of making that intervention. He is right, but Brighton and Hove council is the only council that consulted its local residents. In many other local authorities, the decision to support the proposed national park was taken by council officers and rubber-stamped by a small committee of councillors. Indeed, in every case where a local authority held a public meeting concerning the proposed national park, the majority of those in attendance supported the proposal.

Why should the South Downs become a national park? There can be no doubt that the landscape is unique and needs protection. From Winchester to Eastbourne, the landscape is subject to all kinds of pressures, and needs the protection that only national park status can provide. The area is popular with visitors, and much more needs to be done to create a balance between the needs of conservation and recreation and of those who work there.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that some 32 million people a year currently visit the South Downs. Does he think that national park status will increase or reduce the number of visitors?

Mr. Lepper: I think that we will have better management of recreation for the South Downs, which will affect the visitors. For example, thanks to good management, the number of visitors to the Norfolk Broads has in some respects declined since national park status was recently conferred on it. The creation of a national park does not necessarily lead, therefore, to an increase in the number of visitors.

Those who oppose a national park for the South Downs have built up certain myths about the way in which national parks are run. One such myth concerns local involvement in a national parks authority. It is suggested that such an authority is a form of quango that is run from Whitehall, but nothing could be further from the truth. The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) expressed his support for the inclusion of parish council representatives as a move towards greater democracy in the management of national park authorities. Fifty per cent. plus one of the membership of such an authority consists of local, county and district councillors, and 25 per cent. minus one consists of parish council representatives. It is true that the remaining 25 per cent. are appointed, but as I understand it the chairman—or woman—of a national park authority is appointed by the authority itself, rather than Whitehall. Therefore, there is a degree of real local representation in national park authorities.

Another myth is that there will be a move away from local councils' involvement in the planning process. All who care about national parks regard the ability to form a strategic plan, through which the various conflicting interests of district councils and planning authorities are resolved, as one of their strengths. As I understand it, the situation that existed in the national parks until the 1995 Act was that the majority of planning decisions were devolved back to the individual local authorities. Following the 1995 legislation, the majority of local authorities decided to move in the opposite direction and to give greater decision making powers over strategic planning to the national park authority for their area. On both those counts, therefore, the opponents of a national park for the South Downs are creating myths that cannot be sustained by fact.

My final point is about funding. We have heard about the Government's contribution to funding, and I share the concerns that have been expressed about the need for that to be increased. However, it is often overlooked, especially in the important area of conservation, that a national park has access to lottery funding—or the ability to apply for it—and funding from the European Union, whereas bodies such as the South Downs Conservation Board do not. On the South Downs, therefore, conservation work would be enhanced by the possibility of attracting additional funding, not only from central Government but from sources from which the Sussex Downs conservation board is currently denied funds.

I pay tribute to the Sussex Downs conservation board for the work that it has done in the years since it was set up. It has done a lot, but its powers are limited, especially in relation to planning. It can be listened to, but it has no remit for decision making in terms of planning. A national park authority would have such a remit. That is why the campaign for a national park for the south downs is supported not only by my area's council, but by the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Friends of the Earth, the Ramblers Association, the wildlife trusts, the Youth Hostels

[Mr. Lepper]

Association, the Open Spaces Society, the Society of Sussex Downsmen, the Sussex Archaeological Society, the Sussex Wildlife Trust, and a host of other local and national organisations. I am glad that the Government have listened to those people.

11.2 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on securing this debate, which has been a very level-headed one.

The debate takes place against the background of increasing building pressure on greenfield sites, an increasing demand for access to national parks as well as country and urban parks, an increasing threat to biodiversity both onshore and offshore, and increasing demands for safe food and the sustainable management of natural resources. All that points to the need for an increase in the number of national parks or—to put it a different way—for areas to be granted the degree of protection afforded to national parks. Greater investment is also required in the less prestigious local parks relied on by many people in urban areas such as mine. That has been well documented in the Select Committee's report on country and urban parks.

I shall focus first on national marine parks, to which other hon. Members have not referred. That is one of the major omissions in the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. I am not suggesting that direct comparisons can be made between a species that is being fished commercially, such as cod, and other species worthy of protection. However, if cod is in such decline that whole sea areas might have to be closed to fishing, I dread to think what is happening to the less well known species. That is why action needs to be taken on national marine parks. I know that the Government have identified that as an issue, and that a working party was set up to examine it. Will the Minister tell us what progress has been made on this important matter?

With regard to onshore national parks, the South Downs has been referred to, and there is also the question of the New Forest national park. The extension of protected landscapes and habitats will be welcomed, but only if local communities feel that their interests are also being safeguarded. I have some questions to which I hope the Minister will respond. Does he support proposals for the South Downs and the New Forest to become national parks? If so, what time scale does he envisage? Has he considered the funding implications for local authorities? What local community involvement would he envisage and has he made any attempt to assess the impact on access arrangements for existing and future visitors?

On the question of reforms to the way that national parks are structured, a number of hon. Members mentioned planning. How can more consultation be carried out with local communities? How can we ensure that the planning officers who carry out the work are more highly qualified? How can planning help to provide more affordable housing in these areas? There is also the question of national park rangers. I understand that they have no powers of enforcement. Do rangers demand or require additional powers of enforcement to protect wildlife in national parks? Is the Minister reviewing that issue?

One of the concerns that has been raised by various organisations in relation to national parks is bureaucracy. Leaving land in a will is an expensive, complex and lengthy process, which is a key problem when a possible extension to a national park is being considered. Do the Government have any plans to review that legal quagmire?

The public are increasingly concerned about the environment, biodiversity and also the quality of the food that is produced. Could national parks develop a campaigning role in promoting high-quality, possibly organic food that is grown in those areas on sustainably managed farms.

What encouragement will the Minister give to sustainable resource development in those areas, and what can be done to sustain rural employment? My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey), who has had to leave the Chamber, wanted me to make that point in relation to Wales, because he is concerned about a net outward migration, particularly of younger people. What can be done to help to promote skills that can be used in national parks, such as stone wall building?

Mr. McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman referred to his hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, who was very pleased that the Welsh Assembly was to move to direct elections for national parks. Would the Liberal Democratic party welcome direct elections for all national parks?

Mr. Brake: I am happy for my Welsh colleague to pursue his agenda through the Welsh Assembly. That is what devolution is about. I will let him deal with that and I will concentrate on English matters.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Brake: I am attempting to finish to allow time for other speakers and I shall not give way. I am drawing my comments to a close.

Another area to which hon. Members have referred is funding. I understand that Wales has received a significant boost to its national parks funding. Does the Minister expect similar action to be taken here? All hon. Members enjoy our national parks. The Minister must reassure us today that he will ensure that existing and future national parks, whether onshore or offshore, are adequately funded and sustainably managed, and that local communities thrive so that our children and grandchildren can enjoy them as much as we do.

11.09 am

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on securing this important debate. I was interested by the comments of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) about offshore national parks—an idea that may well commend itself to the former Paymaster General, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson).

The debate has been very interesting and a veritable tour of the country. We have heard powerful contributions, and I am particularly pleased that Sussex

is so well represented today. I can claim particular knowledge of two relevant areas. One is the North York Moors national park. I grew up in Yorkshire and, like the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby, have enjoyed visiting that national park. The other is the South Downs. My home in my constituency is on the very edge of the downs at Wannock and I get enormous pleasure, as I am sure other hon. Members in the Sussex area do, from walking regularly on the downs.

Today we have an excellent opportunity to celebrate the success of national parks. In particular I acknowledge the Council for National Parks, as it is now called—in 1936, when it began campaigning for national parks, it was the Standing Committee on National Parks. Its major contributions over the years are too many to mention, but they include lobbying for the extension of national parks and playing a role in the establishment of the 10 mph speed limit on Windermere in the Lake district.

The problem is that some national parks have become victims of their success, which has brought problems and challenges. The recent history of some national parks contains a message about the need for flexibility in the 21st century. We should tailor the excellent brand name of national parks to local needs and circumstances, as has happened in recent years in the broads, for example. A very different approach has been adopted there from that used in other national parks, exactly as one would expect given the special circumstances.

I attended a meeting with the hon. Members for Kemptown (Dr. Turner) and for Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) a year or so ago in this very building. It was addressed by Sir Chris Bonington, a distinguished supporter of national parks. He extolled the virtues of the new national park in the South Downs. It was a few days after his appointment by the Deputy Prime Minister to lead a task force to examine the problems in existing national parks, such as too many visitors, too much traffic, erosion, congestion and pollution. Those are the problems of success. It would have been pointless to set up the national parks without encouraging visitors.

I want to talk about the proposals for a South Downs national park, for three reasons. First, I know the area well and represent part of it. Secondly, it is the current live issue in the national parks context, along with the parallel proposals for the New Forest. Thirdly, perhaps the whole debate about the South Downs national park will inform a broader, and very important, debate about the future role and status of national parks. As I have explained, national parks are a concept that needs to develop and change in the light of new circumstances, not least, as the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby has said, the explosion in the ownership of private motor cars.

The issue that I have identified is not a new one. Originally, as the hon. Member for Pavilion pointed out, the South Downs was rejected when areas were being considered for national park status. The Countryside Agency's predecessors considered the issue twice, in 1956 and 1998. In 1992, of course, the Countryside Commission decided to establish the Sussex Downs conservation board, to which I join other hon. Members in paying tribute. It does an excellent job and shows tremendous commitment.

In 1998, the Countryside Commission again considered whether national park status would be appropriate for the South Downs, and concluded that designation was not especially desirable to ensure conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the area or to implement the necessary measures in respect of recreation and so on. It advised Ministers against designation as a national park. The new Government did not take that advice, and the process is thus on-going.

It is important, however, as the Countryside Agency stated recently, to focus on the factors that might make the area a proper place for a national park. They boil down to two criteria. The first is whether the area contains qualities

> that might merit the provision of a markedly superior recreational experience.

No hon. Member who represents part of the area, or who has visited it, could argue that it does not. It is a wonderful area of recreational opportunities already enjoyed by many thousands, if not millions, of people every year.

The second criterion stated by the agency is that

> designation will lead to a markedly better managed recreational experience than can be achieved by local authorities alone.

That is the key issue in this context. The document also states, rather in passing, that

> some regard must be had to public opinion.

It continues that

> designation as a national park for better protection, should be seen as carrying low priority.

It says that because national parks and areas of outstanding national beauty have similar protection under the existing rules.

It has rightly been said that planning issues are at the heart of the debate; that is the key to the future of the South Downs and other national parks. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) said that all the local authorities in the area, with the exception of Brighton and Hove, believe that they should continue to have a strong role in the planning process. That is not just because of democratic accountability, although that is important, but because they know the area and feel that they are best placed to take planning decisions.

The average figure for planning applications is roughly the same for national parks as for anywhere else—about 80 per cent. That point was powerfully made by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby. That is a double-edged sword. In the present circumstances, there will not be a major shift in the approach to planning. West Sussex county council, for example, made a strong case for joint local planning arrangements between a national park authority and the district authorities, possibly under section 62(2) of the Environment Act 1995. I should be interested to hear the Minister's views about that proposal.

The area in question is different from that of existing national parks. It is not a wilderness; it is heavily farmed and close to large centres of population. I am puzzled by the alleged advantages of national park status for recreation and access. We already have an estimated 32 million visitors a year, which is more than any of the existing national parks. The hon. Member for Pavilion seemed to think that we might end up with fewer visitors if the area was a national park, although I am not clear whether he thought that that was a good thing or a bad thing.

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

I advise the Government and others involved to be cautious about divining public support or opposition. There are some vociferous minority groups who are in favour of the proposal, and there have been some so-called public meetings that have not been representative of a cross-section of opinion. In my constituency, mainstream opinion is not in favour of a national park—almost every local authority in the area is against the idea.

We want a working and living community, not a theme park. Shakespeare said, "What is in a name?", which may be a wise approach. The need for national parks in the South Downs and the New Forest will be reviewed under the next Conservative Government.

Today is a time for celebration to mark the far-sightedness and high ideals of those who started national parks; to congratulate existing national parks on their success; and to look to the future to establish whether, under the brand name "national park", we can produce a more democratic, more local and more workable system for the 21st century.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) for raising this important issue. He made an interesting speech and other hon. Members also raised important points. I shall attempt to address as many as possible in the available time, but if I cannot deal with all of them, I shall write to hon. Members.

Responsibility for national parks is one of the better elements of my diverse brief, as hon. Members have noticed. I am familiar with the North York Moors park because I holiday there from time to time. It is about an hour's drive from my home. I am in the process of walking in four stages from Holy island to the Lake district—a distance of about 250 miles. Thus far I have reached Shap, and the walk has taken me through three national parks, so I have some familiarity with the territory.

As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) said, the decision taken 50 years ago to ensure the conservation of our most precious areas of countryside was indeed far sighted and it is worth celebrating. Modern pressures make the conservation of these fine areas even more important—not only on account of their great beauty but because they provide people with somewhere to go away from the hurly burly where they can truly enjoy their leisure time.

As hon. Members have argued today, we must recognise that national parks are also places where people live and work, and the benefits of increasing the number of visitors must be reconciled with the interests of people living and working there. They are not incompatible, but we are all on a learning curve and as we go along we should try to achieve that balance.

National parks are a vital part of our heritage. Each is different from the others, and between them they offer beautiful countryside and a great range of experience in recreational pursuits. It may be that no single ideological model can be imposed on all of them. I acknowledge that in respect of the proposals for the South Downs and New Forest national parks. I have received a delegation and am taking careful account of all the different representations on the subject. I have made it clear that our minds remain open about what model will be adopted.

Mr. Wigley: The Minister will be aware from some hon. Members' contributions that the National Assembly for Wales is, for the same reason that he proposed, considering possible variations in the model. If primary legislation is forthcoming, will the Minister bear in mind the need of the National Assembly for Wales for flexibility through order-making procedures? We want to ensure that we achieve a formula that is responsive to our area's needs.

Mr. Mullin: I shall certainly bear that in mind, but many of my superiors would be annoyed if I made any commitments about future legislation.

In view of the Government's current initiatives, today's debate is timely. The initiatives include the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, the introduction of rural development plans for England and Wales, the forthcoming rural White Paper and the policy review of national park authorities, which I recently announced. The review will be similar to other Government sponsored policy reviews. I expect it to cover a range of issues, including the parks' governing structures, overall policy relating to legislation that affects the parks, and the future distribution of funding. We want to ensure that the national park authorities remain forward looking, dynamic, open and innovative.

National parks contribute much to the social and economic fabric of rural areas. Tourism is just one example; it is an industry that is becoming increasingly important in rural areas. It supports about 380,000 jobs compared with just over 500,000 in agriculture, and it makes a vital contribution to the local economies of all the national parks and to the rural economy in general. In accordance with their statutory purpose, the national parks are keen to promote greater enjoyment of all their special qualities by everyone, in a responsible fashion. I hope that they will be seen as models in promoting sustainable tourism.

Mr. McLoughlin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mullin: I am sorry, I have very little time.

Public transport projects are a key factor in tourism. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned the North York Moors bus scheme and the leading role taken by the Esk valley rail partnership.

Several hon. Members mentioned the need for social inclusion. That operates two ways: first, it means making the parks available to people from all backgrounds and in all income groups; secondly it means taking account of the interests of those on low incomes who live in the parks, including their need for decent local transport and affordable housing. It is imperative that we send out the clear message that the national parks are for everyone. Efforts are being made to make the parks more accessible to all by public transport, particularly disabled visitors. We are also keen to encourage greater involvement by

minority ethnic communities. The Government are playing their part in that by broadening the membership of national park authorities to make them more representative of the social and cultural mix of the countryside at large.

There has been some talk about the use of cars. These days the Conservative party is posturing as the party of the motor car, but that is rather irresponsible. We need to make more sensible use of the car. Everyone recognises that cars are essential, especially for those who live in rural areas, but we can do much to make more sensible use of them.

There have long been stricter planning controls in the national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty, particularly in respect of major development. There are also tighter controls over permitted development rights in the parks. Those additional controls are needed to reflect the special features and qualities of protected landscape areas, and they have proved their worth. I know that concern is often expressed locally about the national park authorities' interpretation of planning controls, but it is a difficult balance to strike. Well over 80 per cent. of planning applications in national parks are granted. The Countryside Agency offers special training seminars for authority members on planning matters, so that the national experience can be more widely shared.

The new national parks have been mentioned. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) said, a number of myths exist about national parks. I agree with the hon. Member for Eastbourne that parks are living communities, not theme parks. The Government are considering the possible designation of two new national parks, and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) asked about the timetable for that. We intend the designation order for the New Forest to be produced in late 2001 and that for the South Downs to be published in the spring of 2002. It will then be for the Secretary of State to consider the orders, with any representations that may have been made, and to decide whether public inquiries are needed before final decisions are taken.

The national parks have received a real terms increase of about £5 million in funding over the past 10 years, and further increases will be announced shortly. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) said that extra money will be available—about 10 per cent. a year—but we must bear in mind the fact that some of that will be consumed by the extra responsibilities that will arise under the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, particularly the access provisions of which he is a strong supporter. Everyone expects us to fund authorities properly and not just impose extra responsibilities on them. In any case, the parks benefit from many other aspects of Government policy. We are putting a lot of money into rural buses and, through the Housing Corporation, into affordable housing, which is an important issue not only in national parks, but in all parts of the country. It is not true—

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to stop the Minister in full flight, but we must now move to the next debate.

Flooding (Vale of York)

11.30 am

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue, which is causing great concern against a background of unprecedented conditions as a result of persistent slow-moving rain. About 30 mm fell in a 12-hour period between the afternoon of Thursday 2 November and the early hours of Friday 3 November, and 50 mm fell on the northern Pennines and the North Yorkshire moors. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) regrets that he cannot be with us. He has suffered similar flooding to that in the Vale of York.

I congratulate the Environment Agency, the police and other emergency services, 38 Royal Engineers based at Ripon, local radio stations and others on all the assistance that they gave in last weekend's emergency, which is on-going. My heart goes out to all those affected: the flooding of one's home and possessions must be one of the greatest disasters that can affect an individual or a family. I accept that the Environment Agency has worked extremely hard and provided 24-hour coverage to improve flood warnings. However, that is no consolation to my constituents in the Vale of York who have been flooded.

There was a flood awareness campaign during September and a number of meetings were held during flood awareness week beginning on 11 September. Regrettably, no meeting was held anywhere in the Vale of York, but plastic cards that float have been issued. My constituents must be reassured that, if their houses are flooded, the cards will be there on their return. However, improving flood warnings is no substitute for better flood defences.

The system seemed to break down in one respect: Rawcliffe was completely overlooked and constituents there feel neglected. The flood defences were breached in the late hours of Friday night and the early hours of Saturday morning, 4 November. A request went out for sandbags to be provided, but it fell on deaf ears. For a number of understandable reasons, priority was given to the city of York, but no clear warning was given to Rawcliffe residents.

I am delighted that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is present, because I would like him to clarify his comments in *Hansard* yesterday. Referring to me, he said:

> Much of her constituency is a flood plain and its flooding has taken a great deal of pressure off urban areas.—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 31.]

I would like an assurance that it is not all right to flood the Vale of York to save the city of York. That is causing a great deal of distress, particularly in Rawcliffe.

As I said, no sandbags were provided and no adequate warning was given. Social services were not involved on either Saturday or Sunday: they intervened only at a very late stage. Rawcliffe parish council could not have done more to help the evacuees. I went to a centre in St. Mark's grove in Rawcliffe, which is where the police were told to direct evacuees. However, I had to intervene in the case of a couple that had nowhere to go because social services were not present. I gather that people from social services did not explain why they had

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[Miss Anne McIntosh]

not been present until late yesterday. In future, there should be greater communication between the services involved.

An array of bodies has responsibility for flood defences, including the Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards. The Library research note that was prepared for me on 3 November states:

> Provision of flood defences relies on a partnership between Government and local operating authorities.

The involvement of that array of bodies with varying responsibilities makes for a complicated system and a confusing funding mechanism.

The funding arrangement that I would particularly like the Minister to consider is the revenue support grant. In the 1997-98 financial year, the flood and coastal defence element of the revenue support grant totalled £225.4 million. When the Local Government Association recently gave evidence to the Select Committee on Agriculture, it agreed that, although it is reasonable to maintain the existing standard spending assessment methodology, additional safeguards are needed to reflect within-year changes in local authorities' spending on their flood defence systems in SSAs for subsequent years. The association believes that that would allow for consistency and certainty under the SSA procedure in strategic planning and flood defences.

The flood defence income and expenditure figures for the accounting year that ended on 31 March 2000 show that a loss was incurred in Yorkshire. Total expenditure as a percentage of the total was 22.8 per cent., whereas income was only 21.6 per cent. I am worried because the £51 million that the Government have provided, although welcome, is to be spread over four years, and £51 million is substantially less than a quarter of the total spending on flood defences in any one year, and will probably be insufficient for the unprecedented flooding crisis that we have faced.

The Minister said yesterday that the Vale of York is substantially within a flood plain area. That is apparent from the most recent indicative flood plains map, prepared by the Environment Agency in 1999, a copy of which I received in August this year. The breaching at Rawcliffe of Blue beck, causing the flooding into Rawcliffe grove, Shipton road and other areas, was apparently aggravated by the large number of houses that have been built in recent years. Will the Government consider imposing an immediate moratorium on the building of new homes on flood plains such as the Vale of York until an estimate can be made of the damage incurred?

I am sure that the Minister is aware of the impact of the flooding on the farming community—which is already in the depths of a crisis. As we have seen in the Vale of York, protecting towns often means that rural areas are flooded, including highly productive agricultural land. For example, a total of 1,000 acres across five farms on the Crown estate at Boroughbridge have been flooded. That area is not a flood plain, but prime land on which is grown potatoes, sugar beet and cereals. Many crops will not be harvested, and tenants and landowners in those areas face huge losses. Everyone agrees that it is vital to protect homes from flooding—it is the most personal disaster that can affect a constituent. However, some form of compensation must be paid—not necessarily from the flood defence budget; perhaps from the rural development fund—to those whose incomes and livelihoods have been sacrificed in this way.

The new money that the Government have announced is appreciated. However, will the Minister confirm that it is not merely a levy on the existing county council SSA, that it will be paid directly to the flood defence committee of the Environment Agency, and that part of it will be paid to the highway authorities?

Floods have damaged many roads and bridges in the Vale of York, which was cut in two. Aldwark bridge is being repaired, Cundall bridge was flooded and impassable, and the A68 has been impassable for the best part of a week. Will emergency funds be made available not just to the Environment Agency's flood defence committees but to the highway authorities, so that they can quickly repair flood damage to roads and bridges?

New defences in Boroughbridge have been put severely to the test, although as I speak they seem to be holding. However, most of the flooded properties in Langthorpe, which is slightly lower than the adjacent defences, could probably have been saved if the Aldborough Ings scheme had been put into operation. Can the new money be made available to compensate landowners and tenants on the Ings for the inconvenience caused by temporary flooding?

There are problems in Boroughbridge. The floodline warning has proved inadequate in certain respects. The quality of information has not been sufficiently or frequently upgraded, and that has caused alarm. Flood information was often six hours old. I phoned the floodline on Friday evening, but Boroughbridge was not mentioned—Milby was referred to, but that is an appreciable distance away. In the past, information was given on the height of water passing under a bridge, but since the flood warning was changed that has no longer been provided. Regrettably, portable road signs were not available in Boroughbridge, so when the bridge was closed local people had to use hand signals to divert traffic, thereby incurring abuse from passing motorists.

Is the Minister aware that the Boroughbridge pumping station is controlled by a computer that is located in York? Recently, the computer failed and manual intervention was required, which led to various operational defects. Moreover, does the Minister realise that the recently installed barrage, which prevents debris passing under the bridge, could cause a sudden rush of water and lead to flooding further down the river?

As of yesterday, 50 residential properties in the Hambleton district had been evacuated, and their occupants rehoused or cared for in other sites. More than 250 other homes in Hambleton have experienced flooding, but as yet it has not been necessary to evacuate the owner-occupiers. According to Broadacres housing association, many homes that were affected by the flood had no house contents insurance, so it will be impossible to make any claim. That is a particularly worrying problem, which doubtless is not unique to the Vale of York. As the Minister will know, if an act of God—such as flood or fire—is deemed to have occurred, many of the losses are uninsurable. That has a substantial financial impact on people who can ill afford it.

I urge the Minister to discover whether, for example, dredging still takes place on rivers such as the Ouse, which used to be dredged frequently. Are local drains being cleared as often as in the past? I make a special plea for the strengthening of flood defences at Aldborough Ings and Clifton Ings, which would protect Rawcliffe. I hope that the Minister, the local authorities and all the relevant services will pay particular attention to rural areas and city outskirts such as Rawcliffe and Clifton. If possible, nowhere should be flooded, and when unprecedented conditions occur in future, sandbags must be made available to all who are affected, come hell or high water. Will the Minister consider a temporary moratorium on house building on flood plains, until we have the opportunity to assess what damage has been caused to constituencies such as the Vale of York?

On the subject of rehousing the evacuees as soon as is physically possible, can we be assured that there will be no health risk? Will the local authority, the Environment Agency or Yorkshire Water be responsible for particles of sewage being removed from people's homes? The water level is about to peak this afternoon. If the sewerage works at Rawcliffe were to burst its banks, the damage to the houses in Shipton road and to other neighbouring facilities would not bear thinking about. Help must obviously be sought, and we seek guidance from the Minister this morning.

11.45 am

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) on securing this debate. It is very timely, given the present circumstances in her constituency and nationally.

As the hon. Lady rightly said, these extreme conditions have been caused by some of the most severe floods that this country has experienced in half a century. Moreover, they are affecting areas right across the country. They have put local authorities, the emergency services, the Environment Agency and voluntary groups under severe pressure. The latest position, reported to me this morning by the Environment Agency, is that 4,725 properties have been flooded in England and Wales. There are 45 severe flood warnings and 231 flood warnings in force. That shows the scale of the flooding and of the demands that it is making on the agency.

Yorkshire has been especially badly affected by the recent floods. The county experienced exceptionally heavy rainfall in October, and that has continued into November with the present rain belts. Nearly all Yorkshire is on flood watch, and flood warnings or severe flood warnings are in force on many rivers. The situation is changing constantly as the rivers respond to the recent rainfall, and I am afraid that more rainfall is expected in the next few days.

As the hon. Lady may know, I visited York last Friday, and I was in Selby last Saturday. The surrounding area was also visited by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. We have seen the effects of the flooding first hand, and the misery that it has caused those people who have been affected.

The one bright side to the situation is that the flooding would have been a lot worse but for the improvements that have been made to flood defences in recent years. The defences constructed in York after the serious floods of 1982 have been seriously tested, but they have managed to operate beyond their design capacity, and they continue to protect about 1,000 houses. As the hon. Lady said, substantial protection has also been given to Boroughbridge in her constituency, where I am glad to say the defences have held. However, as she also pointed out, about 50 properties in Rawcliffe and about 20 in Milby have been flooded. Flood warnings were issued in those locations, but I would like to extend my personal sympathy to all those people who have been affected. I appreciate the impact that this has had on them.

I shall deal with some of the specific points that the hon. Lady raised. The Environment Agency has issued warnings to people who live in flood risk areas, and those cards were important because they explained exactly what the warnings and the symbols meant, and what action should be taken in case of a flood. They also had the flood watch number on them. That service has been very successful, because it has allowed people to ring and obtain the information to which the hon. Lady referred. People want information: they want to know what is going on in their area, what the risks are and what the local river is doing. The agency has done a very good job in that respect.

The hon. Lady asked about the availability of much wider information on road closures and so on, and I am not saying that we cannot consider such issues when the circumstances have calmed down and returned to normal. We may be able to improve on those provisions in future, and there may be areas in which we could do better. The agency will review the situation, when it has returned to normality, and I shall ensure that the hon. Lady and all other hon. Members in affected areas receive a copy of the conclusions.

The hon. Lady mentioned the flood plain in the Vale of York. I do not want her and her constituents to get the impression that it is acceptable for them to be flooded to save the city of York or other people. That is not what the Government or the Environment Agency believe, but flood plains are part of our natural defences in flood management. Flood meadows and plains will flood as they have always done and may have flooded more in the past than now. They are a natural feature of the environment and many farmers use cropping and grazing regimes that work in harmony with annual winter flooding, although there have been huge changes over the years with intensification and a move to arable farming. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has played a role in that over the years by providing grants for draining fields or for switching from winter grazing to arable crops. The Ministry has played its part over the decades, but we must think more about sustainability and its impact.

Miss McIntosh: Does the Minister accept that there is a case for grants to be made available to farmers on this occasion, and will he agree to press for a moratorium on house building on flood plains until we can assess the damage?

Mr. Morley: I shall come to what we can do to help farmers in the current situation and the arrangements for flood defences.

[Mr. Morley]

Our prime concern is to protect lives and property. Farmers may suffer loss, but the degree of loss depends on how long floodwater remains and the strength of the flood. The strength of the present floods will have a great impact on farmers wherever land has flooded.

We have given some thought to the funding arrangements and to the standard spending assessment in relation to regional flood defence committees and levies, and we have considered whether that is the most efficient method. The methods of funding flood defences will be reviewed and we shall produce a report. The present methods work well, and local people are involved through their local representatives and local authorities, which decide local priorities. That is a strength of the system, but I am not saying that there have not been problems. One is that local authorities are sometimes reluctant, for a variety of reasons, to pass the increase in the levies—it was above inflation in the previous standard spending assessment—to regional flood defence committees. That can cause problems.

I confirm that the £51 million over four years is new money from the Government's reserves and will not come from county council or local authority allocations. It will be predominantly for capital programmes for flood defence work and some will be used for whole catchment area planning. It is not destined for highway authorities for road or bridge replacement or repair, for which there are separate budgets. That £51 million, on top of increases already announced for the flood and coastal defence budget, means that we shall be able to grant-aid more flood defence schemes, and we shall want to give priority to river systems.

The hon. Lady referred to schemes in her constituency. It is for local and regional flood defence committees to decide their local priorities, work out schemes in conjunction with the Environment Agency and submit them to the Ministry for grant aid according to the criteria that we apply—engineering standards, cost benefit analysis and other criteria with which they are familiar. I am sure that they will consider those matters in their areas and take action accordingly.

The £51 million and the Ministry's budget for flood control are not intended to compensate people who have been affected by floods. The Government do not have the facility to help with insurable risks. No Government have ever done that, and we cannot do so. However, we can help local authorities with the exceptional expenditure that many of them will face as a result of the floods. Bringing out emergency work teams, rehousing people and dealing with storm and flood damage involve exceptional costs. The hon. Lady will be aware that I announced yesterday that the Bellwin formula is to be boosted. The Government will now accept 100 per cent. of exceptional spending over the Bellwin threshold. Moreover, there will be the possibility of advance payments to help local authorities, and their claims will be dealt with as speedily as possible in future. That point was put to me by local authorities on my travels.

Information on road signs is a matter for local authorities. I note her point about the barrage holding back debris. The agency is keen to get that debris out of the water. I saw the Foss barrier when I visited York. Three members of staff were working around the clock in the rain removing tonnes of debris, including dead cattle, sheep and trees. Debris must be removed from the water; it must not be allowed to go down the rivers to jam under bridges, turning them into dams. The agency is well aware of that and is working very hard. Keeping the drains clear is a matter for local authorities. Dredging is a matter for the Environment Agency and the drainage authorities, which give it careful consideration. However, dredging channels would make only a marginal difference given the scale of these floods.

The Government recognise that in the recent flooding farmers may have lost crops that they intend to include in a claim under the arable area payments scheme in 2001. If they intend to re-sow the crops and if there is exceptional rainfall throughout the winter and into the spring, we shall seek any necessary extension of the latest sowing date after 31 May. If farmers want to put the flooded land into set-aside and need flexibility on the requirement to have green cover, which is one of the rules of set-aside as the hon. Lady will know, they should contact their local regional service centre. Exceptionally, because of the situation, we are prepared to allow flooded land to be set aside up to 100 per cent. of the area claimed. Any farmers in that position should contact their regional service centre. We are using our national discretion to deal with the situation. I think that farmers will find that helpful. The National Farmers Union has asked us to implement those measures, and I shall issue a press release so that farmers are aware of the changes that we will make.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to local agencies and local authorities, which have informed people about what has been happening. Local radio stations have also played a great role. On sandbagging, if the Environment Agency has spare capacity and time, it is only too happy to help out, but given the extent of these floods, the priority had to be to shore up defences that were under threat of collapsing. It is not the Environment Agency's responsibility to give sandbags to local houses; it is the responsibility of the local authority. I am quite sure that the hon. Lady will take that matter up with her local authority.

I have realised from my travels that the facility to get sandbags is important to local people. It is something tangible that gives them some security. Local authorities need to make sandbags available. However, to be fair, filling them is time consuming, and when flooding occurs local authority staff are obviously doing other things. In some parts of the country the Environment Agency has machines to fill sandbags and is only too pleased to co-operate with local authorities. The same applies to the provision of social services and facilities such as help with rehousing. The environmental health authorities, insurance companies and sewerage companies will help with cleaning up sewage pollution. If floorboards need to be replaced, that is a matter for insurance companies.

The conditions that have come about are exceptional and the response, by and large, has been good. We shall think about what lessons we can learn, what we have done well and what could be improved.

Art Cinemas (Reading)

12 noon

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I am delighted that I have been fortunate enough to be able to raise this important issue for my constituents.

Charlie Chaplin said:

> The story of the cinema is not simply entertainment for the ordinary men and women in Britain's towns and villages, it is as much the history of the 20th century.

In Reading, history shows that the cinema now known as the ABC was built in 1927. It was built for silent movies, perhaps rather late in the silent movie era, and the equipment for talkies was fitted later. The building contained, and still contains, a ballroom with a sprung floor and a cafe at the end. In the 1950s the building was one of nine cinemas in Reading, comprising 13,000 seats and showing more than 30 films every week. At that time the ABC was the home of the MGM musicals, which have had an enduring appeal, and of films such as "Casablanca", originally devised as a propaganda film for the second world war but now rightly regarded as a classic. The ABC cinema later became the Reading home of Rank films.

I am indebted to Mr. Roy Smith, known in Reading as "Mr. Cinema", for the information that I have used. Mr. Smith worked as a projectionist in most of Reading's cinemas and elsewhere. I pay tribute to his tireless efforts to preserve some of Reading's cinematic heritage. Mr. Smith attributes the decline in cinema in Reading that was going on until a few years ago to the entertainment tax introduced in the late 1950s. That added between 17 and 24 per cent. to the price of a cinema ticket at a time when competition from television was starting to be felt.

Leaving the history of the 20th century and moving to the 21st century, cinema patronage has increased in Reading, as elsewhere in the country. It was thought in the 1980s that the rise in video rentals and home video ownership would kill off cinema, but the opposite is true. Video has cross-fertilised with mainstream cinema and more and more good British and international films are being made.

Reading now has one multiplex cinema, in the centre of the city—I use the word "city" advisedly—with 10 screens and 2,000 seats. The ABC closed as a cinema in early 1998 when it became clear that the multiplex was coming. The ABC site has received planning permission to become a private health club, and stories that I believe to be well founded are circulating in Reading that it is also being eyed for development into flats. That fate befell the other town centre cinema in Reading, the Odeon, which also closed recently.

I began with a quotation from Charlie Chaplin, a key figure in cinema, about history, and have tried to give a brief history of cinema, particularly that of the ABC in Reading. However, the point of the debate is not history but the future. I do not want to be seen as promoting a luddite wish to turn back the clock. I am not someone who refuses to see the advantage of change. The multiplex is a fine place to see films. I do not think that I have ever sat in a more comfortable cinema seat. I remember the cinemas of my youth, which were far from comfortable or clean. Going to the cinema these days is quite different, and so much better.

However, even though there are 10-screen multiplex cinemas, many films do not get the showing that they deserve. Although they probably would not attract several hundred people several nights a week, they have a great influence on subsequent and more popular film making. The audience for art films is smaller than that for mainstream films, and people have to travel a long way to see them.

A recent example of such a film, although it would not necessarily be called an art film, was "Love's Labours Lost", made by Kenneth Branagh, who grew up in Reading. The film was shown at Reading university's film theatre but not at the multiplex and it did not have a general release, which is a great pity. It is a pity, too, that the film could not have a premiere in Reading, which is what Kenneth Branagh wanted, as he said when he came to Reading and spoke about it at an event that was held at Reading university's film theatre. Kenneth Branagh expressed his firm support for people who wanted to save the ABC as an arts or community cinema.

Similarly, there are other audiences that are are not catered for by the multiplex and mainstream cinemas. Reading has a sizeable Asian population, which has almost no opportunity to see "Bollywood" films at the cinema, as there is no longer a screen that shows them. Although there is a flourishing video market in such films for home viewing, Asian families enjoy going out together to the cinema to see the films that they enjoy, which they cannot do at present. The sizeable Asian population in other nearby towns would also appreciate a cinema showing the films that they want.

Both Reading university and the Reading college and school of arts and design have media and film studies courses, where students learn about making films. I declare an interest, as my son directs and acts in some of those films. However, those aspirant film makers have no venue where their work can be shown and where they can get feedback from the public. That is important for young film makers and artists who feel passionately that they have a message to get across to the public. It is a pity that they can show their films only to each other or to half a dozen friends, and then only when they can get hold of what is often primitive projection equipment.

We do not know what Steven Spielbergs, Francis Ford Coppolas and François Truffauts of the next generation might be lost to cinema by being disheartened at the lack of opportunity for showing their work. What new Kenneth Branagh or Kate Winslet, who also grew up in Reading, will be lost because they did not have the chance to practise their craft along with student film makers?

Film and cinema are not only about artists; as I said, it is a matter of record and of history. Reading is also home to the community film makers Real Time, who record their community, and involve people from all walks of life in making films. This weekend, I shall join them to be interviewed by Reading's gay and lesbian youth group, Reachout, for a film funded by Reading borough council about what it is like to be young in Reading. Reading, East is one of the youngest constituencies in the country; films like those that I have mentioned deserve to be seen, but at present there is nowhere for them to be shown.

[Jane Griffiths]

The ABC is more than a cinema; as I said, it also has a ballroom with a sprung floor, which was well used in the 1930s. Many of my constituents have fond memories of dancing there in their young days, and of meeting their future husbands and wives on the dance floor. The ballroom could now house all kinds of dance, from tea dances to salsa, the current dance craze. It could provide hanging space for local artists and it already has a cafe. Reading has many public houses, but people tell me that we should have more cafes—more places where we can spend the evening drinking coffee. The dance floor could also provide rehearsal space for dance artistes, young and old. Reading has a thriving amateur and youth theatre scene, but those people have nowhere to put on their plays. The ABC could offer that. Again, I declare an interest, as my son is active in Reading Youth Theatre.

I know that I have expanded a little beyond the title of the debate, which is on arts cinemas in Reading. I have shown that the ABC cinema could provide a venue for art cinema there, but I have also shown that it could provide so much more; as well as providing a venue for community cinema and an outlet for student and community films, it could be a general arts centre.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister knows of the ABC building, because it was assessed by English Heritage in April 1999. We hoped that the building would be listed, as people in Reading felt strongly that it had merit. English Heritage made several favourable comments about the building, describing the front elevation as "stylish"—although it was somewhat altered in the 1970s to create the three-screen cinemas that were popular at the time. It described the cafe stairs as a good 1920s piece of design—a style pleasing to the eye that we do not see often enough nowadays. However, although it was acknowledged that the ABC cinema has merit, it seems that it will not be listed and, therefore, may not be preserved.

I hope that other innovative ways may be found not only to preserve the building for arts and community use but to allow various groups to work together to let the building continue to contribute to Reading's cultural life, as it has done throughout most of the 20th century. Some of those who are interested in saving the cinema have formed a committee, which has already approached various bodies in search of support and funding. I hope that, as a result of any publicity generated by this debate, more people will come forward. Since it was reported in Reading's *Evening Post* that I had secured the debate, I have been contacted by many constituents who support the move, and I have forwarded their details to the committee.

The first part of the debate's title on the Order Paper is the dreaded phrase—it will certainly be dreaded by the Treasury—"Government support". I do not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to say now whether funding or other support will be made available to rescue the ABC building for use as a centre for arts excellence. Instead, I hope that she will be able to say who else could be approached for funding. I hope, too, that she will give us the Government's view on community and art film making and on how young student film makers could be supported.

I have written to my hon. Friend requesting a briefing on the matter, and I hope that some preliminary information will be made available—soon, if not today—that will allow the campaigners to make a start on raising the necessary funding. However, not only money is needed. Other advice will be needed to put together a business plan. For instance, a surveyor will need to inspect the cinema to determine the building's condition, and legal and financial advice will be required, so any information on where such assistance could be found would help.

I mentioned earlier that Reading, East has many young constituents. One reason is that Reading university is located mostly within the constituency's boundaries, and almost all the 12,000 students live in the area. That is why the club scene, the music scene and the arts scene flourish in Reading. However, it is not the only reason. I said also that two stars of film, Kenneth Branagh and Kate Winslet, both grew up in Reading. There is considerable talent—and not only young talent—in Reading. People involved in creative work are always looking for venues. A prosperous place such as Reading brings in people all the time—to work, to study and to enjoy their leisure. That puts pressure on various spaces—housing, and particularly cultural space. The demand for housing leads developers to view a cinema as a potential space for building flats that could be sold at a higher price.

I hope that I may continue to work with my friends in the constituency, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can provide some helpful advice today.

12.15 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) for initiating this debate. She has highlighted the importance to local communities of venues such as the ABC in Friar street. I want to reassure her that the Government support such venues and want to ensure that that specific venue continues to be available to her constituents for a wide variety of activities.

My hon. Friend wrote to me in October, following a meeting with Margaret Schreiber who was leading a group to examine the future prospects of the ABC in Friar street. My hon. Friend also paid tribute to Roy Smith's efforts to preserve the cinematic heritage of Reading. It was interesting to hear that Kate Winslet and Kenneth Branagh grew up in Reading, which obviously has a long history of achievement in the film world. It was also interesting to hear that the ABC in Friar street has a ballroom with a sprung floor. I have one in my constituency for tea dances, and it is very popular. I wish my hon. Friend good luck.

It may help if I briefly set out the Government's position. The Government are keen to promote arthouse cinema, both as a means of encouraging new ideas and innovative approaches in the film industry, and as an opportunity for dedicated cinemagoers to enjoy a wider choice of film. Before today, I acquired details of some of the films that have been shown since the beginning of October, which clearly demonstrates the wide range of films shown and made available to people in my hon. Friend's constituency.

My hon. Friend referred to "Love's Labours Lost", which was shown at the ABC. I share her concern about such films' not being on general release. She also

mentioned the need of her Asian constituents to view films from what is now described as "Bollywood"—a huge sector of film making. The Bollywood awards took place earlier this year at the dome in Greenwich.

Because of our concern about such matters, my Department produced a strategy for film. Let me assure my hon. Friend that that strategy incorporates a strong regional commitment because we want to ensure increasing public access to cinema throughout the UK. One aspect of our strategy is to establish the Film Council under the chairmanship of the highly able British film director, Alan Parker. I can think of no one better for that role. One of the Film Council's tasks, under Alan's chairmanship, is to take account of the cultural as well as the commercial film industry. The ABC in Friar street is achieving precisely that.

One aspect of the Film Council's regional strategy is to provide a more effective network between the film bodies in each of the English regions. The council has been allotted £6 million a year, for three years starting from April 2001, for a new regional investment fund. It will facilitate new film structures in each region with the capacity to determine their own industrial and cultural priorities for cinema exhibitions and film education.

The council will expect regional agencies to produce business plans so that there is a firm structure for the future development of film in the English regions. Funds currently distributed to the regions by the British Film Institute for investment in archives, education and cinema exhibition will in future come under the Film Council, which will prioritise the areas of need. It aims to provide a broader audience with access to a wider range of films, which the organisation that runs ABC certainly seems to be doing.

In addition to regional funding, the new cinema fund with a budget of £5 million was launched in October by the Film Council to support and nurture new talent and to encourage cutting-edge and experimental film making. I hope that my hon. Friend can get some assistance from it and I shall write to her with details of how that may be done. I sympathise with her, because I also have a son who is an aspirant film maker. The more opportunities our young people have, the better. The new cinema fund, which will help young people, will operate highly collaboratively, with partners drawn from right across the private and public sectors. That seems to be the sort of partnership that is developing in my hon. Friend's constituency.

I turn to the all-important subject of funding. My hon. Friend has written to me about the possibility of converting the ABC cinema in Friar street into a combined arthouse cinema and arts centre, as she outlined in her speech. The Film Council is keen to support arthouse cinema as an art form, but does not currently provide funding for capital projects. Therefore, when my hon. Friend secured this debate, I took it on myself to investigate areas or bodies from which we might be able to find the funding that she and her constituents seek.

The Arts Council's regional arts lottery programme provides support for organisations requiring funding of less than £100,000 for capital projects, including building work. I shall write to my hon. Friend with details of that programme. In any case, it might be helpful for my hon. Friend and the group in her constituency to discuss the proposal with the Southern Arts Board, because it is working with other media agencies in the south-east to develop a single business plan for film media in the region and to make recommendations for the delivery of a single regional film strategy, including the all-important area of exhibition.

For capital projects in excess of £100,000, the Arts Council of England's capital programme has £176 million to spend on arts buildings, equipment purchase and public art commissions up to a maximum of £5 million per individual award. The current application round closes on 22 January 2001.

The Film Council is working with the Arts Council to ensure that those funds are used effectively for film and that, in making awards from the arts capital programme for cinema exhibition—essentially bricks and mortar—the Arts Council works hand in hand with the Film Council.

My hon. Friend referred to the need for practical advice on developing business plans and so on. I shall write to her with details of how such assistance may be provided. She mentioned the request to list the old ABC building in Friar street. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts first received such a request in December 1998 from Reading borough council. In April 1999 the cinema was assessed by English Heritage, which is the Department's statutory adviser on the historical environment. However, English Heritage concluded that the cinema had been altered too much, particularly with the loss of the proscenium, and did not therefore possess sufficient architectural or historic interest to merit listing.

On 5 October, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts announced his decision to list a number of cinemas around the country. However, after careful consideration, he decided that the ABC in Friar street did not meet the criteria. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East is disappointed and I am sorry that it was not possible to help in that way. Nevertheless, there are many other ways in which we can help to develop that facility in her constituency. The decision not to list the building does not in any way ignore or overlook the considerable strength of feeling among my hon. Friend's constituents, who feel that the building has a future and should respond to their needs in Reading, East.

The magic of the cinema touches all those who go to the movies. My hon. Friend referred to the advent of television, and then the video, which it was thought would destroy the cinema. The reverse has been the case, and cinema audience figures are on the increase throughout the country.

I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the matter to my attention. I wish her and her constituents luck with the venture, and I shall write to her with the further details that she needs.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. We can now move on to the next debate, because both hon. Members are present.

Adult Carer Placement Service

12.25 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, and to the Minister of State for being here to respond not only to my concerns but to those of many who are involved with the adult placement scheme throughout the country.

There may be people who are unaware of what the adult placement scheme does. In Oxfordshire, and in counties and local authorities across the country, there are a number of adults who need to be looked after but for whom traditional social services are not the answer. It has been found that the best way to provide them with the care that they require is to offer them the chance to live or stay in someone's home. That scheme is called adult placement.

The scheme gives those people many of the important things that only a real home can offer, such as help with day-to-day living, their own personal space, emotional as well as physical support, and a sense of belonging to and being part of the community. Those who need such care have a variety of needs. Some are physically handicapped, some have learning disabilities, some have suffered mental health problems and some are frail and elderly.

The adult placement scheme relies for its success on people who are happy to open their home to those who need help and care, either on a long-term or a short-term basis. Carers in Oxfordshire come from all kinds of background, but they have in common the lasting contribution that they make, not only to the life of an individual adult, but to the whole community. The people being helped by the adult placement schemes have a range of challenges, from handicaps and learning disabilities to mental health problems and problems relating to the frail and elderly. Those tend to be conditions that benefit from emotional as much as physical support, and many of the people concerned want company, apart from anything else, and understandably prefer a more personal environment.

Adult placement carers are committed to ensuring that the care that they provide is given in the most professional way. One of those carers has written to me, and says simply:

> We are Adult Placement Carers recruited by the Oxfordshire Adult Placement Scheme...to support and care for people who have disabilities or are vulnerable. The scheme in Oxfordshire is well monitored by the Scheme managers through Social Services. There is a close working relationship with the local Registration Inspection Office which advises both carers and managers when necessary. The approval procedure for recruiting carers devised by the Oxfordshire scheme is extensive and together with references and police checks enforces the high expectations of good care standards. We believe we offer a very professional and valuable service. However we are encouraged not to be complacent and strive to extend our skills through training and continually looking for ways to improve what we do.

The sort of people whom such carers help have a wide variety of backgrounds and needs. For the benefit of hon. Members, I shall give four examples of constituents of mine who are being helped through the adult placement scheme. For obvious reasons, which I am sure that hon. Members will understand, I shall refer to people by letters rather than by name.

Mr. X is a comparatively young man with learning disabilities and physical disabilities. He is a wheelchair user, has challenging behaviour and is occasionally violent. He was brought up by foster carers who are now elderly and can no longer care for him. Mr. X was placed in residential care in a staffed group home, which did not work due to his high level of support needs and disruptive behaviour. He was then placed in an emergency bed of a larger residential home while a more permanent placement was found. The care package was extremely expensive; extra staff had to be brought in to deal with the challenges that he presented to the service.

A couple of years ago, Mr. X was referred for adult placement, and a family with suitable ground-floor accommodation and the necessary skills to support him was identified. A carefully planned introduction programme to the family took place, with overnight stays increasing until Oxfordshire county council felt that the time had come when the placement could succeed.

Earlier this year, Mr. X moved into his new adult placement home. Since then, his behaviour has improved considerably. He has learned more socially useful behaviour from the family, which has, in turn, improved the responses that he gets from the general public when he is out in the community. That makes him feel happy and builds up his self-esteem and confidence, giving him the clear message that what he is doing is right. He says that he is very happy with the adult placement scheme—among other things, he likes the cooking.

Another constituent of mine, Mrs. Y, is a lady in her mid 60s with paranoid psychosis and serious alcohol problems who has taken overdoses of medication and has had recurrent suicidal tendencies. She was sectioned under section 3 of the Mental Health Act 1983 and placed in a hospital for older people with mental health problems. Earlier this year, Mrs. Y was introduced to an adult placement carer, who visited her in hospital and gradually gained her trust. Mrs. Y had a trial period staying with the carer, who has a nursing qualification, and a couple of months later moved in full time.

During the first few weeks, Mrs. Y tested the adult placement carer's patience and commitment to the limit, but everyone persevered and Mrs. Y's mental health has improved greatly since moving in. Her drinking has reduced dramatically and she takes pride in her appearance, mixes socially with the adult placement carer and the family and has started to access local community facilities such as day centres and clubs for older people. She now has someone to talk to who genuinely cares for her and sees her through the bad spells, and there has been no further talk of suicide since she moved in.

Mr. Z is a middle-aged gentleman who had an accident in 1993 that caused severe head injuries. After major surgery on his brain and a long stay in hospital, he returned home to his wife and young daughter. He had been left with poor memory, poor concentration, little insight and extremely high levels of fear and anxiety. He forgets things that have been said to him a few minutes earlier.

About five years ago, Mr. Z was referred to adult placement because his young daughter was having great difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that her father

was behaving like a small child and could not be left alone. She was having behavioural problems herself, both at school and at home. Mr. Z's wife was trying to cope with her own grief at the loss of the husband she knew, as well as with his care needs, and the family was in crisis.

Mr. Z was given an introduction, over a long period, to an adult placement family. He had a great fear of leaving his wife and home to go into respite care, and forgot who the adult placement carers were after each visit. The whole process was traumatising for him, his wife and his daughter. Mr. Z has been going into respite care every month since 1995, which has enabled Mrs. Z to have time with her daughter and to support her through this difficult time. The daughter's behaviour improved as time went on, and she is now coping again at school. Mrs. Z's knowledge that she has access to respite care enables her to carry on caring for her husband at home.

This is a matter not only of full-time placements, but of respite care, and even, in the case of my fourth and last example, of occasional nightly care. Miss B has learning disabilities. She attended a large day centre five days a week, which gave her carers a break. She started to become depressed, her behaviour deteriorated and she refused to go to her day centre. That put her carers under great strain, and they talked of no longer being able to care for her at home. Miss B was therefore introduced to two different adult placement carers—one to provide regular respite care and one to provide care for two days a week. The smaller, quieter environment of the adult placement carers' homes, and the one-to-one attention, has proved to be what Miss B needed. She has attended those placements for more than five years and is still at home with her carers. The adult placement carers are paid £33 a night for respite care and £23 for day care. Hon. Members will agree that that cost is small, compared with that of the residential care that would have been required if her carers had not been given that support.

Adult placement carers are also available at times of particular need, and have great flexibility. For example, last Christmas the care management team of Banbury's Redlands centre, which looks after adults with learning difficulties, wrote to the leader of the adult placement team to express gratitude for its work and flexibility in the Christmas-new year period, and for finding suitable placements at very short notice and in difficult circumstances. Care managers said that the work was done well and helped to create a supportive environment at a difficult time.

I think that everyone would agree that the service is extremely impressive. It provides personal care for some very vulnerable people in a flexible, dedicated, committed and targeted way, and at no particular financial cost to the community. Certainly, it represents good value, so why are there concerns? According to Oxfordshire's social services department, the adult placement service

has grown up over the years in an ad hoc manner and at different times has been sucked into other developments such as the Registered Homes (Amendment) Act which has produced an uneasy fit between Adult Placement and the present small homes regulatory framework.

Oxfordshire county council's carers are registered with the local authority, and the council works with the county's inspection unit to ensure high standards. Potential difficulties arise for adult placement schemes because of the regulation proposed by the National Care Standards Commission, brought into being by the Care Standards Act 2000. If adult placement carers continue to be regulated in the same way as small care homes, the future of an adult placement scheme such as the successful schemes in Oxfordshire will be under threat. That is the crunch issue.

If carers who take people into their private homes are treated and regulated as though they were small, residential care homes, the future of this scheme will look pretty bleak. First, the standards and requirements set for small care homes will be inappropriate for normal family homes. Oxfordshire county council is worried that it will lose, and be unable to recruit, carers who cannot adapt their normal domestic accommodation to meet the levels set for small care homes. Even where accommodation can be adapted, the social services are concerned that the domesticity and normality that is so important in adult placements will be lost.

Secondly—and, I suspect, even more importantly—charges for registration of small care homes will not be on a scale that normal families or individuals can afford. Nor will it be easy for social services to meet those charges. I understand that the new National Care Standards Commission will be self-funding. According to a recent paper that was published by the university of Kent's personal social services research institute, the cost of registration for small homes could rise from £252 to £1,960 a year, while annual inspection costs could rise from £42 to £1,100 a year. As Oxfordshire county council currently has around 100 carers, the annual cost of inspection alone could exceed £1 million. The figures are ludicrous and would threaten the viability of the scheme not only in Oxfordshire, but throughout the country. Oxfordshire and other local authorities would be unlikely to recruit carers if they were expected to meet those costs, which, if we cannot find an alternative, would undermine a useful scheme.

Oxfordshire county council favours effective regulation and protection for service users, but believes that that could be achieved more appropriately by regulation of the adult placement schemes. I hope that the Minister and his Department will consider that option. The Department would have to be satisfied that Oxfordshire county council was implementing the adult placement scheme in a fit and proper way, inspecting individual homes and taking care to ensure that carers were delivering a high standard of care. There has not been a scintilla of a suggestion that the council is doing anything other than that at present, or that adult carers are not delivering the most gentle and worthwhile personal care for anyone in need in their homes. If the Department were minded to regulate the adult placement schemes instead of individual carers, we might have an effective and proportionate system of regulation.

I wrote to the Minister of State enclosing a copy of a letter from Oxfordshire social services, and I expected to receive a reply stating that my fears were misplaced, that the Department understood the concerns about adult placement care schemes and that proportionate regulation would be introduced. However, the Minister did not state that. Instead, he stated:

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

The development of national minimum standards is part of the reforms that this Government is putting in place to modernise the current regulatory system for social services and nursing homes.

My argument is that the homes are not nursing homes but private homes offering care. The Minister continued:

The Care Standards Act...will bring about these reforms, including the establishment of a National Care Standards Commission to regulate social services and private healthcare. National standards, which will apply to all providers across the country, will mean that providers will be clear about the standards they will have to meet to gain and maintain registration. Users and their carers will know what they can expect as a minimum. Homes, which provide good quality care, should have nothing to fear from the introduction of national standards.

I suggest that the word "homes" is confusing in that context. The homes covered by the Care Standards Act 2000 are residential care homes, which usually have a number of residents and are usually run for profit. The homes that I am discussing in the adult placement scheme are not homes in the institutional sense, but those in which individual carers provide individual care in their own home and often to a single person.

The Minister's reply continued:

National standards are currently being developed for a range of services to be regulated by the Commission including...care homes for adults with disabilities.

Again, those care homes are not institutional homes, but may be individual homes in which adults with disabilities are looked after. The Minister continued:

Regarding the latter, a reference group has been set up which inputs to the development process and the National Association of Adult Placement Services (NAAPS) is represented on that group. I trust that you will be reassured to know that consideration is currently being given to having a separate sub-set of standards for adult placement carers.

I think that I understand that. However, I would welcome it if the Minister said that it did not mean that the bureaucracy and associated cost of registration would continue; that the Department recognised that adult placement schemes were different from residential care homes and that it was dealing with a group of people whose care could perfectly well be monitored, inspected and regulated by social service authorities such as that in Oxfordshire; and that the Government would introduce a scheme that was not over-bureaucratic or over-costly. Those schemes should be encouraged to develop and grow, and should not be threatened.

The Minister of State continued:

As a separate exercise, the Department of Health also plans to issue guidance to local authorities and the independent sector on the running of adult placement schemes.

I understand that Oxfordshire county council already has fairly rigorous guidance; over the years, it has developed its own practice standards, which are good.

The issue turns on a narrow but important point. We have some excellent adult placement carer schemes in Oxfordshire, and others are in place throughout the country. They involve hundreds of committed carers giving invaluable care to some of the most vulnerable members of the community. Perhaps unwittingly, that care and those schemes may now be threatened by over-regulation under the Care Standards Act 2000. I hope that the Minister can say today, clearly and without reservation, that the Government recognise that that is a potential problem and that they will be able to respond in such a way that adult placement carer schemes are not put in jeopardy.

12.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I thank the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) for giving us the opportunity to discuss the future of adult placement schemes. We agree that they are important. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the careful and sensitive way in which he set out his arguments, and I shall try to give some of the reassurances that he and the Oxfordshire service seek.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Oxfordshire social services has operated a successful adult placement scheme for many years. It provides flexible, practical and emotional support for vulnerable adults. Carers offer long-term, respite and short-term care, and emergency or day care, either in the adult placement carer's home or the home of the service users.

I understand that service users are charged according to the type of service that they receive. Those who are placed in homes classified as small are charged according the national regulations set out in "Charging for Residential Care". Those who are supported in the community are charged under Oxfordshire's charging policy for people with a disability and, therefore, according to their own financial needs.

Recently, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the scheme was the subject of a social services committee report which resulted in members' wisely agreeing to increase the number of people employed in order to match service users to carers—the adult placement scheme workers themselves—and the formation of an approved panel of carers. Those were sensible and prudent decisions. The Oxfordshire adult placement scheme is one important part of the range of social services that are provided by many authorities.

We estimate that about 10,000 people may now be using adult placement services in about 6,000 homes. However, not all those homes require registration, but only those that provide personal care. About 85 per cent. of the schemes are run by local authorities, 60 per cent. of service users have learning disabilities and about 15 per cent. are elderly, and the services are used also by people with a wide range of needs. The services enable people to enjoy a better quality of life than would otherwise be possible, and the Government fully recognise their valuable contribution. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we certainly will not be taking action that might jeopardise their viability.

The Government are committed to promoting people's independence, improving protection and raising standards. In recent years, social services have become more responsive to individual needs, but there are failings in the present system that must be tackled. That is why the Government introduced the Bill that became the Care Standards Act 2000, which received Royal Assent in July, to put in place key building blocks of our programme for modernising health and social care, and especially for improving the quality of protection in those services. There are many well-run,

good-quality services but some have fallen short of acceptable standards, as several inquiries into abuse of vulnerable service users have testified. Providers of services therefore need to know what standard they should meet and service users also need clarity about the standards that they may expect.

The new National Care Standards Commission, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, which will be set up under the Act, will be an independent body with the welfare and safety of vulnerable people at its heart. It will regulate children's homes and care homes for elderly and disabled people; it will also regulate other care services for the first time, including care to people in their own homes and fostering agencies, and in time it will also regulate day centres. It will advise the Government and inform the public about care services generally and about monitoring trends and national quality.

The deficiencies of the present regulatory system have been well documented and exposed by scandals such as those at Longcare in Buckinghamshire. Such abuse cannot be tolerated and we are determined to improve the protection of people who use these services. The homes where standards are shoddy and the quality of life poor do not hit the headlines, but we are equally determined to improve those services. However, in doing so we will not impose unreasonable burdens on those who provide that type of family-based service. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that it is not the Government's intention to make life unnecessarily difficulty for local authorities or for adult placement carers. It would be counter-productive to strangle these valuable schemes with red tape and we will not do so. We shall ensure that the new regulatory regime is flexible and proportionate to the type of services being regulated.

The hon. Gentleman quoted several figures for the cost of registration and inspection to small homes, which have been circulating for some time. I reassure him and the interests that he articulated that no decisions have been taken about the final level of fees. Although it is our policy intention that ultimately the system of regulation and inspection should be self-financing—the previous Government, of which the hon. Gentleman was a member, was also committed to that policy—let me reassure him that recognition will be given to the particular nature of adult placement carers when we set the appropriate fee structure. I hope that he is also reassured that we will consult fully on the issue before final decisions on fees are taken.

All adult placement carers are required to be registered if they are providing accommodation, board and personal care; that has been the position since the Registered Homes (Amendment) Act 1991, introduced by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), which had wide cross-party support. You were a Member of the House at that time, Mrs. Michie, but I was not. I reassure the hon. Member for Banbury that the Care Standards Act 2000 has carried forward the position outlined in that measure, and that we have not changed the basic requirement of registration in that regard. However, we anticipate that adult placement carers and their homes, which need to be registered, will be treated as a separate category under the new regulations. We shall be able to tailor the regulatory demands to ensure that those placed on adult placement carers are kept to a minimum. The standards to be applied to adult placement schemes will therefore be different in nature from those applied to registered care homes—that point was raised, sensibly, by the hon. Member for Banbury—and will in future recognise the special characteristics of the schemes. The hon. Gentleman described many of them as being the small, private homes of individuals and we shall take that into account.

National standards are being developed for a range of services to be regulated by the National Care Standards Commission, including care homes for adults with disabilities. We have been anxious to ensure that the standards take account of the needs of the various client groups who use the services and of the nature of the services that are being provided. We have an advisory group helping us on the development of the standards for care homes and, as the hon. Gentleman said, the National Association of Adult Placement Services is represented on that group. As part of that work, a separate set of standards specifically for adult placement carers is being drafted. We intend that a consultation document on the national standards for residential services for adults should be published later this year, together with those for adult placement carers. We are trying to fix the appropriate level of regulation in this area in a fully open and consultative manner. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can lend his support to that approach.

Given the breadth of the Oxfordshire scheme, which includes services provided in people's homes, it is worth mentioning that under the Care Standards Act 2000, Ministers have a new power to issue statutory guidance on charges for non-residential care provided by local authorities. That measure was necessary because of the unacceptable degree of variation in the way in which local authorities operate their charging regimes at present. We have been consulting a wide range of groups, including representatives of service users, and we intend to consult formally on new statutory draft guidance this autumn and issue final guidance by April 2001.

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman that adult placement schemes are a valuable resource. When they work well they can provide good-quality individual care. However, we must recognise that when they are not properly regulated or supported they carry similar risks for service users as do large care homes. Indeed, the potential for service users to be isolated and unable to voice complaints may be even greater in some cases. That is why regulation continues to be necessary, but it will be proportionate. Those who already provide good-quality services should not find it burdensome.

We are also taking a number of steps to raise the quality of services for individual client groups. Thus we have already introduced a national service framework for people with mental health needs and are currently developing a national service framework for older people, too. We are also developing a national strategy for people with learning disabilities—a client group that is frequently the major user of local adult placement schemes. Such placements are one way of enabling them to be included in the local community by receiving the support that they need.

[Mr. John Hutton]

It is worth pointing out that it is nearly 30 years since we took a comprehensive look at learning disability services, their rationale, relevance and effectiveness. Services have changed a great deal in that time, but the quality and quantity still vary considerably from area to area. That is unacceptable. The time is therefore right to modernise and improve our whole approach to supporting people with learning disabilities, both to reflect user concerns and to tackle some fundamental issues that we still clearly need to address. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can also lend his support to that process. We intend to publish the new learning disability strategy as a White Paper early next year.

People with learning disabilities are clearly among some of the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups in our society. We want to ensure that help and support are in place to foster independence, provide new opportunities and deliver high-quality services. I hope that the new strategy will seek to eliminate the current inconsistencies in the quality and quantity of services. As a Government, we are determined to ensure that services continue to improve and that those who use them may do so confidently and safely.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to clarify our intentions. I believe that the measures that we are taking will help to drive up standards. We need greater consistency in regulation, and the 2000 Act has given us new powers to root out abuse and unacceptable care standards. We need to use those powers appropriately and sensitively. I can assure hon. Members that the regulatory regime that we are in the process of setting up will be sensitive to the different needs of individual client groups as well as to the different type of provision that is being regulated. We shall therefore continue to involve a wide range of interested parties, including service users. We are particularly grateful to have had the expertise of NAAPS to assist us in that work, and we shall continue to involve it in future.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has marshalled his arguments and put his case this afternoon. I hope that he has been reassured, at least in part, by what I have said. We do not intend to go about the business of ensuring that regulation is appropriate with a heavy hand or an iron boot. We intend to develop policy in this area carefully and sensitively. If the hon. Gentleman would find it helpful to see the draft minimum standards that we intend to consult on later in the year, I will arrange for him to have a copy so that he may give us his opinion of how we are going about that process. I hope that he will work with us to ensure that the new regulatory arrangements are sensitively introduced and do not have the unintended consequences to which he alluded, which would certainly not be in the interests of vulnerable people and would not address the wider concerns that we need to tackle if we are to improve quality standards in the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 November 2000

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Domestic Violence

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I welcome you to the Chair, which I hope that you will enjoy, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In any civilised society, absolutely no one has the right to knock the living daylights out of anyone else, yet the police receive more than 570,000 calls a year reporting violent attacks in the home. The largest category of assaults recorded by the British crime survey involves domestic violence and 80 per cent. of them are against women. Domestic violence—violence within the family—is a huge and hidden problem. A snapshot of one day of violence shows that some victims are raped or stabbed. Women are kicked while pregnant. Some are left with cuts and bleeding. One victim had her throat slashed with a razor blade. Four out of five calls are from women who have been attacked by men. Only one in 10 is from a man who has been attacked by a woman. A person is assaulted in the home every 20 seconds, so a woman somewhere has been assaulted since I started my speech.

At greatest risk are those aged under 25 and in financial difficulty. The risks are highest for women who are separated from their spouses. The public is now on the alert for child abuse, both physical and mental. The media and the Children Act 1989 have done a great deal to bring that evil into the public eye. Rape is a vile crime, which thankfully no longer attracts comments from the police and judiciary suggesting that the victim asked for it. Parliamentary colleagues regularly receive thousands of letters from constituents reporting cruelty to animals, but what about cruelty to human beings in this country? Domestic violence occurs behind closed doors, so it has been convenient to overlook it. However, by tolerating domestic violence, we condone it as an acceptable form of behaviour. By failing to outlaw and punish the perpetrators, we collaborate in undermining the healthy fabric of our society.

The law acknowledges physical violence, but emotional and mental abuse are as widespread and its natural precursor. When the victim is verbally undermined as well as physically threatened, she suffers a loss of confidence and dignity. Women live moment by moment, fearful of what might happen when their partner returns home and experiences an unexpected mood change. Emotional terrorism goes hand in hand with physical abuse but often is not accompanied by physical abuse. Only such emotional and mental abuse enables the abuser to feel sufficiently confident to pursue the power that he seeks—complete control, body and soul, of another human being.

Evidence shows that women tend not to complain immediately. They want things to work out and believe that they can make things better. They think that they can make a difference, as though they were nurturing a naughty child; they cajole, placate, spoil and offer their unconditional support. They give more love, not less. Unfortunately, matters always get worse. Statistics show that it is not until they have been physically abused an average of 30 or 35 times that women take action.

The full extent of domestic violence will probably never be known, but the facts speak for themselves. In 1996, nearly half of the 224 woman homicide victims were killed by their partners. Of 426 male homicide victims, only 8 per cent. were killed by their partners. Domestic violence is the most common single cause of violence against women, and it accounts for a quarter of all recorded crime.

The harrowing account of a constituent of mine illustrates the horror and degradation that a young woman had to endure at the hands of a brutal and cruel man who, on the face of it, was a respected manager of an out-of-town shopping centre where she had worked for six years. Julie's story is so typical that I shall tell it in her own words. She said:

> On 9 August 1996 we were married. It was the best day of my life. On 10 August, he attacked me and tried to strangle me in our bedroom. He attacked me again for wearing a bikini in the pool. I was on honeymoon in a strange country being beaten by the very man who only a week before had promised to make all my dreams come true.
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> The day before I was due to return to work, he set about me on the stairs, just because my mother said he looked like a character from a soap opera she watched. He slapped me about the face and pushed me down the stairs. The next morning I had a huge black eye and bruising about the head. The mirror said it all. I couldn't go to work like that.
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> By November I was five months pregnant and that is when the trouble began in earnest. He would get me up in the middle of the night and interrogate me about my past boyfriends, saying he was not the father of our child and set about me. He was never in a rage when he did this, he was always calm and collected. I dared not provoke him by defending myself in any way. It never worked. I was afraid what more he might do to me. I guess it wore me down because I couldn't find the guts to ask for help, particularly from my family or friends. I was too ashamed, it had been going on so long. A couple of months after our baby was born, he punched me in the breasts and pinned me to the floor, his foot to my throat, he was wearing his Cat boots.
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> The final straw came on 9 May 1997. He first attacked me at around 10.00 in the morning, then on and off for the better part of the day, about 6-7 hours in all. He repeatedly got me by the throat to stop me breathing while he reassured me that I could be unconscious for two minutes and still be okay. Then he would take to kicking me in the legs and buttocks. He only stopped to wash his face of sweat, before starting off again. He told me he was ready to do 25 years in prison for me. He then got hold of a fondue fork and threatened to stab me in the eye. I was absolutely terrified and really believed that this time I would not get out alive. But he suddenly left off, put on his coat and went out of the house—"to get some fish and chips", he said.

That is just one of the harrowing and horrifying accounts that I have heard at first hand from the women that I have talked to at the South Devon Women's Aid outreach project. It was an unbelievable experience. The project works like the secret service. It has offered confidential advice and practical help to some of the 897 women who have called on it during the past year. Those women were in dire distress and came from four small districts. I am sure that many colleagues have heard similar stories. Having heard Julie's story, it is not surprising to hear that three women a week are killed by former or current partners.

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

The scale of the problem and its horrifying nature is mind-numbing. We need to lift the lid on this horror. Perpetrators of domestic violence must pay; just as child abusers and paedophiles are now recognised as pariahs of society, so must they be exposed for the monsters that they truly are. What can we do to rid ourselves of these bullies and tormentors? How are the police, the social services and the courts coping?

At one time, the police distinguished between violence on the streets and violence at home. Thankfully, they have made great strides in recent years, with the help that they provide to victims of domestic violence—many of whom are in a state of utter despair and fear and have nowhere else to turn. Indeed, Julie told me that she was eternally grateful to the policeman who listened to her and believed her. He was sympathetic and understanding, and encouraged her to sign her statement. Julie told me that it was the police's positive response that helped to turn her life around. If she had received a negative response, she might well have gone back to her abusive husband and ended up as another homicide statistic.

Although police attitudes have changed, targeted training is needed to deal with domestic violence on the doorstep and careful attention needs to be given to how the police might become more proactive in seeking it out. We are fortunate in Devon to have two police officers whose sole responsibility is for cases of domestic violence. They cover Torbay, South Hams and Teignbridge, which are part of my constituency, and West Devon, which is not. The total population there is well over 300,000. It is self-evident that more police officers should be aware of what domestic violence entails. The limited number of trained police officers in far-flung rural areas such as mine—where two officers often have to travel 60 or more miles between each call—results in limited cover.

A decade ago, I spent an evening with the police in Kingsbridge, a town in my constituency. In retrospect, I realise that almost all the emergency calls that night involved apparent acts of domestic violence. At the time, I was not aware of it. One call was from a woman whose partner was threatening her with a double-barrelled shotgun. Out we rushed in a panda car. When we arrived, the policeman smiled at the couple and told the farmer with the gun to put that silly thing away. He smiled at the lady and told her that everything would be all right. In retrospect, it was probably a warning sign that should have been taken much more seriously.

What about the judiciary? There are some very real problems there. Although there has been a shift in awareness, the courts employ practices that often militate against bringing abusers to justice. What woman who has been knocked senseless is prepared to confront her partner across a courtroom, without fear for her personal safety when she gets outside? Videotaped evidence should be the norm in these cases, and in instances of domestic violence the burden of proof should be specifically placed on the man to prove that he is a responsible person and should have access to his children.

Contact orders are awarded almost automatically to married men and to most unmarried fathers, even if they are known to be violent within the family. Although there are strong links between domestic violence and child abuse, that danger is often not recognised by family courts. If arrangements cannot be agreed between a separating couple for their children, either parent can apply under section 8 of the Children Act 1989 for a residence order to decide whom the child will live with, or for a contact order to determine how the child will maintain contact with the non-resident parent.

Although under the guiding principles set out in section 1 of the 1989 Act, the welfare of the child is paramount, there is no reference to domestic violence. The same applies to the guidance that accompanies the Act. It does not require the court to consider the safety of the other parent or of other children in the family. The Family Law Act 1996 went some way to recognise those issues, but decisions in the Court of Appeal have established a strong case law presumption that contact will almost always be granted, as in the long term it is considered to be in the best interests of the child.

Children of abusive families live in fear and confusion. Many abused children fail to thrive, remain weak and undernourished, start hitting out at school, fail to make academic progress, play truant and steal, and become part of the crime statistics. In one third of child protection cases domestic violence was identified as part of the problem, although it is widely believed that the real figure is much higher.

Women need protection. South Devon Women's Aid has a number of refuges in which women who have been brutalised may seek a safe sanctuary. There are three in Devon and four in Cornwall, offering between them about 35 to 40 places—and that is all—enabling desperate women to get away. There is always a massive waiting list. The refuges do essential, invaluable and vital work in providing a safe house where victims' self-esteem can be restored. The 897 women who called South Devon Women's Aid last year were primarily counselled by a handful of paid workers and a small battalion of women volunteers. Those women do an amazing undercover job with inadequate resources. They provide practical help, advice and information for women who are desperate to get out of abusive relationships. Let us not forget that the numbers involved are massive—at least half a million women a year in the United Kingdom suffer from abusive and violent relationships.

Is there any way to prevent this problem? Is there a way to make progress? I believe that that depends on analysis of the cause of the problem. Some psychiatrists and psychologists believe that domestic violence is proof positive of widespread mental disorder eating away at the fabric of our society and effecting the breakdown of the nuclear family. They point out the increase in stress and personal pressure in everyday life, which means that many people just cannot cope any longer with the demands made of them and the speed of change. However, that analysis fails to account for the fact that the problem is not a new phenomenon. Unemployment, poverty and poor housing do not help, but we should not forget that domestic violence is encountered in all strata of society. Regardless of its root causes, it cannot be tolerated. In a civilised society, no one has the right to knock the living daylights out of anyone else.

Domestic violence is the most insidious of crimes. It is not a one-off, for the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Young boys seek to emulate their abusive and

violent fathers, whom they see as role models. In turn, they repeat the abusive behaviour by attacking their mothers. It is no wonder that women who contact help agencies are not only those who complain about their partners, but mothers asking to be rescued from their violent sons. It sounds as though our country has become a war zone. It has, I believe, become a domestic war zone.

I applaud the recent focus on bullying in schools. Perhaps it will open our eyes to scraps in the playground involving boys and girls. The teaching profession is reassessing training methods, to help teachers in primary schools deal with bullying. The work of Kidscape shows how crucial it is for violence at an early age to be rooted out. Coram Family, the London child care charity based in King's Cross, is breaking new ground in tackling poor family relationships and family breakdown. The work focuses on improving relationships and expectations between men and women, thus preventing violent and abusive relationships. One of the projects recently set up is Boyz to Men, which works with young black men in the care system, setting out to promote new understanding of their future role as fathers and partners. The young men in question frequently have had bad models in their own fathers and need to find new and less violent ways of relating to their partners in future.

Quite a bit is being done in the voluntary sector to address the problem that I have described, but can the state do anything? An effective and supportive legal system is essential in tackling domestic violence. It needs to provide protection for women and children and to hold abusers to account. If women are afraid to use the legal system, we must attend to it until it is shown to provide protection and safeguards for people who have suffered such terrible violence. The Crown Prosecution Service should play a far more helpful and positive role. It should automatically take the initiative and bring prosecutions. It should not be expected that victims will prosecute. Although there is a general acceptance that the police and judicial system now treat victims of domestic violence with greater sympathy and listen and respond to their experiences, such improvements are piecemeal and not every court is quite so sympathetic.

We can get to work straight away. Comprehensive training in domestic violence issues should be included in the training of all legal practitioners. We need an improved police response, strengthened pro-arrest policies, improved collection of evidence and an end to the routine release of the offender on bail. There should be better co-ordination between the criminal and civil law in relation to domestic violence. The criminal justice system should issue stronger sanctions against abusers. "Seek and find" orders should not be pursued in cases of domestic violence and the court procedures must be altered to ensure that the addresses of abused women and children remain absolutely confidential.

The Child Support Agency grants departure orders allowing men to reduce their contributions to their wives on the pretext of having to make costly journeys to see their children. The benefit should be available only with proper receipts, because the mothers know when the visits do not happen, but fear to let the officials know because of the likely consequences. An effective legal response should be part of a wider, community response including refuge and support networks for women and children throughout the country. Institutional barriers to progress must go.

Women have had the vote for nearly 80 years and are viewed as equals in the eyes of the law. Condoning domestic violence by turning a blind eye and shrugging one's shoulders has gone on long enough. If more than half a million black people a year were physically and mentally assaulted, there would be a national outcry, but because women report the abuse we acquiesce. Also, because it is seen as happening at home. A change in public attitude is urgently needed. Our institutions are slowly recognising the enormity and nature of the problem and seeking better ways of dealing with it. However, the response still seems halfhearted when one realises that the homes of many victims have become war zones with an enemy as cunning as any wartime interrogator effective in the arts of brainwashing and torture.

One in four women are assaulted at some point in their lives. There are 650 Members of Parliament in the House of Commons; how many have experience of domestic violence? There are 2,000 support staff in the Houses of Parliament; how many of them have been involved in an abusive relationship?

We must now see what can be done to help women to escape from abusive relationships and to prevent their children becoming part of the cycle of violence. Child abusers and rapists must face the full consequences of their crimes, and no longer should perpetrators of domestic violence be able to escape. I hope that the debate will bring us closer to that aim.

9.52 am

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on securing this important debate and I appreciate the opportunity to take part in it.

I shall speak about one aspect of domestic violence: contact between violent parents and their children. My plea is that the Government enshrine in legislation the guidelines laid down by the Children Act subcommittee of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law Matters on parental contact in cases of domestic violence. That means changing the presumption set out in a ruling by the Master of the Rolls in 1995 that contact is "almost always" in the interests of the child. Instead, there should be a presumption, capable of being rebutted, that if there is a history of violence to the child or the other parent, contact and residence will not be granted until it can be shown to be safe for all parties. The safety and welfare of the child should be paramount, and that should be achieved by amending the Children Act 1989. It would also mean challenging wider social assumptions about parental rights, including parents' rights of access to their children, but it would do much to protect children and their resident parent—usually, but not always, the mother—from further attack.

To emphasise the human cost involved I, like the hon. Gentleman, shall describe the experience of a constituent, whose ex-husband attacked her eldest child with a knife and tried to strangle her when she was five and a half months pregnant with their child. When she came round, she discovered that her husband had gone,

[Ms Sally Keeble]

having cut the telephone cord so that she could not summon help. She recovered, and had her child, but the police could not find her ex-husband so eventually the charges were dropped. Two years later, a letter arrived on her doormat from her ex-husband's solicitor, asking for contact. She spent two years fighting that request through nine court hearings. She finally came to me in desperation when she faced being imprisoned for contempt of court for refusing to agree to the court's contact order. The court had previously ordered indirect contact.

In nine months, the father of the little girl sent two cards, one at Christmas and one a few months later. He took little opportunity to make even indirect contact. None the less, the court ordered direct contact. My constituent faced being imprisoned for contempt of court for refusing to agree, and was told to make child care arrangements because she would be sent to prison. The court was a family court, so there was no publicity. I was horrified to realise that a woman could be repeatedly sent to prison and threatened with losing the custody of her child in a case that would not be tried at any stage in a public court.

Only at the final hearing did my constituent's lawyers draw the court's attention to the Children Act subcommittee guidelines. Much to everyone's surprise, it was found that although she was in contempt, she was reasonably in contempt and so was not sent to prison. Her story had a happy ending, but not all children are so fortunate. In August, Daniel and Jordan Philpot were gassed to death in their father's car during a contact visit. A contact order had been granted to the father, despite the fact that he was due to appear in a Crown court on charges of threatening to kill his ex-partner and causing her actual bodily harm.

Women's Aid, which has done excellent work on the subject, has provided other examples of such cases. One was of a woman who fled to a refuge with her youngest child. She was collecting her son from a contact visit to the father in 1996 when she was stabbed to death. Her son was found strangled in her husband's car, and later her three other children were found dead in their beds with their throats cut. Her husband is serving a life sentence for murder. Another case was of a woman worried about her violent husband's mental stability. She was persuaded to agree to contact without a court hearing, and her two children were murdered during a contact visit in 1993.

As the hon. Member for Totnes mentioned, it is a problem that neither the 1989 Act nor its supporting guidance explicitly mentions domestic violence in relation to contact. That makes it difficult for judges to deny contact to a violent parent. The county courts, as the hon. Gentleman said, heard 36,144 applications for parental contact in 1997-98. In only 656 cases was contact refused. The welfare of the child is considered only in decisions of residence, not contact. The number of contact orders refused is surprising, given the substantial role that domestic violence plays in marital and relationship breakdown.

There are some signs of change. In four landmark cases of applications for contact in the Court of Appeal in June, the judgment stated that

> there should be no automatic assumption that contact to a violent parent was in the child's best interests. If anything the assumption should be in the opposite direction, with the violent parent proving why he or she could offer something of benefit to the child.

Also, there are the important guidelines of the Children Act subcommittee, which follow consultation with the courts and everyone involved in family and child welfare. The publication is excellent, and includes criteria for cases in which a parent is trying to get contact and there have been findings of domestic violence. It lists a series of procedures for establishing cases of domestic violence, stating:

> the court should consider...the effect of the domestic violence which has been established on the child and on the parent with whom the child is living...whether or not the motivation of the parent seeking contact is a desire to promote the best interests of the child or as a means of continuing a process of violence against or intimidation or harassment of the other parent.

My constituent had to go through nine hearings with a violent ex-husband who had made no effort to establish a relationship with his child through indirect contact. The hearings were in a family court with no publicity, so he could prolong the procedures without there being protection for the woman. The guidelines say that the court should also consider the

> likely behaviour of the parent seeking contact during contact and its effect on the child or the children concerned.

One must bear in mind that there are other children in the family unit whose needs must be considered. The report says that the court should also consider the

> capacity of the parent seeking contact to appreciate the effect of past and future violence on the other parent and the children concerned...The attitude of the parent seeking contact to past violent conduct by that parent; and in particular whether that parent has the capacity to change and/or to behave appropriately.

Those points are excellent, as is the rest of the subcommittee's report. However, I disagree with the conclusion that legislation is not needed.

Despite the new guidelines and the case law, it is not clear at all that the courts know about the changes; it did not appear that my constituent's lawyer knew about them, at least until the final hearing. It is essential that there is parity of treatment for children in all courts throughout the country, and we should not have to wait for all courts to reach the standards of the best. We should not leave more women to face continued abuse by a violent spouse or ex-spouse through the courts after they have endured violence at home from that spouse. We must not leave children at risk of further abuse or harm by a violent parent.

The principle at stake is important. It concerns the priority that should be given to the safety of the child, and society's attitudes to parental rights in relation to children. Those issues are a proper subject for discussion in Parliament and for wider debate, and I am sure that that debate would be heated. We all agree that it is wrong to hit people, especially vulnerable people such as children. However, the notion that the parent—in most cases, the father—should not have an automatic right of contact or access to his child would be controversial. It would need to be discussed, so that the principle could be established on a wide basis and properly understood.

My view is that when a parent, spouse or partner has shown a pattern of violence, especially when that violence—as it often is—is exacerbated by drug or alcohol abuse, there must be substantial evidence of

change before we can assume that that parent will not cause further harm or injury to the child or to the parent who has care of the child.

We tend to assume that domestic violence is directed at women alone, but that is often not the case. I do not have the results to hand, but some children's charities have done careful research and have found that, when the woman is attacked, the children may be witnesses to the violence or attacked themselves. Therefore, it is untrue that the issue affects only women; it affects children directly, and we should recognise the impact that it has on them and take steps to prevent it.

I welcome the approach taken by the Lord Chancellor's Department; in fact, I thought that a Minister from that Department might reply to the debate. However, I am sure that the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) will speak with colleagues in the Lord Chancellor's Department. The approach that it has taken suggests that the Government are considering issuing a practice direction to the judiciary. However, for the reasons that I have given, I do not consider that a practice direction would be adequate to deal with the problem properly, in such a way as to allow society to understand how the issues should be resolved. I believe that the guidelines recommended by the Children Act subcommittee must be entrenched in law, and I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to respond to that point.

10.4 am

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on securing the debate and making a thoughtful and thought-provoking speech. Let me say, without being patronising, that it is excellent that a male Member has brought the issue to our attention this time. The issue has too often been perceived as one that concerns women alone, but it should concern us all.

I wish that we could come up with a term other than "domestic violence": "domestic" sounds so cosy and homely and, as the hon. Gentleman said, violence is violence wherever it occurs. If anything, violence that takes place in the home, where one normally wants and expects to feel safe and secure, must be even more frightening. As the hon. Gentleman said, at one time the stereotypical police response to a violent argument between husband and wife or cohabitees was that it was "just a domestic" and that it was better for outsiders not to get involved. I remember hearing that response One used to hear many anecdotes about people seeng a warring couple in the street and not wanting to interfere because they were likely to be thumped instead. The police have moved on a great deal since then. My local Avon and Somerset police force has been particularly pioneering by having a domestic violence unit in each district, dedicated domestic violence officers and a pro-arrest policy. Sadly, however, it is still the case that, too often, the attitude of neighbours and witnesses is that it is better not to interfere. Much education needs to be done among ordinary members of the public.

Mr. Steen: One problem is that giving evidence in cases is not only time-consuming but, in violent cases, often dangerous. I had the misfortune of being the victim of a road-rage case. It was adjourned at least three times and by the end I had given up about four days of my time to it. I hope that the hon. Lady agrees that we should streamline such cases, so that they can be heard speedily and witnesses need not wait interminably—for days if not weeks.

Jackie Ballard: I certainly agree. My daughter witnessed a violent incident—not domestic violence—that ended up as a case of murder; she had to wait a year before she knew whether she was required to go to court. I had to persuade her that it was the socially right thing to do. The whole court process can deter people from coming forward as witnesses.

People concerned about domestic violence are not limited to those who have experienced it at first hand or even to such people as refuge workers or the police who are in the front line of dealing with perpetrators and victims. As the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) said, the concern extends to teachers with pupils who are or have been direct or indirect victims, to general practitioners who need to be able to spot the signs of emotional crisis as well as the physical wounds, and to health visitors who need training to ask the right questions. Housing officers, social workers, probation staff, community nurses and the Crown Prosecution Service also have a role to play. A considerable number of people are therefore touched by the issue. From the victim's point of view, many people are involved. The police, refuge staff, social workers and the CPS can all play a part in what is for most victims one of the most difficult, intimate and frightening experiences of their life. It is therefore vital that victims who contact any of the agencies are guaranteed basic rights.

The hon. Member for Totnes said that one in 10 calls to the police are from men who have been assaulted by women. I suspect that there is a great deal of under-reporting of the violence perpetrated on men. As there was once a huge amount of under-reporting among women—there is probably still some—because of the shame of admitting that they were being abused in their own home, it is still very difficult for a man to come forward and say that he is being physically abused by his female partner. I suspect that the number of male victims is much higher than the recorded figures although I am sure that the majority of victims are still, because of the physical differences between the genders, women. We tend to focus on women victims, but it is important that we do not forget male victims.

All victims need to be guaranteed confidentiality. They need to be guaranteed that they will be dealt with sensitively to ensure that the process of reporting domestic violence does not contribute to the sense of powerlessness that many victims already feel. They need to be reassured that if they come forward for help they will not be judged. In the past, victims too often felt that they had done something wrong. People who have spoken to victims of domestic violence know that they often start by saying things such as, "It was my fault because I did not have his dinner ready on time", or "It was my fault as I made him angry".

We know that domestic violence is rarely a one-off event. Many of the people who speak out have been on the receiving end for a considerable time. As the hon. Member for Totnes told us, the police say that women who report domestic violence have, on average, been

[Jackie Ballard]

assaulted about 35 times. Such women do not need to be told that they should have reported the assaults earlier. They need to be encouraged to be strong now that they have decided to make the break—a decision that is often made in spite of huge social and economic pressures to return to an abusive partner in the belief that it will not happen again.

We need to be able to guarantee that the professionals dealing with the health, social and emotional needs of women and their children have been properly trained to do so. Ideally, specialist services will be available, but we must also ensure that every front-line worker who is dealing with the victims of domestic violence has had basic training. Above all, we must be able to guarantee that the professionals involved have a co-ordinated response. The last thing that a person who has plucked up the courage to come forward needs is to be passed from agency to agency, with the feeling that those agencies are not even talking to one another. There must be a response that does not stigmatise the victim or her family, but encourages her to take positive control of the situation.

A new United Kingdom-wide membership organisation was formed earlier this year. It is called Respect and was formed to promote best practice among statutory and independent-sector projects and workers who work with perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. It is to be formally launched in March 2001 and will be a great help in ensuring a standardised method of response. We know from children that even when people are not being abused directly, they can be living with domestic violence in a constant state of fear, anxiety, confusion and often helplessness—a fact that has been described by mothers also. At the very least, that should influence the nature of the interventions made to protect women and children. A challenge remains for all of us to try to improve a system that affects so many women and children each year.

We know that properly co-ordinated inter-agency work can achieve a great deal. It can enable effective intervention, as well as challenge and change inappropriate attitudes to domestic violence. No single agency, whether the police, social services or any other, knows all that there is to know about the subject or can tackle it alone, but when a range of agencies work closely together, domestic violence can be reduced and prevented. Hon. Members may know about the intervention project in Duluth, Minnesota, whose inter-agency strategy has reduced significantly the number of men who repeat acts of domestic violence. Indeed, it has also reduced domestic violence murders.

When I first visited Women's Aid projects, I found that people who worked with the organisation would not work with male offenders and focused only on the female victim. That is, after all, what the organisation was established to achieve. It regarded it as part of its task to help the woman to get away from the male offender. Many refuge workers now accept, however, that some men can be helped to recognise and end their violent behaviour if they receive appropriate counselling and support.

An independent voluntary-sector project called the domestic violence intervention project was set up in London in 1991. It provides many services to women and children but also does violence prevention group work with male perpetrators. The DVIP believes that working with perpetrators alongside their partner or ex-partner dramatically improves the safety of women and children. The previous speakers mentioned the difficulty of child contact orders. The DVIP is currently involved in an inter-agency pilot project on child contact and domestic violence, in partnership with the Middlesex family court welfare service and the Coram Family centre, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes.

I should like to list the main aims of the pilot scheme, as such schemes will, alongside legal changes, have a significant contribution to make. The first aim is to include the voices of women and children in the risk assessment process, so that their safety and wishes are taken into account. The second aim is to build into the system of risk assessment the notion that perpetrators can change and should be held accountable for their abuse, and to ensure that perpetrators are actively working to change their behaviour and attitudes before contact is given. It is important to accept that many perpetrators can change, because even if one woman manages to escape from a perpetrator of domestic violence, that perpetrator is very likely to enter another violent relationship. Therefore, if it is possible to change him, that opportunity should be taken.

The third aim is to encourage consistency in judicial rulings regarding contact orders and to help the judiciary in its dilemma of balancing a child's right to see both parents against the possible risk that contact with a violent parent may present to the child and the resident parent. That means promoting safe and appropriate contact by decreasing the number of inappropriate contact orders granted, while increasing the number of perpetrators with whom people can safely work towards establishing contact.

The project will assess both partners. A risk assessment will be made of the perpetrator, and recommendations will be made to the court, which may order the perpetrator to attend a programme before it takes a decision about whether a contact order is appropriate. It has the makings of an excellent pilot project. I know that the Minister has been listening carefully, and I hope that she will note that the scheme is still actively looking for funding to evaluate the project. As we all know, it is not enough merely to conduct a pilot project. It must be evaluated to provide evidence of whether it would be worth rolling out on a wider basis.

By taking an approach that is person-centred rather than process-centred, which does not blame the victim for experiencing violence and clearly places responsibility on the abuser, which imposes sanctions for such behaviour and which ensures that sanctions are imposed as soon as possible after the incident is reported, it is possible to offer effective services that enable victims to empower themselves in circumstances that seem hopeless.

I am convinced that the inter-agency approach is best, but inter-agency working raises difficult questions that must be dealt with. How do different agencies share information while retaining confidentiality? How do

they integrate the approaches and aims of each agency without compromising anyone's position? How can power be shared among what is often a collection of unequal organisations, some of which are statutory and some of which are voluntary? Difficulties are involved, but they should not become insurmountable. However, in the long term, adequate funding is vital. I would never argue that funding alone is enough in any circumstances, but funding is obviously important to underpin the work of different agencies.

As the hon. Member for Totnes said, changing society's understanding of violence and its causes and solutions is an on-going and long-term process. In the past 10 years, many changes have taken place in how we view such matters. Services and protection are more accessible than previously. People now accept that the victim should not have to flee to safety, and that the perpetrator should be removed instead. However, effective counselling is still not widely available for everyone involved.

The hon. Member for Totnes is right about the need to reduce general levels of violence in society, to tackle violence when it starts—in the playground—and to tackle some deeply held views. A recent opinion poll asked young men in what circumstances they felt that it was appropriate to thump their partner. I have forgotten the percentages, but a rather high and worrying percentage said that if dinner was late, it was appropriate to do so. Many views need to be challenged. It is a complex issue, and I am pleased that we have had the opportunity to have a sensible and thought-provoking debate about it today.

10.18 am

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on having secured the debate and on the graphic illustration of the curse of domestic violence that he offered to hon. Members. According to the figures, the number of reported incidents has declined somewhat in recent years, for which we are grateful, but it still bedevils our society, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to it in such an eloquent fashion this morning. I congratulate the hon. Members for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) and for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), who illustrated with constituency examples a problem that continues to rage.

Domestic violence can be defined as activity that involves any form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse of people in a close relationship. It is important to understand, however, that it can involve more than physical violence. It can include threats, privation, humiliation and behaviour that is designed to belittle the victim. Controlling and, in a sense, degrading conduct towards mainly women, but not infrequently now towards men, is deeply undesirable and needs to be countered.

Several hon. Members have already drawn attention to the scale of the phenomenon. One in four women suffer domestic violence at some stage during their life. When undertaking research for the debate, I was horrified to discover that two women are killed each week as a result of such violence. In 1999, the year that reflected a reduction in the incidence from two years previously, there were 761,000 cases of domestic violence. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes suggested that about 80 per cent. of such cases involved female victims. It is right to point out however, that just under 15 per cent. of men will suffer such abuse during their lives.

Those who practise domestic violence are more likely than not to inflict that violence on their children. Furthermore, children know rather more about it than was hitherto thought to be the case. Evidence demonstrates that about one third of children are aware of the infliction of domestic violence and that figure rises to one half in instances, regrettably all too common, of repeat offences. We must bear it in mind that in the majority of cases that knowledge is scarcely surprising given that, at the time of the commission of the offences, 90 per cent. of the children are in either the same or an adjacent room. We do not know the scale of the damage that is done to them, not only physically, but in the long-term with irrevocable emotional and psychological scars.

It is therefore right that the significance of the problem for the country has to a considerable extent been reflected in the interest that right hon. and hon. Members have taken in the subject since the general election. In the House of Commons, there have been no fewer than 33 oral questions, 169 written questions, two business questions and 10 early-day motions. There have been three Adjournment debates, initiated respectively by the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) in March 1998 and for Luton, South (Ms Moran) in June 1998 and again in June this year. Twenty-one questions on the subject have been asked in another place.

If we are effectively to tackle domestic violence, we must be aware that, sadly but almost inevitably, several prerequisites fall upon the victim. The first responsibility for the victim—if "responsibility" is the appropriate word to use—is for her to recognise that the violence is occurring. Secondly, the victim must come to terms with the fact that, without exception, she is not to blame. There can never be an excuse, a mitigating factor or an element of personal responsibility for the fact that someone who supposedly loves her chooses to beat her up. Thirdly, the person concerned needs to be given every possible encouragement, advice and succour to seek official help.

Many organisations provide such help and it is right to draw attention to the good work of the Women's Aid national domestic violence helpline and its local refuge services, of which there are 300 in England and Wales. Many refuge services operate advice centres, drop-in centres or outreach services to isolated areas that are still bedevilled by the problem, but which often are not so visible to the naked eye. They also operate helplines. Victims can also seek help from the refuge 24-hour national crisis line, a men's advice line, a victim support service, Shelterline, the police, the national health service, the Samaritans, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children child protection helpline, Careline and Relate.

As I have said, we need to do everything that we can to encourage the victims of domestic violence to bring it to public attention. Of course, that also requires us, consciously and repeatedly, to confront the prevailing myths on the subject. Those myths are all too frequently heard. One is, "Well, it's just the odd domestic tiff,

[Mr. John Bercow]

which all couples experience." Another is, "She's not really suffering domestic violence, it's just a ploy to get herself rehoused." A third—an outrageous statement by someone who is responsible for committing domestic violence—is, "It can't be that bad, because if it were she would leave." That wholly ignores the fact that that person is often a dependant and does not feel confident enough to leave. Again, it is sometimes said, wholly wrongly and stereotypically, that domestic violence only happens in working class families. Alternatively, it is observed that those responsible must come from violent backgrounds. They might do so; equally, they might not. I was struck by what my hon. Friend said about the ostensibly respectable person—outwardly an upright and decent citizen—running a store in his local community. In practice, however, as my hon. Friend learned to his shattering cost, the truth was nothing of the kind.

The current legal position is substantially better than it was. On a wholly unpartisan note, I should like to observe that good work took place under the previous Government. I know that when the Minister was a Back Bencher and a member of the Home Affairs Committee, she constantly urged Ministers in the previous Administration to do more, and was right to do so. This Government have also done a good deal.

The Family Law Act 1996 is one of the principal protections for those who suffer from the curse of domestic violence. That Act has two features, of which increasing advantage is being taken by victims. The first is the opportunity to secure non-molestation orders. The evidence, I think, is that that is starting to happen on a significant scale. There is common ground that under-reporting still exists, and we must do everything that we can to tackle it. In 1998, about 18,000 non-molestation orders were granted. The fact that a power of arrest is attached to the granting of those orders gives them added bite. That power has been used on 22,000 occasions, which must have a deterrent effect. It must send out a clear message about the unacceptability of domestic violence.

The second feature of the Act is the opportunity to secure an occupation order. That is crucial, although sometimes more difficult to obtain, as it regulates who can live in the home in which the domestic violence takes place.

Ms Keeble: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a housing problem attached to domestic violence? A woman can be forced to leave the home with her children, in the middle of the night, during a crisis, or later when things have calmed down. That is extraordinarily difficult for any woman. Help can be provided by local authority assessments of women who have left home suddenly because of domestic violence. Sympathetic consideration should be given to women who need private housing, rather than saying, "You've got a home to go back to." Women have real difficulty if they have to leave their homes, as they often must do, at least in the early stages.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady is right to make that observation. Under part VII of the Housing Act 1996, people who are so afflicted have a right to temporary accommodation. There should be no cavilling about that; it should be granted automatically, without debate. For occupation orders, it is important to understand that a balance of harm test is applied. If, for example, a court were to decide not to grant an order, it would have taken into account fully the likely prospect of further violence being inflicted on the victim or her family. If it were persuaded that there was a serious prospect of such violence, it must be assumed that the balance of harm test would work in favour of the victim. There is still progress to be made.

Mr. Steen: I like what my hon. Friend is saying, but I would like to hear a little more from him on one matter. There are only 35 or 40 beds available for desperate women in the whole of Devon and Cornwall and in four small districts in south Devon, 897 women have rung in for help. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that local authorities could do an immense amount if they had safe houses and if the refuge service had more homes so that it could provide halfway houses for women. I am worried about the number of places, other than local authority places, where women can go.

Mr. Bercow: I am certainly concerned because my hon. Friend is right. There is, at least, an argument for ring-fencing the allocation of funds to ensure that local authorities' resources are used for that specific purpose. There is always a conflict between the principle of guaranteeing funding and local autonomy, but ring fencing should be considered. That there is still a lamentable inadequacy of supply throughout the country, particularly for those in remote communities, is not in dispute. Members of all parties should recognise the importance of doing what we can to provide further provision.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 provides the opportunity for restraining orders and that is welcome, because one of the problems that we have experienced is that those who have never been married to or co-habited with the violent partner have had limited protection. I believe that under the 1996 Act they have no recourse, but under the 1997 Act they do have at least some recourse, and that is welcome.

Some issues remain to be addressed. For example, there are substantial variations in the performance of different police forces and, even now, in the apparent lack of seriousness with which they pursue the evil of domestic violence. That was recognised by the Home Office: While recognising the principle of operational autonomy of individual forces, will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to exhort good practice and to show those forces that are not doing as well as they should how they could do better—the carrot and stick approach. Let them see what other forces are doing and recognise their responsibilities.

Domestic violence and child protection indices are often not properly integrated. A clear majority of forces now monitor repeat victimisation, but it is only fair to record that around 40 per cent. of forces do not have systems and mechanisms in place to record repeat victimisation. It is essential that they do so because, unless the scale and frequency of offences is known, we shall not have an accurate picture and it is less likely that the robust measures, including those within the criminal justice system, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes rightly calls, will be forthcoming.

As long ago as 1995, the interdepartmental group on domestic violence called for an inter-agency approach and that call has been repeated. Victims need to be assured that they will not be passed from pillar to post and that claims for confidentiality or anonymity will never be used as an excuse for apathy or inaction.

Some hon. Members said that in the overwhelming majority of cases the presumption was that contact should be granted. I believe that it is granted in around 98 per cent. of cases. However, in a recent significant study of the problem here and in Denmark, it was found that in England only seven of 53 women interviewed felt that they were able to make safe arrangements for contact between their violent ex-partner and their children. The overwhelming majority still felt at risk. Yet in 1997-98 the courts granted contact in 33,000 out of the 36,000 cases that came before them. That indicates that something is wrong.

One sometimes wonders whether judges are properly aware, as they should be, that supervised contact typically ceases to be supervised after six months, when it becomes unsupervised contact. Subsequently, unless the right decision was made in the first place, the children are at terrible risk.

When I was preparing for the debate, I was horrified to discover that not only are addresses sometimes given out in a palpably inappropriate way, but that addresses of women's refuges are given out. If a woman is in a refuge, fleeing violence and still trying to rebuild her confidence, it is unjust that a violent ex-partner should have the opportunity to find out where she is.

In his 1998 Adjournment debate, the hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out that relatively few hospital accident and emergency wards collect statistics on the injuries that are caused by the commission of domestic violence. Surely that information should be collected. While we do not want to impose an undue bureaucratic burden on hard-pressed hospital staff, we need to build an accurate picture that enables us effectively to publicise the nature and scale of the evil that is taking place and to build robust public support for measures to counteract it.

Section 60 of the Family Law Act 1996 confers a power on a third party to apply for an injunction in circumstances in which the victim did not have the confidence to do so herself. Unless I am mistaken, that section of the 1996 Act has still not yet come into force. We have all talked about the importance of encouraging victims to come to terms with what has happened, recognise that they are not to blame and seek help. However, some will not reach that stage, and we cannot abandon them to be the continuing and tragic victims of evil. Will the Minister clarify how soon the section will take effect?

With regard to immigrants, many women have been fearful of reporting cases of domestic violence lest they are chucked out of the country in the process. The Government said some time ago that they would consider the operation of a concession on that matter. Last night, I had the benefit of a productive exchange with the Minister, and she assured me that that concession is now operating. I hope that all hon. Members would say that that is absolutely right and proper.

The problem is now treated more seriously than ever before. Much good work is being done, but there is still a great deal to do. Domestic violence must not be tolerated. It must be clear that, without fail and wherever we can ensure it, the perpetrators will be apprehended, convicted and punished.

I conclude on a point of language. The hon. Member for Taunton said at the outset of her contribution that it would be a good thing if we could devise a better expression than "domestic violence". I think that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and hon. Members in the Chamber would be astonished to hear me call for the nationalisation of anything. However, in a sense, domestic violence needs to be nationalised. For far too long, it has been privatised—that is, regarded as something to be kept in the closet, which is scarcely worthy of significant public discussion. That is unacceptable.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, if large scale, continuing and appalling violence were taking place against black people—thankfully, such violence is greatly decreasing—it would be considered a national outrage and there would be a national outcry. We need to develop a similar moral imperative with regard to the discussion of domestic violence and the introduction of effective remedies against it.

My hon. Friend has performed a signal service to the Chamber by introducing this debate. I greatly enjoyed the contributions made by the hon. Members for Taunton and for Northampton, North, and I now look forward with eager anticipation, bated breath, and beads of sweat upon my brow, to hearing the Minister's response.

10.39 am

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), not only on securing this important debate, but on the way in which he opened the proceedings, the content of his speech, the passion with which he outlined his views and the way in which he set the tone of the debate. Such speeches show how important the Westminster Hall procedure is, allowing us to hold a debate of this kind. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) and the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on their valuable contributions, both of which brought a wealth of interest and expertise on the matter to the debate.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Although he and I have debated on the radio since his appointment to the Home Office Front Bench—

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Shadow.

Mrs. Roche: The shadow Front Bench, as my hon. Friend says—this is the first opportunity that I have had to welcome him to the shadow Front Bench, and I look forward to having a continuing exchange with him. His speech today, in his first outing—if I may put it that way—as shadow Front Bench spokesman on home affairs, was an outstanding contribution. I warmly congratulate him on that.

[Mrs. Roche]

In some ways, it is right to say that even a few years ago we would not have been having a debate of this kind. Attitudes have changed remarkably over the past few years. When practising as a barrister, I remember being sent to court, as all new barristers are, to obtain civil injunctions. I remember the attitude among the police, the judiciary and also, perhaps, fellow members of the Bar—although this did not apply to everyone—that a case of this kind was a "domestic" and was not serious. Sometimes such cases would be greeted with ridicule, and dealt with in such a way as to suggest that they were really not important. As far as the criminal justice system was concerned, they were not an important aspect of the work. Attitudes have changed remarkably since then.

Attitudes have also changed remarkably in the House of Commons. When one looks back even further to past debates, and to some of the remarks that were exchanged, the attitudes of Members of Parliament—not surprisingly—reflected the attitudes of the society that they represented. There has been a sea-change since.

The hon. Member for Buckingham was kind enough to refer to my past involvement with the Select Committee on Home Affairs, of which I was fortunate enough to be a member when I first entered the House in 1992, and to the report that it produced on domestic violence. The report was unanimous, and I pay tribute to my colleagues from all parties who served on that Committee. It was interesting that, even while we were conducting the debate at that time and taking evidence from witnesses, there was still a feeling in some quarters that it was not a serious issue. That situation has changed, but I do not want to be complacent. There is still a long way to go, and I was struck by what the hon. Member for Taunton said about the attitudes of some young people on the subject.

I shall not rehearse the figures—which have already been graphically presented by hon. Members today—illustrating the extent of the problem and its effect on the victims or survivors, most of whom are women. We know that half of all women survivors are living with young children, that the children are regularly aware of what is going on, and that they are damaged by it. Often, as the hon. Member for Buckingham graphically illustrated, the abuser of the child's mother is also the abuser of the child. No one should tolerate that, and the Government are doing everything that they can to combat it.

I understand what was said about the term "domestic violence". One often has to point out that domestic violence is a crime; it should not, as the hon. Member for Taunton pointed out, have a cosy connotation. In many cases, we are talking about violent crime. Domestic violence is not a private matter in which agencies should not intervene—it is completely unacceptable. As hon. Members have rightly said, everyone should feel safe and secure in their own home, and victims of domestic violence should be able to expect that security.

I want to deal with some of the important issues that have been raised. Little has been said about judges, but their role is very important. When I was a young barrister on one of my first outings in court, the judge made some outrageous remarks, which I shall not repeat, about a client of mine. That judge showed a woeful ignorance of the experiences of many women, but things are changing. The Judicial Studies Board, which is responsible for training the judiciary in England and Wales, is already making available comprehensive training on all aspects of domestic violence. Depending on their area of jurisdiction, all judges also attend continuous courses in criminal, civil and family law on a three-year cycle. Before district and circuit judges can obtain a family law "ticket", they must undertake "gateway" courses, of which the study of domestic violence forms an important part.

We must consider not only the judges but the court. As the hon. Member for Taunton pointed out, courts can be difficult places in which to give evidence, and a great deal of thought has recently been given to how support and protection for those who testify can be improved. That is why, as part of our published integrated strategy, we have increased funding for Victim Support. All hon. Members will have had experience of that organisation in their constituencies, and I pay tribute to it. Victim Support does tremendous work. It is a volunteer organisation in the very best sense of the phrase, and the volunteers give tremendously of their time and effort. That is why we included provisions to help all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999.

I accept the point that the hon. Member for Totnes made about delays, and we have introduced measures to reduce them. He is right to say that delay in the system increases pressure on the victim. It makes it less likely that she will want to proceed, and leaves her vulnerable to further intimidation and violence from the perpetrator, and perhaps even from neighbours, who may be unsure of the circumstances.

I want to deal now with child contact cases. I recognise the very important points that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North, who has discussed the problem with my ministerial colleagues in the Lord Chancellor's Department. As she said, last year the Children Act subcommittee of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law Matters issued a consultation paper about domestic violence and its relevance to contact disputes under the Children Act 1989. My hon. Friend was right that the paper suggested that although changes in legislation did not seem necessary at present, good practice guidelines might be issued to courts that deal with cases in which domestic violence is raised as a reason for refusing or limiting contact. The subcommittee reported earlier this year to the Lord Chancellor, saying what the good practice guidelines might be. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North noted, the draft guidelines were subsequently considered by the Court of Appeal in four cases, which were heard together, and on which judgment has been handed down.

The Lord Chancellor, with the President of the Family Division, are now considering what further action may be necessary. I undertake to bring to the attention of my ministerial colleagues the comments of the hon. Member for Taunton and of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North and to pass on all the important points that have been made today. We want to avoid tragic cases such as that of Gina McCarthy, who was killed by her ex-husband following

court proceedings over contact with their young child. I know that these are serious matters, and that my colleagues will want to give proper weight to them.

The role of the Crown Prosecution Service was mentioned. For some years, the CPS has had a code of practice on the handling of cases of domestic violence. It is being revised, but it is not yet ready because we want to get it right. Among other things, it must take account of the review of the Crown prosecutors' code. It must also take account of the relationship of such cases with related civil proceedings, and special consideration must be given in those cases that involve children. I assure the House that that revision is taking account of consultation with other bodies such as the police and voluntary agencies such as Women's Aid. I know that some hon. Members who have close contact with the CPS in their own areas may want to make representations.

Often, as the hon. Member for Buckingham said, difficult issues are involved. For example, a victim may not wish proceedings to be taken against her partner if they are likely to result in some penalty. Such wishes must be taken into account, and there are no easy solutions. As hon. Members have said, it can be difficult to balance such needs with the likelihood that violence might become worse and more frequent without active intervention. Of course, children are often involved and their position must be taken into consideration.

Of course, there are very many examples of good practice. In Leeds, for example, the CPS is involved in an experimental domestic violence court—a dedicated court with relevant advice and expertise. The CPS is also involved in projects being funded under the £7 million violence against women initiative, part of the Home Office's crime reduction programme.

The role of the police is vital. I understand what the hon. Member for Totnes said about training and the number of officers responsible. I pay tribute to the many officers involved. They are dedicated to their task, which shows when one speaks to them about it. They have a stressful and traumatic job, which many officers do very well. I understand what was said about training, and about the fact that ensuring good practice will make it a national response.

In drawing up a Home Office circular on domestic violence, officials worked in close collaboration with the Association of Chief Police Officers. They also had the great advantage of expert comment from outside bodies such as Women's Aid.

Mr. Steen: I have listened with great interest to the Minister's speech, which has been extremely helpful. I wonder whether the Department has comparable figures on domestic abuse in other European countries. It would be interesting to know whether Britain has the worst record. Is there something wrong with our society or the mental health of Britain that is not shared by other European Union countries?

Mrs. Roche: I do not believe that that is the case, but I will send not only the hon. Gentleman, but all hon. Members present, details of any research or figures that we have. It is sometimes difficult to make comparisons, because domestic violence is not a category in itself. It is difficult to abstract figures if it comes under grievous or actual bodily harm or common assault. Different EU countries have different ways of categorising offences and some systems are completely different from ours. However, if comparative figures are available, I will consider them, because the hon. Gentleman has posed an interesting question.

To return to the police response, earlier this year we issued the police with a new Home Office circular on addressing domestic violence. We have also introduced two indicators relating to domestic violence into the suite of police best-value performance indicators. One relates to the number of incidents attended resulting in an arrest; the other relates to the number of incidents that represent repeat victimisation. The police are getting the message that the Government and the Association of Chief Police Officers take domestic violence seriously. Equally, the police take the issue seriously.

We must ensure that all other agencies join in. Without wishing to use jargon, a multi-agency approach is important. The probation service and social services have a part to play. Our pathfinder programme for the probation service is considering what works in perpetrator programmes for those convicted of domestic violence. The hon. Member for Taunton raised that issue. I remember discussing the subject in a Home Affairs Committee report, and the issue was controversial in those days. It is still a complex area, but we need to look forward.

We must ensure that our legislation addresses the issues and is used effectively in both the criminal and civil fields. As a result of this and previous Governments, there is now a single set of civil remedies with non-molestation and occupation orders to deal with domestic violence and regulate occupation of the family home. A power of arrest must be attached where the threat of danger makes it necessary. Like many people who practised law previously, I have been scarred by the failure of injunctions that did not deliver because that power was not in place. The new offences of causing harassment and causing fear of violence have also been introduced.

Domestic violence is an important issue, which demands everyone's attention. The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) takes it very seriously as part of his ministerial portfolio. He has recently taken part in a conference on the matter.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes on his introduction of this debate. I also congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part. People outside this place who follow our proceedings and who are, rightly, interested in the matter will, I hope, realise that the consensus in the House of Commons is that the issue is vital. We take it seriously and are determined to work together to make progress on it.

New Towns (South-East)

11 am

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I have asked for today's debate because I represent a new town and I, and other Members of Parliament for similar places, are concerned about a range of matters. My object today is to establish that the aggregate effects of Government policies for new towns, particularly in the south-east of England, do not satisfactorily tackle the needs of those communities. I am happy for other hon. Members to intervene during my speech, because I want the debate to reflect the fact that the concerns that I shall describe go well beyond my constituency boundaries. In addition to providing an opportunity to discuss those concerns, perhaps the debate will allow the sense of grievance that has been growing to be aired.

I do not, of course, want to suggest that a Government Department has it in for new towns. Rather, a series of initiatives threatens, severally, the welfare of new towns. Jointly, those initiatives add up to an agenda for decline. I shall explain why new towns are right to feel worried about the future. I hope that the programme for redress that I shall recommend will commend itself to the Government, who are the successors of those who founded the new towns—largely successfully—50 years ago.

Why do new towns have a special problem, if, indeed, their foundation has been in many ways a success? Do they not incorporate features that many other towns and cities would want to emulate? The problems originated in the foundation of the new towns. They were not merely built, but planned. It must be admitted that much of that planning was successful, although that aspect of the matter is not what I am principally concerned with today. Much has happened since the planning of the towns, and it is those changes that have caused trouble.

First, and most obviously, the original new town residents have grown older. Facilities designed for an estate on which every family had children and where there were few elderly people might not be at all suitable for an elderly population. We must ask whether the original planners understood that one day their designs for new families would have to serve the needs of an older population. Did they approach their design in such a way as to provide for the needs of those aged over 70? What foresight did the original planners show? In some ways, their vision was defective.

A second dimension to the new towns problem is that the facilities have also grown older. Some of the original facilities were built to last and do not show undue signs of age. The council houses built in the late 1940s to Parker Morris standards, for instance, may well have needed significant maintenance in their lifespan, but they were built well and those who live in them find that such houses can be adapted to their needs as they grow older. Indeed, I live in one.

Other facilities lack such good design. To cope with a large number of young children in the new towns of the 1950s, system-built schools were put up. Those buildings depended heavily on asbestos as a prime building material, and most were jerry-built. In the first decade of the 21st century, they are mostly beyond their natural lifespan, and what is worse, they have all reached that stage together. A system that was ageing in the 1990s has arrived at its dotage.

I do not suggest that the Government have not been aware of the needs of new towns. In my constituency, many schools have a mixture of old, and bright, new buildings, which have been constructed to a much higher standard. That is a tribute to the Government, who have tackled a problem that was heretofore ignored. However, the pace of change is too slow, and because of the scale of the problem, the overall effect, even given recent initiatives, is that the condition of the school estate worsens year on year. When buildings that were not well designed age together, much stronger measures are needed than hitherto.

A third dimension of the problem is that certain social changes were not envisaged by the designers of new towns, which is not surprising. They did not plan for communities to change organically, and action taken by successive Governments since then has constrained those communities in their need for such growth. The original designers of the blueprint had a vision of what constituted a community: a cluster of houses around some green space, in the middle of which would be a small shopping centre, to which local residents would walk; one large pub, which all members of the community could use; and a community centre to service a great variety of social activities. When one walks around Hemel Hempstead, one could be forgiven for wondering whether one is in Stevenage, because the same blueprint was adopted.

In some ways, the blueprint was resilient. The community centres, for example, play an important role in the life of new town communities, although in general they are used much more by older people than by the young. Younger people often hang around the shopping centres, which as a result do not have quite the community focus that the original planners envisaged. Indeed, the standard shopping trip now is not a walk to the neighbourhood shop, but a drive to a massive supermarket from a road that, even at that late stage, was planned in the belief that few residents would have cars. In some new town areas, the lack of car-parking facilities leads to ugly disputes among neighbours.

In many other ways, too, the original planners were unaware of how community needs would develop. In my constituency, we need a mosque for the 3 per cent. of my constituents who are of Muslim belief. At present, a private house, with inadequate facilities, fulfils that function. None of the original planners would have thought that the town might need such a facility somewhere central.

New towns need scope to grow organically. Successive Governments have, to put it mildly, constrained the capacity of new town residents to tackle the problems that they face in their daily lives. The problems inherent in the flawed blueprint that I described—as I said, it is flawed only in patches—have been exacerbated by a deficiency in resources, which is hard to explain clearly. Some people have even been confused about what can be meant by the title of this debate. I am thinking particularly of resources in land and of financial resources vouchsafed annually to those who control the destiny of our communities. The history of that resource allocation system is important. We must understand the operation—labyrinthine though it is—

of the Commission for the New Towns. If we do not, we will not understand the scale of the problem facing new towns today and why the Government must give the matter much more urgent attention.

Some people might ask, "Why are you worried about Hemel Hempstead? Isn't it fair that, in deciding the overall allocation of resources, the Government should take something away from such privileged areas, where there are unemployment rates of, for example, 1.6 per cent., and give it to others?" The trouble is partly that there has been a resource-abstraction mechanism from new towns since the Domesday book. The Commission for the New Towns has been required to take resources away from new towns in a way that is prejudicial to their interest. In the last year of its operation, the commission contributed around £160 million to the Exchequer.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene on that important matter. I wish to focus on the issue of paying for new facilities, particularly housing, in new towns—many of which are twice the size originally envisaged. Is my h F aware that 500 new houses have been built in Crawley over the past five years for people who have been excluded from the market, for the economic reasons that he mentioned? How can such a problem be redressed in the new proposals for resource accounting, so that we continue to ensure that people who are excluded from the market because of the sheer enormity of housing prices can still live in our new towns?

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is good at making all hon. Members aware of the problems that Crawley new town faces. I shall deal later with housing resources—a significant source of trouble to some of us in the new town sector—and particularly with the definition of that phrase. There is a philosophical continuum between the old ideas of the Commission for the New Towns—CNT—and what is happening now.

A specific problem is that, once new towns were established, it was thought that they had been the recipients of considerable resources from the rest of the country. As they were new communities that had to make their way in the world, however, it was not deemed appropriate to vest all the functions of community governors in the local authorities. The view was taken that another authority had to be created, in addition to the normal local authority, to ensure that appropriate quantities of taxpayers' investment were pulled out to repay the rest of the country for having established such privileged habitations. The new agent, the CNT, was therefore established—consisting of those with experience of governing communities—and enjoined to ensure that the considerable resources ploughed into the new communities were not frittered away or wasted by immigrants from places such as the east of London. The CNT oversaw the inauguration of the new towns and, as they became more established, its role was to make a return to the nation of at least some of the resources that the new towns had, as it were, taken.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene in this important debate. As he will know, it cannot be said that the Commission for the New Towns discharged its remit in Stevenage very well. It fragmented the ownership of the town centre in such a way that it is impossible to redevelop it properly. Will my hon. Friend and others who represent new towns consider what the now reformed Commission for the New Towns, which has been absorbed into English Partnerships, could do to redress the errors in its management of those new towns over the years?

Mr. McWalter: My hon. Friend well illustrates a reason for the problem. It is interesting that the financial memorandum under which the Commission for the New Towns was established instructed it precisely not to subject parcels of land to such treatment, but to work with the local council and community to ensure that such fragmentation and inefficiency in patterns of ownership would not occur. I agree that we must try to evolve a new way of going forward that will deal with the problem satisfactorily. Since securing the debate, and following recent discussions with the CNT's successor body, English Partnerships, I have however experienced some joy at the way in which it has responded to some of my requests. I can see the first signs of a brightening dawn on the horizon.

The interventions of my hon. Friends the Members for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) and for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) have established that I am not alone in thinking that the Commission for the New Towns did not do its job very well. My problem has been to identify the villains of the piece, which, in many ways, have been the terms of reference under which the CNT was set up. Paragraph 1.6 of its financial memorandum stated that the commission should attain the best price

> obtainable in the market...The highest bid should normally be accepted.

Even though other paragraphs in the financial memorandum instructed the commission not to fragment land, the onus was on maximising financial return. As a result, the commission would fragment land if it was in its financial interest to do so.

Paragraph 2.1 of the financial memorandum stated:

> The best price will normally be achieved by marketing assets in such a way as to maximise price competition

and that delay would be countenanced only if it would achieve "a significantly higher price".

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): The hon. Gentleman talked about the Commission for the New Towns. Its major problem was its indifference to consequences. I was heartened by his suggestion that English Heritage, which has assumed responsibility for such matters, might have a different approach. Is he convinced that indifference will not continue? Is he sure that the organisation will be able to resource the effects of 50 years of new town development? Does he believe that the Government will provide sufficient resources to ensure that?

Mr. McWalter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his observations, although he should have referred to English Partnerships, not English Heritage. He may have made a few enemies, so I want to get him back in those people's good books fairly quickly. He asked whether the manager of the assets of the Commission for the New Towns will adopt a different strategy. If hon. Members were convinced that a different strategy

[Mr. McWalter]

were required, I could almost move on. However, I should dwell on one feature of the commission's operation.

I have mentioned the commission's powers of delay. On my own patch, an extremely important area was required for the building of a 400 m hospital access road. The commission sat on the project for eight years. I was elected on 1 May 1997 and mentioned the subject in my maiden speech, so important was it to me and so dear was it to my heart. Following various meetings with all the interested parties—the health trust, the county council, Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all—and the commission, there would be, perhaps, three and a half weeks of extraordinary activity. I might almost describe it as hyperactivity. The job of a Member of Parliament is to get a train back on the rails when it comes off, and sometimes to give it a shove as well. However, in that case, the moment that the train went out of sight and around the corner, it ground to a complete halt. Four months later, preparation of the various promised documents was no further forward. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage is listening to my remarks with some enthusiasm.

Barbara Follett: I echo my hon. Friend's comments. The same thing has happened and is happening in Stevenage, where English Partnerships now holds small but significant pieces of access land, preventing many developments to which it holds the key. In the mid-1980s, Stevenage attempted to wrest control of its destiny from the Commission for the New Towns under a Bill which, I am sorry to say, failed. It would be far better if Stevenage, rather than English Partnerships, controlled its own destiny.

Mr. McWalter: My hon. Friend anticipates one of my solutions. A danger of accepting interventions is that other hon. Members may filch one's best lines. Other hon. Members in the Chamber nodded at what she said; the way in which the CNT proceeded, which she described, is of course inappropriate, but it is not completely new. My father used to work on a building site, and sometimes the people on the site would find out that there was likely to be no work in the near future. As the desperate day grew ever closer, the work grew ever slower—until they found out that there would be new work. Then they speeded up and finished off the first work. People will react rationally. I suspect that employees of the Commission for the New Towns were in some areas a little like those people on the building site. If they did their job incredibly quickly, they would have no job left; so they did it rather less quickly.

As I have said, my main concern is that the framework in which the commission worked was invidious. The financial memorandum that describes the framework for its operations considered whether some land might, for instance, be sold to the National Trust. It seems to me that if land is of a suitable character to be sold to the National Trust, it is precious and hence tremendously important to a community. Indeed, the National Trust land at Ashridge Park is precious to the people of my constituency. However, the Commission for the New Towns took the view that a selected purchaser such as the National Trust—which figured as an example in its financial memorandum—should be treated with caution, because of the risk of it not realising full market value. In other words, if something of strong environmental character is retained, lo and behold, that could blow it for realising the money intended to pay wages and honour obligations to the Treasury.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my hon. Friend agree that the guidelines that are given to English Partnerships contain at least a theoretical possibility of deviating from maximum return for the Treasury, but that the problem in practice is that the rule of deviating for community gain is not applied consistently?

Mr. McWalter: My chain of argument must be immensely logical, because my hon. Friends are seeing the next step, and hopping in to wrest it from me. As my hon. Friend says, there is potential for a change in methods. I emphasise that there was a conflict between those living in a new town and the old commission. A question arises about the extent to which the CNT's philosophy has been carried through into a new structure.

There are in some respects clear discontinuities, at least of principle. I have become aware of those only since requesting this debate. I was not optimistic about the changes. However, something happened with respect to the hospital access road site that I mentioned, which was so frequently booted into touch, to use a new metaphor, by the Commission for the New Towns. To be fair to English Partnerships, it took the view that it had continued the inefficiencies of the commission with regard to the site, and apologised wholeheartedly for those omissions. I was grateful for the honest approach to my sense of grievance on the matter.

The site for my hospital road, which, ironically, is called "Paradise"—I think that "hell" would have been more appropriate—is needed by the community. Its development would benefit the whole community, but that development must be strongly configured by the needs of the health service. The land adjoins the hospital. Therefore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) suggested, if there is a discontinuity in policy between the Commission for the New Towns and English Partnerships, a discontinuity in practice is also vital. That discontinuity in practice needs to be consistent, as my hon. Friend said. We cannot continue with a system in which there is a feeling that such decisions are made capriciously. I am therefore pleased that, in my constituency, English Partnerships has broken with the Commission for the New Towns tradition. Because of that, my object in seeking this debate has altered slightly. I should like to tell hon. Members something about that discontinuity, to give them some hope that things may be about to change.

English Partnerships has committed itself to treating the hospital-aspect land over which it has control in terms not of the financial return that it will make to the Treasury, but of the "best consideration" for both the community and the Treasury. Paragraph 69 of the English Partnerships financial memorandum, dated July 1997—the Government lost little time in addressing the matter after the election—requires it, as the successor authority to the Commission for the New Towns, to

obtain market value for any asset it sells, assessed in relation to the use proposed for the asset.

The paragraph provides a different way in which to think of the role of English Partnerships.

The precedent of taking into account "best consideration" rather than maximised value augurs well. It gives us the opportunity to overcome some of the problems that the communities and representatives of new towns have had with the old structure. The new financial memorandum will not prevent English Partnerships making significant sums for the Exchequer, but it will minimise the conflict between the community and itself by ensuring that it works closely with those in a locality. If English Partnerships emphasises that aspect of its brief, it will set a distance between itself and its predecessor authority. However, we should perhaps give it good notice that, if we get the train going and the authority stops it when it goes around the corner, we shall sack the driver.

When I called for this debate, I was not sure that the authority had the power to dispose of assets at less than the fullest market valuation; I now know that it has, and is prepared to use, that power. Following the "Paradise" decision, if I may call it that, there is clear water between English Partnerships and the Commission for the New Towns. In part that is thanks to the emphasis on urban regeneration in the relationship between English Partnerships and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, for which my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), will respond in this debate.

I admit that I was prepared to castigate English Partnerships as a successor to the Commission for the New Towns. It seemed to be drawing down the maximum financial return from new town assets. However, there has been a change for the better on my own patch—and I hope in other new town constituencies as well. Members who represent new town areas will be pleased to work through the implications of those changes.

The history of the new towns suggests that the way in which they were set up resulted in little attention to fostering their own local democracy. That echoes the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage. In a standard local authority, the land bank was under democratic control, to be used for the public weal. In a new town, however, it was controlled by an authority that was interested only in maximising the financial return it made to central Government. That historical residue and that view of new towns is still with us, because people still think of them as privileged places that have consumed a lot of resources and owe a buck in return. It is important that we address that view of new towns when we consider other aspects in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley said that a threat lay in the wings for new towns. That threat relates to the requirement for councils that are technically in a position called negative subsidy to pool profits from April 2002. Those profits would be redistributed around the nation, which all sounds very technical. I previously secured an Adjournment debate on this subject, so I do not need to add much to what I said then.

It is important to note that the concept of a housing resource, as it is currently defined by the DETR, is deeply invidious for new towns. Most of the resources of new towns originated, in some way, from a housing source. Because housing was the new towns' only resource base, they will be left with nothing if the DETR adopts the historical definition for its concept of a housing resource. There may be odd bits and pieces of land that some vicar donated in the 17th century, but new towns do not have the same asset base as other communities. The DETR must take account of that point in its definition of housing resource. When, in addition, it ring-fences housing by saying that resources cannot be taken out of housing and used elsewhere, it denies new towns the capacity to develop an effective resource to address what I characterised earlier as the deficiencies of the new town blueprint.

That important matter is being articulated not only in this Chamber. For reasons lost in the mists of time, my local authority is called Dacorum; it has something to do with an Anglo-Saxon division of land. On its website, Dacorum council discusses the problems of current Government policy and the financial issues that face the borough council. It states:

> Senior councillors and officers have been lobbying hard over the summer months to achieve

what amounts to an increase in the transition period that central Government will allow before they take all the money. That is what they have been "lobbying hard" for. I have been lobbying harder for something else: for the money not to be swiped at all. The Minister will be aware that I wrote rather passionately to her about that in my submission to a Government paper on the matter.

Dacorum council also says:

> Meanwhile councillors have agreed proposals to plan savings of £2.25 million from the council's spending.

The council spends only £20 million, so £2.25 million is a cut of devastating proportions. The council continues:

> We are expecting some good news about the amount of time the Council will be given to adjust to the changes which are being made by central government.

That reminds me of the story about someone who, on hearing about Nero's fiddling while Rome burned, asked, "What tune was it exactly?" When huge tranches of resources are being lost, it is beside the point to say, "We hope to have good news about the length of time that they will give us." Some people have suggested that cutting perhaps 40 per cent. from a council's budget, as proposed in the overall plan, could reasonably take 30 years—30 years of misery.

Laura Moffatt: Is my hon. Friend aware that Crawley council, for that very reason, faces a 25 per cent. cut in its services to the community? I suspect that that is happening in other new towns, too.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for that observation. Initially, we examined the repercussions of the ring-fencing of housing resources and thought that it was especially bad for some new towns, but when we examined them further, we found that the new rules captured a greater number of new towns. The Government must consider the issue as a new towns issue.

Barbara Follett: In Stevenage, which is the oldest of the new towns and now well past middle age, most of the housing stock needs repairing. The council is grappling

[Barbara Follett]

with the problem of having to install new boilers, and for it to have to face a cut now is little short of disastrous.

Mr. McWalter: Those of us who are concerned about the problem initially wondered whether Stevenage had negotiated its way out of it. I am pleased to have my hon. Friend lobbying with me on these issues, although it is distressing to hear that her constituents are also subject to such cuts.

I do not mind if my local council loses money. I should qualify that: I do not mind if it loses money if it is wasting it; if it is not delivering best value; or if it can be shown that cuts will, in the end, provide better value for the resources that hard-pressed council tax payers put into local government services. I believe that the council in my patch would come out very well from a best-value assessment. In some respects, it has a claim to beacon status. For example, it anticipated the Government in setting up an advice centre so that the elderly would be fully aware of their entitlement under the minimum income guarantee. No pensioner lobbyists visited me yesterday, because nearly everybody in my area gets what he or she deserves.

The reality of a 5 per cent. cut in the voluntary sector, which is part of the proposals, is a reduction in resources for the blind, the mentally ill, the bereaved, the mentally handicapped, the homeless and the drug-dependent. Our meals on wheels service alone costs £750,000 to run, and will be dealt a severe blow by the proposals.

I challenge my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to say in replying to the debate that she will not remove resources from the local authority in my area except on the basis of an appropriate best-value assessment. I believe that such an assessment would leave all those services intact. One might ask what a borough council is doing providing such a wide range of services. The answer is partly that it has been proactive. It is in many ways a beacon council and should be honoured for its work, not savaged.

Barbara Follett: I should like to echo my hon. Friend's sentiments. Stevenage has tried to remedy some of the ills that the design of the new town has inflicted on it. There is strong evidence to suggest that, in new towns, boys are doing far worse than the national average, and we are building up severe problems for the future, when those young men attain adulthood.

In Stevenage, we set up the Raise project to try to motivate young men. That project is funded by the borough council, not by the education authority. We have also done a great deal of community safety work—in fact Stevenage is a beacon council because of that. I echo my hon. Friend in saying that such councils deserve better and deserve more.

Mr. McWalter: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is ironic that the arrangements for governing new towns revealed considerable scepticism on the part of those who constructed them about the ability of local people to get on and deliver a good quality of service to those in their locality. It seems that exactly the opposite has been so. In my local authority, there was also a pioneering community safety partnership, which included the use of closed-circuit television in some of the difficult areas. In a wide range of ways, the local people have shown themselves to be fully capable of utilising resources sensibly.

A Minister responsible for social services visited my constituency, looked at the advisory services for the vulnerable and the elderly and commended them highly. It is peculiar that while one arm of government says, "This is terrific, so many people could learn from this practice", a DETR Minister can say, "I am sorry, but I have some bad news. Resources will have to be chopped away."

Laura Moffatt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way once more; this will be my last intervention. In the light of the contributions to this important debate, what possible justification does he think there can be for taking money away from new towns and giving it to the Exchequer?

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I am sorry that it will be her last, as her points have been most valuable. It feels as if the idea behind the old Commission for the New Towns persists and that some think, "These people got a lot; it is their turn to start ploughing it all back." Decisions are being taken without looking in detail at how their consequences will be borne.

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is being amazingly tolerant and understanding in allowing so many interventions. The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) asked him about the motives behind the pay-back syndrome. Is it a Government-driven, political policy or a Treasury-led initiative? Historically, nobody has been able to budge that problem.

Mr. McWalter: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. A sensible Government policy has had an unexpected backwash in new towns. When I was a councillor, the council made a profit on its council houses and used it to lower the overall rates. It made bigger profits by refusing to maintain houses properly. I understand where the Government are coming from in that respect, and it is vital that such policies are addressed, but it is very different when a council is delivering the services and policies wanted by those in central Government, when wearing all their other hats.

I must add one other thing. Some local authorities have been managed very successfully, but have not been able to participate in central Government programmes of allocating resources. The local authority on my patch has made no demand on housing improvement programme funds for many years—not because it does not have a housing programme, but simply because it knows that it can generate the resources from within, and manage without going cap in hand to the Treasury.

People must recognise that Government policies are running against each other. That is why, when I first called for the debate, I wanted a reply from a Minister who had a specific role in joining up government. I will be honest; I wanted a Treasury or Cabinet Office Minister, who, theoretically, has that responsibility, so that we could examine the cumulative effects of all the

issues, and not simply financing. That is why I use the word "resources" and not "financing". We are talking about land banks, housing assets, assets for leisure and culture, and so forth.

I shall be brief on my final point about the problems facing new towns, though it could be the subject of a further Adjournment debate if we do not receive a satisfactory response. It originates again from the DETR, which is responsible, in my area, for providing resources to Hertfordshire county council through the so-called standard spending assessment. That allocation of resources is related to the expense of hiring people to do a job.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley, who I know must leave the debate soon, mentioned the high cost of labour in the south-east, which has repercussions for the problem areas that we identified. The Government have decided not to uprate the standard spending assessment component that relates to the cost of labour, even though it costs much more in the south-east than elsewhere. I find that strange. One DETR Minister to whom I mentioned that point said, "Well, it would cost a lot of money and you are doing very well." If it costs an extra 6 per cent. year on year to hire teachers or porters, for example, that should be regarded as the going rate. Even if that is paid, we are not doing particularly well; we are just keeping a standard level of service, which is what the SSA is supposed to be about.

In Hertfordshire, cuts in next year's SSA could amount to about £7 million. Of that, about £4 million is for education and about £1 million bounces back on to new towns. I do not know the figures for other authorities represented by hon. Members present today, but that area cost adjustment is a further deprivation of resources from new towns. It originates, as I said, from the DETR, and it is important that the DETR takes note of it.

The cumulative picture, which is the result of all the different pressures, is of the erosion of the resource base, so that new towns face problems in addressing the problems of the community. They already have inherited problems and have had to cope with three successive whammies on their financial status. The first relates to the continuing depletion of resources through the aegis of the Commission for the New Towns—now part of English Partnerships; the second is the depletion of resources through the negative subsidy that authorities issue; and the third is depletion as a result of the area cost adjustment.

The result is a structure under which the Government's role in providing resources to people who do a job for our communities is compromised. Local schools, for example, require resources. If the Government, with a blast of trumpets, give £40,000 to a school to solve its problems, but squeeze that resource through technical adjustments to the new earnings survey component of the SSA of the area cost adjustment, we know that the latter policy will never hit the headlines. It is, however, a real issue for people in our localities, and the Government must address it as energetically as possible.

11.54 am

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am aware that time is short, so I shall try to be brief.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on putting the case so well. His arguments on a matter of real concern are shared by all hon. Members with new town constituencies.

Most new town communities were built at the same time and are deteriorating at the same rate. New towns have never possessed the land-bank assets of more traditional communities, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and its equivalent Department under previous Governments, has not given that sufficient recognition.

I shall deal with the issues in turn: first, the role of English Partnerships and the Commission for the New Towns, which the new town communities resent, as the organisation is seen as a remote and unaccountable asset-stripper—£162 million a year goes back to the Treasury. My hon. Friend was right to say that the rules allow deviation from those returns to the Treasury, but they are not applied consistently and are not made available to the local community or to local community organisations. Many community organisations that are trying to develop their own facilities, especially for sport, are being given conflicting advice, information, deadlines and time scales by English Partnerships, which is unacceptable. I can best sum up the organisation's remoteness and lack of accountability by recounting what was said when I intervened on a constituent's behalf and contacted an official of English Partnerships about the sale of a piece of land over which it was negotiating with a community organisation. The official, who will have to remain nameless, said, "Well I will talk to you, but you must realise that technically it is none of your business." For a member of English Partnerships to speak in that way to a representative of the local community—I am not getting on my high horse and speaking of myself as an individual—is unacceptable.

I agree, too, with my hon. Friend's argument about the area cost adjustment. There are significant extra costs in the south-east, and we thought that we had a "done deal" when the ACA was put on hold until 2002, but last year's earnings survey was implemented within the ACA, which resulted in a cut for Essex. This year, when the earnings survey shows a rise for Essex, it is suggested that it will not be implemented. That is inconsistent and unreasonable, and might be open to challenge.

The most important issue is that of resource accounting for councils that, technically, are in negative subsidy. My hon. Friend and I have spoken about the matter in the House before and we have had welcome access to Ministers. It is a huge issue and hon. Members have described the impact in their communities. In my local community, £3.1 million being taken out of a general fund annually of £12.6 million means either huge cuts or huge increases in council tax. I do not deviate from the Government's principle that tenants should not, as a rule, subsidise the general fund, but the impact on a handful of local authorities is disproportionate and unjust.

The Government have listened, particularly about phasing, and I welcome that, but I am worried that the impact of the proposals will come in two stages—first, on 1 April next year, which will have a major impact on my local authority and, secondly, on 1 April 2002. The way in which those two stages will be financed differs.

[Mr. Bill Rammell]

The first stage will be met by the local council's own housing revenue account; the second stage will be met from the national pool. The impact on my local authority is enormous. If it is to take advantage of phasing, the money must come from its housing revenue account and from rent payers in Harlow. As that is the Government's objective, I hope that my hon. Friend will listen to our concerns and ensure consistency so that both stages of phasing are financed similarly through the national pool.

Ministers have listened to us about what is called the item 8 credit transfer. It is the element that takes account of the set-aside capital receipts that were previously used for non-housing purposes. There was an assumed investment income to the housing revenue account, which is the main cause of negative subsidy. We went down that road because we did not have the asset base; the only asset available was the set-aside capital receipts.

The Government have listened, particularly through the local government technical working party, but I am worried that the concession that the Government are considering will apply only when a local authority becomes debt free. The trouble with that historic method of financing is that if we do not allow authorities that become debt free to have that assumed transfer nullified, it will not meet the needs of that small number of local authorities that have a real problem.

Finally, about 100 councils are hit by the negative-subsidy problem. For a handful of local authorities, predominantly new town authorities, the issue is severe. Even at this late stage, I hope that the Minister will go further. I hope that she will ask her ministerial colleagues to reconsider the matter to see what support can be offered.

12.1 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter). I do not question the time that he took to introduce the debate because, logically and understandably, he raised issues that affect hundreds of thousands of people and many local authorities.

If a lesson is to be learned from today's hour-and-a-half debate, it is that many people and local authorities are begging the Government to think again about that clawback. To take £162 million a year from new towns will deprive them of the opportunity to put into their communities what was not included when they were built. Those councils will not be able to prop up the communities that have aged with the new towns, or to take account of the problems that have resulted. For instance, community centres that were built for young people now no longer attract the youngsters because older people are using them, and the buildings do not adapt to use by varying age groups.

If a lesson is to be learned, surely it is that we must look at what has happened in the past 50 years, particularly in the south-east. We must not allow the new town syndrome to be repeated elsewhere in the same format. As a local councillor, I represented an authority that created two new towns, one of which, Leigh Park in Havant, is the largest council estate in Europe. We simply built houses, one or two schools, the odd pub, one community centre and a shopping parade. We then left it to the community and the small local authority of Havant to pick up that enormous baby. Those 30-odd thousand council houses in Portsmouth were able, for the best part of 20 years, to service many other activities from the housing revenue account. I cannot remember the general rate fund being used to support any activity on those large estates outside the city.

As leader of Hampshire county council, I was responsible for the development of Basingstoke, under which its population increased from 50,000 to more than 125,000, and the Andover development, under which 40,000 people from London moved into a small rural community with homes, schools and very little else. There was no infrastructure. Parliament and the Government need to learn lessons from the examples that have been mentioned today. It is not good enough to continue in the same way.

I am heartened by what two hon. Members said about the Government's new relationship to new towns—the take-over by English Partnerships, as opposed to English Heritage. I hope that that will come to pass; if it does, it will be a more positive, visionary and, perhaps, understanding approach. However, should new towns be run in such a way that the people who make key decisions—on the release of assets, the selling of land and achieving best value—are not part of the community where those decisions will have the greatest effect? There is no financial gain if one does not want to sell land simply because it makes good sense for the community for it not to be sold.

Where is the local authority's ability to resist English Partnerships' demands to sell assets? A mechanism that allows the local authority and the interests of the community to override the new relationship between new towns and English Partnerships is essential. Otherwise, sadly, the problems will persist. As hon. Members have said, some local authorities could lose 10 to 25 per cent. of their spend. Local communities will suffer, because desperately needed replacements and upgrading of property and other assets will not be undertaken. Ultimately, that will cost more money. Some support for the community will be lost, and it will not easily be replaced.

I hark back to what the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said about living in a Parker Morris house and the standards that apply to such buildings. I wish that some of the properties that are now being built by housing associations could claim that in 40 years' time they will, perhaps after a little adaptation, still be fit for habitation, as are many Parker Morris houses.

When the developments were built, the people who were going to live there were not trusted. It was as if we as a nation said, "We will create new towns, but we will not trust these people who have been shipped in from cities such as Portsmouth, Southampton and London—we will put in an overseer who will control the way in which the towns develop, grow and resource themselves." That approach has failed miserably, and we must do something about it now, before it is too late.

I am glad to have had the opportunity to play a part in this debate, and I know that many of my colleagues would have liked to be present. I plead with the Minister

to respond to the issues that have arisen. If we do not do something now, we will run out of time; resources will go and will be lost for ever.

12.7 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on securing the debate and on his full exposition of the problems.

Annunciators throughout the Palace are displaying the debate title, "New Towns (South-East)", and it struck me that many visitors will think that Parliament is considering building more new towns in the south-east of England. A chill is probably going down many spines at the prospect of such an ill thought out policy.

I had intended to divide my contribution between the details that were discussed by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead and other hon. Members and more general issues about development in the south-east. In fact, many of the general points that I wanted to make arise in relation to the problems that the hon. Gentleman explained in introducing the debate.

I was interested to hear the hon. Gentleman say that, although he thinks that the new town concept was good and supports the ideas that lay behind it, current events represent an agenda for decline, and that even if we stick to the concept of what might be called oxymoronically the "old new towns"—or "middle-aged new towns", as they have been described—it is clear that something has gone wrong in the past 50 years.

When the Minister and her colleagues develop policy, on both existing new towns and wider planning issues, they must ask whether that agenda for decline has been a result of human error or whether there was always something systemic that would ensure that, over time, things would go wrong. One can draw conclusions about the undesirability of applying general principles too specifically across areas of the country in which local communities may have widely different needs. Those conclusions should enable the Minister to respond specifically to the points raised about new towns, and give her pause for thought when she considers the wider policies that the Government are proposing, not least in relation to the south-east of England.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead spoke of problems, which are now very apparent, based on the hubristic application of once-fashionable nostrums. He talked about asbestos, school buildings, and so on. I am sure that all hon. Members have arrived at a school in their constituency, taken one look at the roof—knowing within 10 or 15 years when the school was built—and realised that they were about be told that that school had to spend a lot of money on its roof, because of permanent problems with buckets in corridors. That should serve as a warning to Governments not to apply the fashion of the day wholesale, everywhere, especially if some local wisdom suggests that what may appear a good solution 50 miles up the road may not be the best solution there.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead made the point that one of the problems with the new towns, as they were set up, was that they were not planned for organic growth. It seems paradoxical to talk about planning for organic growth, but I think that the hon. Gentleman meant that not enough flexibility had been built into the system to enable different towns to grow in different ways, and to become different types of towns.

The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) made the point that Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead look as though they come from the same blueprint. They may now be very different communities with different needs, but it is obvious that someone put down a single blueprint and said, "That is what we are going to adopt." That, too, should warn Governments against hubris, because every age has its blueprints and its visionaries who say, "This is the way to develop our towns." Many of them are genuine visionaries who produce a quality of life that did not exist before. However, Governments should be more modest about applying those blueprints.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead made the point that resources are not only about money. He said that he was not just appealing for more money to be given to his area, although I note that, as one would expect, he went on to do so, and that other hon. Members joined in. He said that the assembly and provision of land—and I assume, by extension, the provision of other infrastructure that allows communities to grow successfully—are also vital to the planning process.

The lesson that the Minister and her colleagues could draw is that it is extremely short-sighted to plan for growth in communities simply by using housing numbers, without ensuring a supply of infrastructure before people arrive to live in those houses, and a future flow of the forms of infrastructure that make life tolerable in those communities. That mistake has clearly been made in the past, for which communities around the edge of London are now paying the price. Please, let us not repeat those mistakes. I am afraid that the Government seem determined to do so, judging by their current policies for the south-east.

The central question asked by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead was who are the villains of the piece? Why are things going wrong in the various new towns? He made a good point when he said that, in some ways, the problem lies with the Commission for the New Towns' original terms of reference and their somewhat mechanical application. One cannot blame the commission for that. One should not condemn public officials for fulfilling terms of reference laid down by Parliament: if the terms of reference are wrong, that is the fault of Parliament and the Government.

However, I accept that, if a blueprint is established on a national or regional basis, the communities that are subject to those terms of reference are likely to suffer. The hon. Member for Stevenage said that her constituency has tried to grab back some power, so that local people can take the decisions that they regard as appropriate to their own community. I support that idea entirely, and it is certainly the way ahead. In the past, we have centralised too much, and we should try to reverse that process.

Another lesson that I hope the Minister will learn concerns the role of the regional development agencies. It has been fascinating to listen to hon. Members—mainly Labour Members—complain that problems in their constituencies are the result of power being taken

[Mr. Damian Green]

away from, or not given to, councils, and given instead to relatively unaccountable and distant public bodies, whose agenda may differ from that of local people.

Mr. Rammell: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that those problems are long-standing, and that at least we now have a Government who are listening? I spent 12 years as a councillor in a new town authority, and during that time the then Government simply did not listen.

Mr. Green: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are listening, but my point is that, in the past two or three years, they have been in the throes of setting up RDAs, which will be remote from most communities. RDAs will have extensive powers; they are already able to take decisions that should properly be taken by local councils. Those wretched institutions will not survive beyond the next general election, but were they to do so, the hon. Gentleman's and my successors would ask why those institutions were given such powers. They would ask why decisions taken by distant, remote and relatively unaccountable bodies had led to money being taken away from their local communities, or to the imposition of the wrong type of development.

One need not look into a crystal ball. The same wave of goodwill and good intent that accompanied the setting up of the RDAs also accompanied the creation of the Commission for the New Towns. As the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, the commission seems to have introduced an agenda for decline. Moreover, its decisions—now under English Partnerships—are arbitrary and unfair.

As the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) pointed out, many who work for the commission display an intrinsic arrogance. They do not regard as legitimate the intervention of local representatives—be they hon. Members or councillors—in decisions that, in their view, properly belong to them. Were the RDAs to have a long-term existence, I am certain that that is how they would develop. Hon. Members and, above all, local authorities would discover that a bad decision had been taken in terms of planning, which should be responsive to local needs, and the preservation of proper local democracy and representation. I urge the Minister to take that lesson from our debate and the problems that it has revealed in new towns. Policies are being implemented that will replicate many of the problems that arose because of the way in which new towns were set up.

The thread that runs through our debate is the need for local sensitivity, and the Government would do well to take account of that. They should not continue in a direction that is fundamentally centralising but should devolve power to local authorities and communities.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on securing the debate. He and other hon. Members have raised many important points in excellent speeches. Notwithstanding the fact that the debate has raised serious issues, it has been good-humoured and illuminating. I pay tribute to the assiduous way in which my hon. Friend pursued the benefit for his town, as have other hon. Members. My hon. Friend is a veritable terrier; I hope that he will take that as the compliment that is intended.

My hon. Friend started by analysing the issues facing new towns, including the ageing population and infrastructure, and specific problems concerning school buildings. The hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) asked whether there are systemic problems peculiar to new towns or whether their problems are more general. He failed to see the obvious answer, which I shall give and to which my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) referred. Many of the problems facing new towns, although they had a specific genesis and period of development, undoubtedly stem from 20 years' neglect of infrastructure, development and opportunity, and local government's inability to have an impact on the issues. New towns share some of the problems faced by inner cities, market towns and coastal towns following a lack of investment, and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead acknowledged the extent to which that is starting to change under the present Government, with the additional resources that we are directing into a variety of places.

It is unfortunate that the hon. Member for Ashford tried to hijack this important debate for party political purposes when all other hon. Members in this Chamber were trying to speak with one voice across party boundaries about the issues facing their towns. It is a bit rich for him to criticise the Government for establishing regional development agencies when the establishment of the worst sort of quango, with no local government representation, was a hallmark of the previous Government's record.

My hon. Friends referred to some important matters and I shall try to do them justice. They referred to English Partnerships and the Commission for the New Towns, the changes to housing finance and the area cost adjustments.

I am aware of the frustration, which my hon. Friends graphically described and which was audible from the passion in their voices, arising from the legacy of the Commission for the New Towns. The description of the commission operating as a resource-abstraction mechanism since Domesday may be a triumph of passion over accuracy, but it shows the strong feelings that have been generated.

Since coming into government we have tried to bring together, under the umbrella of English Partnerships, the Urban Regeneration Agency and the Commission for the New Towns. That is never easy. We have not been able to find the legislative time to make them one entity legally, so financially they have to operate as two entities. However, by bringing them together we have tried to change the culture that has been operating. Many important historic issues are involved relating to how the land that the CNT controls was assembled and where the resources for it came from, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said.

Notwithstanding memorandum and legal requirements, much depends on the political context in which those bodies operate. I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead has acknowledged that he has seen a shift over the past couple of years under EP and because of a different political climate in—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I do not want to interrupt the hon. Lady, as time is short, but if she speaks toward the microphone the *Hansard* transcribers will be able to hear her.

Ms Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We have introduced new draft financial memorandums to deal with some of the issues that hon. Members have raised, especially those relating to less than best price and to openness, accountability and partnership with local authorities. Land has always had to be sold for the highest price, although under the previous Government there was an aggressive drive and requirement for the bodies involved to achieve that. We have tried to change that culture, and I am pleased that my hon. Friends recognise that that is starting to happen.

One initiative that will help is the English Partnerships initiative for town strategies, which I hope will deal with some of the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Harlow, for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) and for Hemel Hempstead. In that initiative, EP will reconsider how its remaining land assets can be used by forming strategies in partnership with local authorities, which relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). I am pleased that local authorities, including Dacorum, which recently met English Partnerships to start developing a town strategy, will be able to take that forward.

The process is beginning, and I hope that my hon. Friends will recognise that it involves a change of culture. We recognise that land assets need to be used for the benefit of the community and are trying to reinforce that politically. The new town strategy initiative is an important vehicle for doing so. For all sorts of historical and legal reasons, land cannot be transferred, but I accept the argument that such assets should be used in pursuit of benefits to the community.

Hon. Members also mentioned the major repairs allowance and negative subsidy, an issue on which two substantial debates have been held, in one of which I replied to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow. I know that my hon. Friends accept the basic starting point that it is wrong for council tenants to cross-subsidise general services and that subsidies for housing are a national resource that must be used to meet housing need nationally where need is greatest.

It is slightly unusual to feel that I am defending a policy that many people would consider good news. The extent of the major repairs allowance that councils will receive to offset the subsidy is significant for all the councils represented by hon. Members present.

I appreciate that the transitional measures are critical, and on behalf of hon. Members present I shall take back to my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning the view that has been expressed that special circumstances apply in the case of a few new towns. Decisions are about to be taken; they are not yet final.

The final point that was raised related to the area cost adjustment. Hon. Members are aware that the information resulting from the new earnings survey would, if applied straightforwardly, result in a major redistribution of resources across different sorts of authority. As such a redistribution would be significant, and as we have promised stability, we consulted local authorities. No decision on the matter has yet been finalised, and we are considering several options, including whether the data will be applied and how the distribution might be made less dramatically different. We shall announce a decision shortly, having had a lot of feedback from local authorities.

I remind hon. Members that no authority will face a cut in its revenue support grant for this year. The spending review 2000 gave a generous overall settlement of approximately 5 per cent. Hertfordshire and other authorities in areas represented in this Chamber will receive substantial budget increases. Given the experiences of those councils up to 1997 and the money that they have received in real terms during the first three years of the present Government, those increases demonstrate clearly our commitment to increasing the resources of local councils, to deal with the precise issue that they raise: improving services for local people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask hon. Members who do not wish to remain for the next debate to leave quickly and quietly.

Job Losses (Blyth Valley)

12.30 pm

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): It was interesting to hear the back end of the previous debate. If we had some work in the north-east, there would be no need to build towns in the south-east—an argument that has been advanced by some hon. Members who represent southern constituencies.

This has been a torrid month for job losses in Blyth Valley. During the past two months, we have lost more than 500 jobs—530, to be precise. Courtauld's Ladieswear closed a few weeks ago, with the loss of 300-odd jobs. The rapid employment force is trying to find jobs for those people, but I do not know how many have been fixed up. I hope that the number is big, but I am not sure whether it will be. Valeo Security, a car component firm that makes locks, has also closed. Both firms were lost to foreign competitors. The managing director of Courtauld's told us that the stuff that was made in Blyth Valley was 70 per cent. cheaper to make in Sri Lanka, so the company is off there to make its ladies garments. Valeo Security decided to go to Czechoslovakia. I understand that at least two of the workers who were recently made redundant by Valeo went to the new location to train the local workers on how to work the line, as the saying goes. It is ironic that the company is establishing a factory abroad but the workers have to be trained by our people after they have lost their jobs. Unfortunately, that is the way things are today. At the time of the relocation, I asked the managing director whether the decision related to the single currency or the pound, but he said that although the pound was a bit high, such matters were not the first priority. The argument of both companies was that they could do it cheaper abroad. Obviously, that was our problem: cheaper wages abroad.

On top of those losses, during the past two years we have lost Wilkinson Sword to Germany and Cramlington Textiles has gone into liquidation. Somebody wanted to buy the factory and machines and to employ at least 80 workers, although there had been 300. However, the liquidator sold the machines to someone who sold them abroad. Blyth power station, which lies in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy), closed completely in January. Half of our job losses occurred in the Port of Blyth, where several hundred workers have been paid off during the previous year.

In total, there have been 3,000 job losses in Blyth Valley and only 1,000 gains in two years. That is a significant loss, but until now we have not grumbled or complained. However, we have had a right rough couple of months in which 530 jobs have been lost and we have received no help at all. The employment force is trying to get these girls and boys fixed up with jobs, but I do not think that it is being very successful.

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck): I congratulate my hon. Friend on having secured this important debate. Does he agree that high unemployment over many years, which has led to severe economic problems, has meant that car ownership is among the lowest in the United Kingdom, and that public transport is therefore more important? Does he agree that the single biggest improvement to public transport within the constituencies of Wansbeck and Blyth Valley would be the reopening of passenger rail services of the Blyth and Tyne line? That would bring huge economic benefit to not only our two constituencies but, the whole of south-east Northumberland. Will he join me in pressing the Government to give a firm commitment, in principle, to agreeing the scheme before the next general election?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that interventions should not be mini speeches.

Mr. Campbell: I do not mind that, as my hon. Friend made the valid point that the rail link would also come through my constituency. I am all in favour of that. I do not know whether the money for the rail link will be forthcoming; we will have to wait and see. Perhaps the Minister could answer that question when he replies to the debate.

My hon. Friend has prompted me to talk about two areas in south-east Northumberland—Blyth Valley and Wansbeck, which have 12 wards. Eight of those wards are among the most deprived 10 per cent. in the country, and five of them are in Blyth Valley. Wansbeck is the 18th most deprived constituency in the country, and Blyth Valley is the 88th most deprived constituency in the country. My hon. Friend's constituency of Wansbeck has the benefit of £3 million from the neighbourhood fund, but I cannot understand why Blyth Valley did not get any money, as it has five wards among the worst 10 per cent. in the country. As the Government decided to make it a district in which there are two wealthy wards—in Cramlington, which is a new town—the poor ones in Blyth Valley town have to stay poor. I cannot understand how the Government can justify that. The Minister may be able to justify that, but he gets paid for it. I have to tell people in my constituency, which has five wards among the 10 per cent. most deprived in the country, that because of the good wards in Cramlington, they have to stay poor.

Last week, I went to a meeting about the Barnett formula. Lord Barnett said, "Don't even think about trying to apply the Barnett formula, as it is known in Scotland and Wales, in England." He believes that money should be used to tackle poverty and deprivation at source. If it exists in Blyth town, money should go there. Money has not come to Blyth town because the Government's calculations show that it has a rich part. Blyth Valley is split in two—the old town of Blyth, and the new town of Cramlington. As one is rich and one is poor, the poor part has to stay poor. That is not good enough. The Labour Government were not elected to leave areas poor. Lord Barnett was right—we should tackle the areas that are poor. Will the Minister reply to that? Will he do anything about it? If not, will our right hon. Friend the Member for Hull—the Minister knows who I mean—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): Our right hon. Friend the Member for Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) the Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Campbell: Well, whichever Hull it is, will he do something about it?

I want to return to the rapid response team, which is doing an excellent job. I do not have the figures for what it has done. I also want to return to the issue of job losses. A report in the local paper said that, in Stoke, Michelin was to close with the loss of 950 jobs. Local papers, television and "Newsnight" all talked about the terrible job losses in Stoke. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was under a lot of pressure, although we had not put any pressure on him. He launched a £110 million aid programme for Stoke, which suffered those job losses. The people of Stoke have my sympathy, but we have suffered 500 job losses and not had such a response. I hope that the Minister can tell me what is going on and why we have not received a similar response.

I remember the hullabaloo about the closure of Rover and all the money that would be invested to save jobs or retrain people. We lost 500 jobs a couple of months ago, but we have had nothing. What is going on? Why does the north-east not receive its fair share of money, as everyone else does? The Minister can tell us whether we are getting any money.

The Government must acknowledge that serious economic and social problems in the north-east need to be addressed, especially in Wansbeck and Blyth Valley. We have no status and do not benefit from urban development or city challenge money. Unlike Tyneside, Newcastle and south Tyneside, south-east Northumberland does not even have an enterprise zone. Blyth Valley and Wansbeck cannot even get a call centre, because the companies would not get free rent or any encouragement to go there; they all go to Newcastle and Tyneside, which have enterprise status. That status must be expanded to include south-east Northumberland, where we need help.

We cannot go on losing jobs and expect people to vote Labour at the next election when the Government totally ignore them. The Minister did not ignore Stoke—it got £110 million—but he is ignoring Blyth Valley and Wansbeck. He cannot ignore me, because I am telling him that he is totally out of order. We are not getting a fair crack of the whip.

Mr. Denis Murphy: My hon. Friend mentioned the economic problems of both our constituencies. Does he agree that, if our areas had been allowed to stand alone, we would have received objective 1 funding as a result of the poverty and deprivation?

Mr. Campbell: My hon. Friend is right. Devolution is at the hub of the argument. When devolution took place, the north-east lost out. People should make no mistake about that. When the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament were set up, money had to go to Wales and Scotland. Wales received objective 1 funding and millions of pounds were put into Wales, but we got objective 3 funding, which was very little in comparison. That is the problem.

The aim of the national neighbourhood strategy is to arrest deprivation. The situation in the present climate is desperate. Some neighbourhoods in the north-east, including your constituency Mr. Deputy Speaker, are deprived. That needs to be addressed. I believe that your area Mr. Deputy Speaker, received a few million pounds from the neighbourhood strategy. Wansbeck and Easington got some funds, but Blyth Valley did not. Unfortunately, we have a case to make. The town has one of the lowest numbers of start-up businesses per head in the country. People do not come to start businesses in south-east Northumberland because we are not in an enterprise zone. We do not have anything to offer. We have only a bit of land.

We need some incentive. People from my constituency are coming down to see the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 16 November. They are coming down full of hope, but I have a feeling that they will go back disappointed. I do not think that they will get anything at all. The trouble with this Government is that their views are set in stone and they do not see some of the problems. They do not listen to their Back-Bench Members. They have never listened to me. I have had a couple of debates about the north-south divide, although I promised not to mention that.

This is a problem that Ministers must address. It is no good the Secretary of State saying that there are enterprise zones all over the north-east, as there is not one in Blyth Valley or Wansbeck. There is not one in south-east Northumberland and we are demanding one. Of course we can demand, but we may not get one. That is the problem we face. Funding is urgently needed in these areas. The Government's regeneration initiative should apply to areas that are in need.

I do not knock the new deal for one minute. It has done a good job in getting young kids to work or involved in some sort of training. Not all of them have been good schemes and not all have resulted in jobs, but it is a good idea and I do not knock it. With all these kids getting on to these schemes, youth unemployment has gone down in my constituency, but adult unemployment has risen by about 10 per cent., according to the latest figures. We need action and we need some money. I only hope that the Minister will reply in the affirmative and give me and my constituents some encouragement and hope for the future.

12.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) on securing the debate, which is obviously of great importance to other hon. Friends in the area. That is underlined by the fact that my hon. Friends the Members for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy) and for Easington (Mr. Cummings) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) are present. I readily accept that my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for his area and his constituents. I hope that I can clear up some of the ambiguities in the short time available.

My hon. Friend referred in his final comments to an increase in adult unemployment. That is not borne out by the figures that I have. I should be interested to know how adult unemployment is defined because various measures are used. The figures I have show a 2.3 per cent. reduction in claimant unemployment in my hon. Friend's constituency since 1997. If long-term adult unemployment is defined as being unemployed for more than a year, the reduction has been something like 50 per cent. since the last general election. If it is defined as being unemployed for over two years, as we generally

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

think of it, it is down by two thirds. I should therefore be interested to clarify those figures, perhaps outside the debate.

My hon. Friend raises serious issues. We are unfortunately aware of the closures that have taken place in Blyth Valley over the past 12 to 24 months. I know that Blyth Valley council estimates that anything up to 3,000 jobs have been lost in that period. As my hon. Friend said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has agreed to meet councillor Dave Stephens, leader of Blyth Valley council, and council representatives to discuss employment opportunities in Blyth Valley. That meeting is scheduled for Thursday 16 November. Perhaps it can be a natural progression from our debate today.

I was extremely concerned to hear of the most recent closure announcements at Courtaulds Ladieswear and Valeo Security Systems. I appreciate that a combined loss of 500 jobs was a crippling blow to the area, but it is important to acknowledge the work that was done to try to prevent it. Officials from the Department of Trade and Industry were in contact with both companies, making offers of regional selective assistance to try to prevent the closures. It is unfortunate that they could not be prevented. The companies had made strategic decisions and the offers of regional selective assistance were not accepted. It is important to emphasise the fact that the offers were made.

Blyth Valley council has set up and led a rapid response team to deal with both closures and to help those losing their jobs. The former Courtaulds workers have benefited from that, and I understand that rapid response funding is available to help them gain new employment. The sums involved are exactly in line with the assistance offered in the examples mentioned, and the principle is the same. We might not be able to affect the decisions of the company, but we can make financial assistance available to help people deal with the consequences of closure. We did so in Blyth Valley in relation to the two most recent closures.

The initial figures from the Employment Service are encouraging. They show that 50 former Courtaulds employees have already found work, and it is estimated that another 30 will do so in the next few weeks. The vast majority of those ex-employees are being placed in similar occupations in the area.

Valeo Security Systems is undergoing a gradual rundown of staff, with most of the work force likely to have left by December, although the plant will remain open until the middle of next year. The Employment Service is providing an on-site job shop and aims to highlight the considerable transferable skills of the work force to employers in and outside the area, with special emphasis on north Tyneside, where several recent job announcements have been made.

The two closures are not the only recent ones in and near the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley. The closures of Wilkinson Sword and Cramlington Textiles were severe blows to the area. I share his frustration about Cramlington Textiles, which had a large order book shortly before the closure. In both those cases, many employees who wanted to stay in work have found employment elsewhere. That says much about the high quality of their transferable skills, and reflects the level of opportunities that our policies have helped to ensure exists.

The assistance that I mentioned relates to only the most recent closures. In the light of the comments made by my hon. Friend about the north-east, it is important to note that the area as a whole has benefited from substantial Government assistance. I want to highlight some of the help that has been given to Blyth. Before I do, I should mention the point made about the rail link made in an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck. The Minister responsible—it is a matter for the DETR—met a delegation from Northumberland, after which she was positive about re-opening the Blyth-Tyne rail line. She awaits the findings of a study that it was agreed would be set up. That is as much light as I can throw on the matter.

For industry, the area is covered by revised assisted areas maps, so it is eligible for regional selective assistance and enterprise grants. Since 1997, the Department of Trade and Industry has made 31 offers of regional selective assistance totalling £6,919,000, and relating to total project costs of £44,507,300. We estimate that those offers will lead to the safeguarding of 94 jobs and the creation of a further 1,345 jobs. I know that my hon. Friend and his colleagues in the north-east will do all they can to contact companies in their constituencies, which do not always understand the assistance available, and encourage them to pursue the funds via my officials in the Government office of the north-east. Perhaps that would be a useful part of the discussion that will take place with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State next week.

Blyth Valley's share of the region's European funding has been significant. In the period 1997-99, the district received £3,530,834 from the European regional development fund and £551,917 in European social funding. My hon. Friend appreciates only too well that the regional development agency, One NorthEast, along with its regional partners, is the lead body that is responsible for the economic development in the region. Its framework for doing so is based on its regional economic strategy. I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that, in July, the Chancellor announced a national £500 million increase to regional development agencies and One NorthEast will receive a portion of that.

One NorthEast has assisted with several funding requirements in my hon. Friend's constituency, such as for the Blyth Quayside infrastructure and environmental works, the Blyth community enterprise and resource centre, the Blyth Quayside offices and Richard Stannard house. Blyth has been in receipt of various single regeneration budget moneys. In SRB round 2, the Renaissance of Blyth received £3.9 million to fund its integrated five-year strategy and in SRB round 4, funding of £1.7 million was provided. In SRB rounds 5 and 6, Blyth was part of a joint bid for £30.6 million, which was submitted by the Northumberland Strategic Partnership. I did not go into so much detail to dilute the passion with which my hon. Friend spoke, but I need to put the record straight. Listening to him, one could have gained the impression that his constituency was being treated differently from others, so I have needed to draw attention to the amount of assistance that it has received so far.

I shall now refer more generally to the north east. Indeed, my hon. Friend has been a fiery advocate of a north-south divide debate on many occasions. While bad news stories tend to dominate the headlines, it is important to emphasise that the north-east has a vibrant economy. The area has a long history of industrial growth and change and, consequently, several jobs in traditional industries have been lost. However, manufacturing still accounts for 28 per cent. of gross domestic product and for about 20 per cent. of employment. Employment levels in the region are rising. Despite the job losses, some of which we have discussed today, 25,000 more people are in work than was the case one year ago.

I mentioned earlier the level of regional selective assistance offered to businesses in Blyth Valley. It is worth noting that, as a result of the 1999 revision of the assisted areas map, the north-east continues to have the most complete coverage of any part of the United Kingdom, with 97 per cent. of the population living in areas eligible for assistance. My hon. Friend pointed out the two wards that are unfortunately in the 3 per cent. bracket, but we are governed by the European Community and the area would not have met its guidelines if coverage had been extended to those wards.

Over the past four years, regional selective assistance offers in the north-east have assisted projects that will lead to the creation of 17,600 new jobs and safeguard a further 5,500. Since the introduction of enterprise grants in January this year, more than 80 small and medium-sized enterprises have been offered more than £2 million of assistance, creating 600 jobs and safeguarding a further 140.

We cannot be complacent. I am aware that business start-up rates in the north-east, while increasing, are still a long way short of the average for the rest of the United Kingdom. To improve that position, almost half of the resources available from the new objective 2 programme for European structural funds will be devoted to business support for small and medium-sized enterprises. The news across the country is good as is the news in the north-east. However, that is no help to the people who have lost their jobs in the two recent closures, but I must give the broad picture on the Government's behalf. Companies are continuing to invest and to create jobs. I pay tribute to the skills, resilience and determination of the work force. With Government policies and the passion of local representatives, I am sure that new employment opportunities will continue to arise in Blyth Valley and the north-east as a whole.

Primary Health Care Trusts (Eastleigh)

1 pm

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The Minister will be aware that Eastleigh is at the centre of various conflicting proposals for primary care trust configuration in south Hampshire. I have advised her office in advance of the main thrust of my concerns. I have also have provided to her details of a particular constituent's case that shows, among other things, the importance of getting primary care trust configuration right.

The local health authority recommendations on the preferred option for primary care trusts will reach the Minister later this month. I accept that she cannot prejudge the approval process, but I should like to draw her attention to some key factors that should be considered. They include the particular characteristics of my constituency in the context of health and social care, the primary care trust options on offer, the application of Government policy guidelines in judging the options—when they reach her—and the specific issues that Eastleigh primary care trusts must address. Additional factors relate to the provision of national health service dentistry and an appalling case of postcode prescription.

I shall deal first with the particular characteristics of Eastleigh in the context of social and health care. Eastleigh has a population of approximately 120,000, which is settled in the old railway town at the centre, in the suburban northern edge, which contains many London commuters, and in scattered villages to the south, such as Hedge End, Botley and West End. These villages also include Hamble, Bursledon and Netley, which are situated in a rather isolated position on the Hamble peninsula and have particular concerns about health care provision.

Eastleigh's character has changed dramatically over the years, through massive speculative development that resulted in the construction of more than 10,000 extra houses since the 1980s. We are now promised—perhaps I should say threatened with—another 5,000 houses in the next decade. In terms of health care provision, Eastleigh has the problem of lying across two health authority boundaries. Nearly half the population live in the southern parishes and are served by the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority. The rest live in the north and are served by the North and Mid Hampshire health authority. The 5,000 new houses that are to be developed over the next decade are likely to be sited on the boundary between the two health authority areas. It could be argued that that will make matters somewhat worse.

A comparison with other agency arrangements shows that there is an anomaly in our services. Hampshire county council social services division and the Hampshire constabulary division both embrace all of Eastleigh and Romsey. Eastleigh borough council embraces all of the parliamentary constituency up to the boundary of the Southampton city unitary authority. All the major agencies serving Eastleigh, including central and local government representation, are broadly coterminous, with the exception of health care. That is a key factor in determining primary care trust configuration.

[Mr. David Chidgey]

Within Eastleigh's present divided health care provision, there are significant pockets of health care deprivation in what is otherwise a relatively prosperous area. These include Bursledon, out on the Hamble peninsula, and the centre of the old town of Eastleigh. We need to bear in mind that inequality of health care when we consider the primary care trust configurations that are on offer. The Minister will know that the health authority has reduced the number of options to a shortlist of two. I should like to place those options on record. The first is to create four new primary care trusts: New Forest, with a population of 185,000; Southampton city, with a population of 231,000; Eastleigh and Romsey, with a population of 152,000; and mid-Hampshire, with a population 169,000. Option two would create three new primary care trusts: New Forest plus Romsey, with a population of 221,000; Southampton city plus Eastleigh, south, with a population of 277,000; and Eastleigh, north plus mid-Hampshire, with a population of 239,000.

One of the arguments advanced in support of option two, which involves only three trusts, is that it would reduce health care management costs, but, as the Minister knows, those costs are marginal in the overall sense, and in any event management costs do not come out of funds allocated for clinical services. Creating trusts with populations of 250,000 or more hardly squares with a policy of bringing health care decisions closer to the people. How will Government policy and the Department's guidelines be applied to the two options?

As I understand it, the three main functions of primary care trusts are to be: removing inequalities and improving the health of the local community; developing health services through investment to improve quality of care and the integration of services; and commissioning secondary services. A key aim is to reduce the variation in quality of primary care provision.

I want to consider how the primary care trust configuration would work in the context of the national health service plan. Page 1 of the NHS plan summary document clearly states:

> The purpose and vision of this NHS Plan is to give the people of Britain a health service fit for the 21st century: a health service designed around the patient.

Page 2 says that the NHS suffers from

> over-centralisation and disempowered patients...The NHS has to be redesigned around the needs of the patient.

The Department's circular HSC 1999/167 deals in particular with the criteria that should be used for the assessment of primary care trust proposals. Page 12 states clearly that one should ensure that the proposed organisation has

> robust arrangements in place to ensure it can deliver the 3 key functions of Primary Care Trusts.

The criteria will be established through the following questions:

> Does the proposed Primary Care Trust show evidence of knowledge and understanding of the health needs of local people, including the pattern of health inequalities, and of how to take effective action for change?...Has an effective relationship been developed with local authority organisations (as well as Social Services)...?

That is a key point in this particular analysis.

Having examined the Department's circulars and considered Government policy, one does not have to look too deeply to find that option one, which proposes a separate trust for Eastleigh-Romsey, would meet the criteria in full. That option builds on existing inter-agency relationships within coterminous boundaries and has the support of a wide range of agencies that are keen to work together to develop integrated health and social care provision for the area. Most importantly, it breaks down the boundary of two health authorities that run through the middle of Eastleigh and serve different parts of my constituency. It allows resources to be focused on removing inequalities in health care provision and targets the areas of health and social care deprivation.

I will compare option one with option two as guidance for the Minister, who may not be as familiar with the area as I am. Option two would put half of Eastleigh together with Southampton city; there is no doubt that a trust under that option would be based in Southampton city and would focus on the 250,000 Southampton residents. The 50,000 residents of Eastleigh's southern parishes would be out on a limb, tacked on to the coat tails of a big city. My constituents could be the losers in that relationship, as the priority would be to serve the mass of patients, or customers, that live in the city and are easily accessible for a city-based trust.

I will give an example to show that I am not talking about simple tribal warfare. Under our existing primary care group, in the south of my constituency, which serves south Eastleigh and east Southampton, we have made little progress in establishing a new local health centre in Bursledon to serve the villages. Local health centres for the Southampton city part of that group, however, are well advanced. Clearly, there is real reason for concern about configurations of that sort.

I draw the Minister's attention to a comparison of the unified funding allocations for 2000-01. She will be familiar with the concept of analysing distance from target of funding; I want to show the effect that that would have on the trust options. Under option one, the parishes in southern Eastleigh down towards the Hamble peninsula would level up under an Eastleigh-Romsey trust, but under option two, southern Eastleigh could level down to match Southampton city. That would not be good news for people in my southern parishes who are looking forward to a significant improvement in the level of available health care. As I said, I realise that the Minister cannot prejudge the situation but I hope that she will bear in mind my analysis, which is based on local knowledge, when considering the primary care trust configuration recommendations.

I turn to two specific issues that come within the framework of PCT options. The first is an appalling case of postcode prescription, about which I have already advised the Minister. It concerns a constituent whom I shall call Steven. I shall quote some letters from his GP that make it clear that we still have a big problem with postcode prescription. The GP said:

> I am writing to ask for your support in lodging an appeal with the Local Health Authority in Southampton against their decision not to pay for this patient's Clozaril. This is an extremely effective

drug for the management of severe Schizophrenia. Without this treatment Steven would, almost certainly, be a long term hospital inpatient.

Steven has multiple disabilities including Paraplegia, severe Schizophrenia, and has Insulin Dependent Diabetes. He is also an Amputee, having lost a leg in an accident... He is also an Epileptic...

I recently managed to obtain a written guarantee from the Southampton South West Hampshire Health Authority under the continuing and Care and Community programme that Steven was eligible as a resident of their Health Authority Area for all the Services that are available to any other citizen of this country under the NHS free of charge.

It seems to me to be grossly unfair that this most unfortunate individual should be victimised by the National Health Service in this way.

It means that his mother

—who manages his trust—

has to pay £4,500 every year for the Clozaril, in addition to paying for the team of nurses, for his 24 hour round the clock care at their home.

In a further letter, the doctor confirmed that

The decision to force Steven to pay for his medication was apparently made by...a Consultant Psychiatrist at the Royal South Hants Hospital in Southampton. The reason given for this decision was that Steven's psychiatric care is supervised...at the Milbury Unit at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital in Winchester. Steven lives in Hedge End

—in my constituency—

which is in the catchment area of the South Hants Hospital...

It is interesting that the Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority agree with my contention that Steven is being discriminated against because he has the wrong post code.

The Manager in Primary Care at the Health Authority has confirmed in writing that Steven is entitled to all the facilities, services and medication available under the National Health Service. Unfortunately, the Health Authority no longer has any power to intervene in decisions made by individual Trusts.

That is the important point to consider in deciding new boundaries and management processes for the provision of health care.

Finally, I turn to the problem with dentistry in connection with the primary health care trust. As the Minister will know, under the NHS plan, the Government have committed themselves to making high-quality NHS dentistry available to all who want it by September 2001. The plan appears to rely on health authorities as the main drivers of NHS dentists working as part of primary care multi-disciplinary teams, but not within the PCTs, which I find strange. In the context of the options available to Eastleigh, a proposal is being developed to provide an NHS dental access centre in Southampton to serve my constituents in Hedge End, West End and Botley. That surely prejudges the primary care configuration options, within the trust and elsewhere. It is also woefully inadequate as a response to the Government's aim of making access to NHS dentistry available to all who want it. I would like the Minister to look at that in the round when assessing primary care trust recommendations.

I have tried to set out my concerns about the primary care trust configuration as it affects my constituency and I have highlighted an appalling case of postcode prescription. I have also shown that the proposals for NHS dentistry are inadequate. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response; if there is enough time, I may intervene.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): It is a pleasure to be back in Westminster Hall after the summer recess; I had forgotten the joys of Adjournment debates. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) on raising the issue of primary health care trusts. Before I respond generally, I shall deal with two specific points that he raised.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me prior notice of the case involving his constituent, Steven. My information is that it is not a case of postcode prescribing, but rather that the patient was originally a private patient at the practice, and subsequently changed to the NHS. It was then a question of the health authority assessing his case. I am informed that, after consideration by the health authority two weeks ago, it was agreed that he would be prescribed the drugs on the NHS. Steven is currently in hospital and on the drug. When he is discharged, he will continue to be prescribed Clozaril by the NHS for as long as it is clinically appropriate. I hope that that is good news.

Mr. Chidgey: It is.

Ms Stuart: I am glad to have cleared that up.

It is important to put on record the fact that NHS dentistry will remain the responsibility of health authorities. It is no part of PCTs. We recognise—as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) when he was Secretary of State—that considerable improvements are necessary in this sector. On a national basis, we have funded several projects. One is an £18 million commitment scheme, which rewards dentists for their greater commitment to the NHS. From 2001-02, £35 million will be available to modernise NHS dental practices. Additionally, in the current year, £4 million will go to help dental practitioners give treatment to patients. So far, the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority has received £639,000 worth of investing-in-dentistry grants, which are intended to improve dental facilities. That has generated an extra 46,000 registrations.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be delighted that his area was chosen for one of the personal dental service pilot schemes, which bring together community and salaried dental services. By September 2001, we will ensure on a national basis that, wherever they live, people will be given information on obtaining NHS dentistry. There is still some way to go, but we have provided considerable investment.

The main subject of the debate is proposals on PCT configuration in the constituency of the hon. Member for Eastleigh and across Southampton and south-west Hampshire. I want to consider the proposals in the context of the Government's overall view of the role of primary care.

When we published the NHS plan last July, few of us had any doubt about what was at stake. Fifty years after the NHS was founded, it was under attack from many sides. Its delivery was under attack from patients—and from those within the NHS—who had seen the effects of years of under-investment, too few staff, outdated equipment and crumbling buildings.

[Ms Stuart]

Underfunding has hampered the NHS, but so has the way in which the NHS operates—the way it is organised to make people wait; the barriers that prevent efficient use of staff; and the chasm that opens up between NHS and social care. The NHS needed money, but it also needed change. That is what the NHS plan is all about—investment and reform, money and modernisation. The money came at a price—the need to change the way in which the NHS operates.

The result was a plan that set out how the NHS needed to change if it was to make the best use of the new investment. More convenient access to primary care was necessary with more consultations, more tests, more diagnosis and more treatment in primary care settings. Proper priority needed to be given to the major killer diseases like cancer and coronary heart disease. There was a need to end postcode rationing for drugs and to secure better access to hi-tech equipment—the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has played a significant role in that. However, that change can come about only with the full involvement of everyone in primary care.

We have already allocated £54.5 million to primary care groups and trusts this year, to kick-start the expansion of primary care services. Further investment will follow. It is important that those funds are used strategically to develop new services and improve access to primary care. However, although primary care will receive ear-marked funds, those are not the only funds that will affect how services are delivered. More than £20 billion has been devolved to primary care groups and trusts to commission services. That money must be used responsibly.

The creation of primary care groups was a vital step in the biggest devolution of power and decision making ever seen in the NHS. It brought together doctors, nurses, community nurses, health visitors and local people, and put them in the driving seat when deciding how local patients are looked after and treated. We have set up a central programme of support and development to help manage the transition because, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the cultures of corporation and of management that have developed over the past 50 years were variable.

For starters—it is close to my heart because I have some responsibility for the use of IT—we have provided £50 million to help PCGs improve their IT infrastructure and data management, so that all the partners in the system can communicate effectively. The national primary care development team was set up to ensure that all PCGs have access to expert advice and support; we did not expect each group to reinvent the wheel but to learn from good practice. We have issued guidance to ensure that all PCGs have organisational development plans in place that are relevant to their needs. That has already made a real difference to patients. I shall give some examples from the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Money allocated to the Eastleigh, North and the Southampton, East primary care trusts has gone towards training nurses and providing additional hours for triage services in GP practices; extending chiropody and podiatry services to reduce waiting times; and improving access to GPs and primary care professionals by ensuring that all practices are open 12 hours a day, because access is important. We have also developed a locality care centre to act as a one-stop centre for primary care services, a minor injuries unit and a patient information centre.

Those examples of good practice have been achieved by ensuring better working across boundaries and the development of robust links between primary and secondary care. That, and the more effective direction of resources, has meant improved services for patients, but we have taken it further.

The development of primary care groups into primary care trusts provides an unparalleled opportunity. It will allow local communities to determine the pace of change that is right for them. The system will allow local health professionals to control budgets, which will enable them to shape hospital and community services for patients in their area, and invest in improving the primary and community services provided by doctors, nurses and other local professionals. We must be careful not to talk only of doctors and nurses; we must not forget the important role of others in the chain of care. I am forcefully reminded that 60 per cent. of those working for the NHS are not doctors or nurses.

We want to develop more integrated services between general practice, community services and social services, and give patients better access to healthcare, by identifying which services most need developing. Again, the hon. Gentleman referred to historic inequalities, which must be identified; and some groups will need support to develop. Above all, decision-making must be placed closer to patients, and it must be shaped by the professionals who most often meet patients' needs.

Nationally, 40 PCTs are currently up and running and more than 130 PCGs have expressed an interest in becoming PCTs from 1 April 2001. That is a clear sign that primary care professionals recognise the benefits that becoming a PCT presents to them and to the development of the health economy. In reality, they realise that no other body has the same range of flexibility and opportunities to improve services, and we acknowledge the huge agenda they face.

Organisations such as the national patient access team and the national primary care development team have been set up to support them. They are working closely with PCGs and PCTs to encourage the appropriate management of demand and to enable primary care to play a full role in cutting waiting times. We have also developed a toolkit specifically designed for PCTs to ascertain how well they are doing with referrals, admission rates and lengths of stay and to determine whether that is good, bad or indifferent. Often, people in the health service had no means of comparing themselves with similar providers. Those tools will allow PCTs to measure their performance and compare it with that of others. The hidden message behind that is that, if they are not doing as well as others, they will be able to determine what they need to do to improve their standards.

With that level of support and the additional freedom and flexibility, PCTs will be the key vehicles to drive through our modernisation agenda. In general, PCTs of between 100,000 and 300,000 will be assumed to be of acceptable size. Those that are larger or smaller will

need closer scrutiny. However, I must stress that that scrutiny will apply equally to all PCTs, regardless of size.

All PCTs must meet the same four basic criteria. The first involves a vision. They must be able to demonstrate the need to be a PCT and what will be achieved as a result of that. The second relates to support. They must show that the application has broad local support from all the stakeholders. Thirdly, they will need to show competency in clinical leadership, management capacity, technical systems and skills to manage large budgets and provide community services. The fourth concerns the fact that they must ensure that there will be no detrimental impact on other services or service providers within that health system.

PCTs must be able to balance local knowledge against the capacity to manage the provision of services and the management of resources necessary for delivery. We believe that that will best be achieved by responsive PCTs working effectively together to ensure a cohesive approach to health care across a locality, sharing management resources and requiring co-operation from other local providers to obtain the services required. The starting point for determining a PCT boundary should be the need to ensure a coherent and cogent focus on meeting the needs of all the people living in that community.

We have made it clear that PCTs should seek the best possible coterminosity with other bodies. In fact, while coterminosity is not a requirement to attain PCT status, we continue to encourage the move towards coterminosity between local authorities and all other administrative boundaries. It will be imperative for a PCT to forge effective links with county, district and borough councils in order to perform its health improvement functions.

Coterminosity with social services authorities may also be helpful in enabling the pooling of budgets, which will bring service delivery benefits to all those in the group. Although coterminous boundaries will certainly assist PCTs that wish to enter into pooled budget, lead commissioner or integrated provider arrangements with local authorities, they are not the only determinant of effective partnership working and should not halt progress in this vital area.

That leads me to events in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. As he said, there is currently one PCT in the area of the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority—the Southampton, East PCT. It covers the east of the city of Southampton and the southern parishes of Eastleigh borough, which is within the area represented by the hon. Gentleman. It has been operational since April this year. That PCT and the Southampton, Central PCG have recently been the subject of a consultation on a proposal to come together to form a city-based PCT from April 2001.

The consultation exercise is a process designed to allow any interested individuals, groups or stakeholders to put forward their views on the proposals set out by local stakeholders. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has made some detailed proposals, which I read again this morning. The Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority will take into account the representations made and consider them carefully before making any decision. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have already taken the opportunity to take wider soundings. He made it clear in his letter that he was expressing not only his views, but those of a number of the stakeholders to whom he had spoken.

The proposals are now with the health authority and will be considered at its board meeting on Wednesday 15 November. At the meeting, the authority will also discuss wider plans for the development of PCTs in the remainder of the health authority area, including part of the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

The health authority's recommendations will then be received by the south east regional office of the NHS executive before being passed to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for a final decision. Until then, we must remain impartial and must not be seen to be influencing any decision. We must not, and will not, prejudge the outcome of any local consultation.

I am sure that we all share a common desire to ensure that the right services are available to all patients at the right time and in the right place.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

1.30 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I am delighted to have secured this debate on an issue that affects not only my constituents, but thousands of particularly vulnerable people throughout the country. I say "vulnerable" because in Swindon, for example, levels of homelessness, especially among the young, single and low-income groups, have placed great demand on the houses in the multiple occupation sector. Those people are often not in the strongest position to insist on decent standards of accommodation, which should be available to them.

All hon. Members will have witnessed the impact that poor quality housing can have on the everyday lives of our constituents. Inadequate housing is not only a misery in itself, but has an impact on people's physical and mental well-being and on children's education and ability to participate and thrive in society.

The Government rightly want to ensure that there is quality housing for everyone. Their social exclusion unit has pointed out that to achieve that, action must be taken to improve the poor standard of many houses in multiple occupation, which I shall call HMOs. Organisations such as Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the National Union of Students and the national HMO network have been doing important work. Those organisations, as well as my local borough council, have asked me to push for legislation.

I hope that I am pushing at an open door, because the housing Green Paper, "Quality and Choice: a decent home for all", states that the Government are committed to introducing a mandatory licensing scheme for HMOs as soon as parliamentary time allows. I asked for the debate to press for that legislation to be implemented as soon as possible—preferably, it should be included in the forthcoming Queen's Speech—because further delay means that my constituents are not receiving the protection that they should have.

The lack of better controls means that bad owners of homes are allowed to get away with bad practice, which does not support the good owners in our constituencies who are providing decent accommodation.

In Swindon, we have 550 known HMOs in the borough, many of which do not meet the basic minimum standards in terms of fire safety, overcrowding and provision of amenities. Many are poorly managed, which means that the council has to take regular action to try to maintain safe conditions for tenants. Nationally, the latest figures, from the 1996 English house conditions survey, show that 195,000 households live in HMOs. If we extend the traditional interpretation of bedsits to include shared houses, converted flats, households with lodgers and purpose-built HMOs, that figure leaps to 1.4 million households.

Swindon has only a small private rented sector, on which there is great demand. Because demand well exceeds supply, it is a seller's market. Unfortunately, there is therefore little incentive for poor owners to manage their property to reasonable standards. Tenants are prepared to rent small, overcrowded and often unsafe property because it is all that they can afford. Consequently, many are unwilling to complain about the sub-standard conditions of their property, which often means that nothing is done to improve the situation.

Shockingly, Swindon has less of a problem than do many other towns and cities with even greater sections of the population in sub-standard HMOs. That emphasises the great need for nationwide action.

Any civilised society wants decent housing standards. All accommodation that is let, or is available for letting, should be free from unacceptable hazards, in a reasonable state of repair, and in an overall condition that will not adversely affect the health and safety of residents, visitors, neighbours or passers-by. A poor HMO does not affect only its residents.

At a surgery, a constituent told me of her fears of losing her property because the neighbouring property was an HMO that was not up to fire standards. She saw it as a fire risk. She was also concerned to discover that the rubbish was not being dealt with properly, which might pose a health risk to her. Therefore, taking action on HMOs also serves the wider community.

I do not want to give the impression that all HMOs are bad. The HMO sector contains some good examples of well designed, well equipped and well managed housing. There are some excellent owners and they are to be commended, but this debate focuses on problems such as overcrowding, inadequate fire precautions, inadequate shared facilities, poor maintenance, bad management and harassment.

As recently as last Friday, I visited an HMO in my constituency and I am disappointed to say that the standards of disrepair that I have described were in evidence. The house had six tenants but was suitable for fewer. The stair carpet—shreds of a carpet would be a better description—was dangerously ripped, and there was no stair lighting. The house had an illegal loft conversion, and two internal doors had broken panes of glass with jagged edges, on which people could injure themselves. The owner must be getting almost £300 a week from the property, but it had only one smoke alarm—even that had no battery—and there was no fire blanket in the kitchen. The house was a disgrace, and an unpleasant reminder of the need for legislation to deal with this problem. The council is aware of the property, and has served legal notices on the owner to take corrective action, but that was two months ago. Each day that passes is another day on which the tenants face unnecessary risks.

Sometimes the tenants themselves are at least partially responsible for such problems, but that is no excuse for the owner's failure to take corrective action. Ultimately, if a tenant is making a property hazardous, he or she must be evicted, so that the lives and health of other tenants are not put at risk. In Swindon as well as nationally, bad owners of HMOs are generally unwilling to improve properties on their own initiative or at the suggestion of tenants. Therefore, the first step to improving such properties is their identification by councils. Helpful suggestions from councils achieve results on only a few occasions. Councils use existing statutory powers to compel bad owners to improve standards but, as the example that I mentioned has shown, that does not produce a quick response.

Cases where financial assistance is offered in the form of a grant provide the only exceptions to the standard response from many bad owners. However, it is very unusual for a landlord to approach a council for advice on standards. The most unscrupulous owners prefer to remain anonymous, in the hope that their properties will remain undiscovered. Under current legislation, owners are not required to seek prior approval. They know that, if they are discovered, the worst that can happen is to be asked to carry out improvements. Ultimately, that breeds a culture of secrecy among many owners, and creates a barrier to their necessary education and involvement in improving the HMO sector.

In addition to the many HMOs that remain undetected, there is the huge problem of poor management and maintenance in properties that have previously been inspected and approved. According to Swindon borough council, once such premises are rendered acceptable, many owners lose interest and do not feel obliged to maintain standards. When subsequent inspections are made, it is therefore common to find defective fire safety equipment, amenities in disrepair, and other unsatisfactory conditions resulting from lack of maintenance by the owner. More often than not, a council's staff resources do not allow a proactive re-inspection programme.

Councils can establish registration schemes, and I have urged Swindon borough council to consider doing so. It is looking into the matter but, given the current regulations, such a scheme would not be as straightforward or simple to operate as a streamlined national system. Existing planning controls are weak, particularly in relation to small HMOs with fewer than six occupants. Such HMOs, which do not require planning consent, proliferate in Swindon.

Swindon borough council has considerable experience in tackling poor housing conditions, but it finds the current controls cumbersome and often ineffective in achieving the lasting improvements to HMOs that we want. A national system would allow a list to be drawn up of people who were judged to be unsuitable to own HMOs.

The early introduction of a mandatory licensing system would impose an absolute and unambiguous duty on all owners to declare the HMOs under their control. The message would be clear—that failure to do so would leave them liable to prosecution. Furthermore, owners would be aware that HMOs would not be licensed until they met minimum standards based on clear Government guidelines, and that licences could be withdrawn if the standard requirements were not maintained. Perhaps most important, tenants' awareness of the standards to be expected would be raised and they would have greater confidence to come forward and complain if standards were not maintained.

On the detail of the legislation, the same concerns and arguments arise time and again. I emphasise that I am not pressing for massive new regulation; I want better and simpler regulation. For example, a facility to specify the maximum number of occupants on a licence for any particular property would greatly simplify the current statutory powers. A comprehensive licensing scheme would make the controls in the Housing Act 1996 redundant, so the Government could repeal all those regulations. Swindon borough council would welcome that.

Safety is of first importance, and most owners recognise their responsibility and the regulatory role of Government and councils. Fire safety is the key. The Labour Government treats fire safety very seriously and the social exclusion unit has done excellent work as part of its neighbourhood renewal strategy. The risk of death from fire in HMOs varies considerably, as do standards of repair. However, research has shown that in several types of HMOs, the risk is considerably higher than in comparable single-occupancy dwellings. Occupants of houses comprising bedsits are about six times more likely to die as a result of fire than are adults in an ordinary house.

I spoke yesterday to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), who told me that one of her constituents had died in a fire in an HMO because there was no adequate escape route from the fire. A window was jammed and there was no extinguisher, so the house was obviously unsafe. The owner was taken to court and fined at a level that did not reflect the consequences of the action. That decision did not send a strong signal to other HMO owners that it is unacceptable to place people's lives at risk in that way, and it shows again how important it is that further action is taken. The owner of that HMO owned properties throughout the country, which emphasises the need for a national scheme, including a list of owners who are unsuitable to run HMOs.

Better practice, particularly in fire safety, is important. I am a keen advocate of sprinklers in domestic properties. A demonstration house at West Swindon fire station shows very effectively how sprinklers can save lives and minimise the risk to property. I invite the Minister to come and see that for himself. Sprinklers in HMOs could make a big impact on fire safety, and the National Fire Sprinkler Network has examined that. It has called for sprinkler systems to be included in the guidelines of any future legislation. In new build homes, the cost of installing sprinklers is minimal and it is even becoming more economical to install sprinklers in existing properties. With sensible insurance policies, they could provide a quick payback to owners, particularly owners of HMOs. Immediate installation of sprinklers in all HMOs is not practical, but I hope that owners will be encouraged to install them because of our experience of fires in HMOs.

The organisations with an interest in this area have widely welcomed the Government's proposals in the Green Paper. We need action now. Legislation must include a broad definition of HMOs to encompass not only larger HMOs in Swindon, but smaller HMOs, which often place people most at risk.

I do not want a new scheme to lead irresponsible owners to seek to convert their property to one of the exempt categories, thus creating a two-tier sector of licensed and unlicensed properties, the latter being the death traps that we want to see the back of. Wholesale reform is needed, with existing controls repealed and a new, simplified scheme in their place. That would be better than modifying current legislation. We want a simple scheme that helps owners and councils to protect the thousands of people who currently live in squalid

[Ms Julia Drown]

and dangerous conditions in HMOs. When do we want it? We want it now. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) raised an important matter and made her case clearly and powerfully. I share her concern about the poor standards of physical condition and management that can be found in houses in multiple occupation. As she said, other areas of the country, including Sunderland, which I represent, have the same problems as Swindon, but on a greater scale. I am very much alive to the difficulties. Whole areas of Sunderland have been dragged down because of the grip of absentee landlords on a street. My hon. Friend is pushing at an open door.

The Government remain committed to introducing a licensing system for houses in multiple occupation—and now I must use a phrase that my hon. Friend will have heard before—as soon as parliamentary time allows. She will appreciate that my Department must bid for parliamentary time against the Government's other priorities. Therefore, it will be necessary to wait for the Queen's Speech. If my hon. Friend is disappointed, there are things that can be done in the interim, as she acknowledged. Swindon does not yet have a registration scheme, and while such a scheme would not solve all the problems that she outlined, it would make a difference. She is right to encourage taking that route as an interim measure.

Few people, I think, would disagree that current provisions for houses in multiple occupation, which have been amended piecemeal over five decades, are unsatisfactory and not always easy to understand. Court judgments have also cast doubt over which properties fall under the current definition of houses in multiple occupation. Understandably, that uncertainty has led to some local housing authorities expressing reluctance to use their existing powers. That is why we are determined to replace existing powers in relation to houses in multiple occupation with a regime that is simpler to implement and which provides a much more effective and accessible framework for intervention. That will provide protection where it is most needed and benefit tenants and responsible landlords alike.

I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that a number of specific management problems are associated with houses in multiple occupation, which, combined with the higher risks to tenants' health and safety, have made the use of existing powers difficult. Those include a lack of clear management responsibility, evasive or absentee landlords, a lack of funds, irresponsible as well as vulnerable tenants and problems caused by poor management for immediate neighbours. My hon. Friend referred to all those issues.

Where houses in multiple occupation are subject to licensing, a single individual, resident in the United Kingdom, will be nominated as a fully responsible representative or duty-holder for each property. That will enable local authorities to identify who is responsible for meeting the requirements and conditions imposed under licensing. The licensing regime will also address the need for tenants to co-operate with landlords by respecting fire safety measures and allowing access for inspections. That approach will aid local housing authorities in identifying who is responsible for the health and safety of tenants, but will also encourage and support well-intentioned landlords in meeting their obligations and duties. We are determined to improve management practice in the sector of houses in multiple occupation. There is scope to strengthen the existing management regulations and we intend to do that without waiting for primary legislation.

Hon. Members will know that it had been our intention to consult separately on physical standards for houses in multiple occupation. It is very helpful in this respect that, in parallel with the reforms, we have been reviewing the housing fitness standard for all dwellings. The key to those changes is the recent development of a new housing health and safety rating system, which allows a wide variety of hazards to occupants' health and safety to be identified and quantified.

The rating system will, in time, replace the existing relatively narrow pass or fail standard and will apply to any unit of residential accommodation and to all landlords. It will reflect more accurately tenants' perceptions of the condition of their accommodation and the problems that threaten their health and safety. It will also permit a more proportionate enforcement response, which will enable responsible landlords to raise their game on the foundation of good regulation.

The rating system is no less relevant to houses in multiple occupation than it is to single-occupancy housing. As a result, it will form an integral part of our licensing system as the principal tool in assessing the physical condition of houses. All assessment and enforcement of physical standards in houses in multiple occupation will eventually be done using the housing health and safety rating system, with further risk-based guidance on fire, overcrowding and amenity standards.

Fire safety is a particular area of concern, and risk of death is significantly higher in HMOs than in single occupancy dwellings. Current legislation and guidance includes substantial guidance on fire safety measures for HMOs. In addition, the Housing (Fire Safety in Houses in Multiple Occupation) Order 1997 has widened local authority powers in respect of higher risk HMOs. Under this order, local authorities have a statutory duty, in consultation with the local fire authority, to ensure that fire safety measures are adequate in all HMOs of three storeys or above. The order has been phased in over the past three years and came into effect fully on 29 February this year.

For new or converted HMOs, building regulations have clear requirements regarding fire safety. Furthermore the Housing (Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Regulations 1990, impose a duty on the manager of an HMO to maintain all equipment provided by way of fire precautions. My colleagues in the Home Office are also proposing to update fire safety legislation. One of the proposals under consideration is to develop a general duty of fire safety care, which would apply to all multi-occupied dwellings.

I am aware of the growing body of support for the provision of residential sprinklers in houses in multiple occupation. My hon. Friend mentioned the experiment in Swindon. Version one of the rating system guidance includes sprinklers as an option for multi-occupancy buildings. That does not mean that they would be mandatory for HMOs, but it does mean that where the risk is justified and where occupants are particularly vulnerable, sprinklers may well be appropriate. In view of the substantial cost and the need to protect the supply of cheap HMO accommodation, the case for sprinkler installation must be based on a proper risk assessment.

The development of the rating system means that we will be able greatly to simplify enforcement procedures by abolishing the current, separate standards of fitness for HMOs and provide housing authorities with a single set of powers and duties in respect of house condition. That will benefit tenants, local authorities and responsible landlords by promoting greater consistency. We think that there is much merit in legislating for the rating system at the same time as licensing. In practical terms, this will avoid two changes in quick succession.

Under our licensing proposals, local authorities will have a duty to licence higher-risk HMO premises such as bed-sits, hostels and larger shared houses. We also envisage a discretionary power for local authorities to extend licensing to smaller shared houses where that is justified by local circumstances, such as high concentrations of student lettings found in certain neighbourhoods in university towns. Land-use planning issues will continue to be treated separately from licensing, although before issuing a licence, authorities should consider, on a case-by-case basis, whether planning consent is also required for a change of use. At present local authorities are not required to reduce or cap existing concentrations of a particular form of tenure, whether owner-occupation or social or private renting. Planning legislation does not define 'multiple occupation' or HMO as such, but does rely on both the concept of a 'single household' and 'family' in making distinctions for land-use purposes. We are not proposing to amend planning legislation.

We also propose to introduce a broader definition of HMO based on the relationship of those living together rather than their mode of living. That will make the issue of whether a property is an HMO less critical and, in any case, the rating system will be relevant whether or not the property falls within the new definition.

We are determined to make bad landlords improve their performance or get out of the sector. The health and safety of tenants is paramount. However, we must ensure that the impact of regulation and legislation does not impose unreasonable burdens on responsible landlords, or we risk adversely affecting the supply of this valuable source of accommodation.

While I recognise the concern for speedy legislation, I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that we must do all we can to modernise and rationalise the confusing mass of controls, and ensure that future legislation is an improvement on existing statutes. I hope that hon. Members appreciate that the framework I have outlined today will strengthen local authorities' powers and duties to intervene when the quality of HMO accommodation or management causes anxiety. As I said earlier, in the interim there is nothing to stop local authorities setting up their own licensing system; indeed, we encourage it. That will leave them in a much better position to take up future powers in respect of HMOs. Hon. Members may be assured that HMO licensing remains a priority, whether or not time is found for it in the Queen's Speech.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 November 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Electronic Conveyancing

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): I welcome everyone to the debate this afternoon on electronic conveyancing. Conveyancing is not usually a word to set the pulses racing, but a conveyancing system is an important part of the fabric of modern life. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a free, modern society without a secure and trusted conveyancing system. We have only to consider two facts to realise how large a proportion of the population use a conveyancing system. First, almost 70 per cent. of the population of England and Wales live in owner-occupied accommodation and, secondly, more than 1 million residential sales are registered at Her Majesty's Land Registry each year.

From that perspective, the possibility of a quantum leap in the ability of the conveyancing system to deliver a quicker, simpler and more cost-effective service is an exciting prospect. New electronic conveyancing services could directly affect millions of people and businesses each year and, for that reason, I am pleased to announce that I have decided to create an interdepartmental steering group of senior officials to oversee and co-ordinate the development of the electronic conveyancing programme. The steering group will draw in representatives from several Departments with direct interest in the conveyancing system, including the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Inland Revenue, the National Assembly for Wales and the Law Commission. It will ensure that the best use is made of the opportunities offered by the introduction of electronic conveyancing.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I appreciate that the Minister is unlikely to give me an instant answer to my question, but would it not be wise to consider expanding the interdepartmental group to include representatives of the Institute of Legal Executives and those who specialise in conveyancing within the Law Society—bodies that are at the sharp end of such a process? In addition, it may be useful for the group to include someone from the Consumers Association or the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Mr. Lock: E-conveyancing is all about giving instant answers to questions. Therefore, in the same spirit, I can give the hon. Gentleman an instant answer to his question. The next sentence that I was about to read from my brief says that the group will also provide a ready-made forum for consultation with outside stakeholders.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Those outside stakeholders should include estate agents. It could benefit both the consumer and estate agents if a common system were adopted that could create a common platform of information technology.

Mr. Lock: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend's observations. On Tuesday, I had the pleasure of speaking at a seminar on the subject in Birmingham, hosted by Wragge and Company. Among the audience was a large number of property agents, and their interest in e-conveyancing was made plain both by their attendance and by the fact that once the subject had been explained, they came up with many interesting, practical and relevant points that will have to be made to work if it is to operate in practice.

What then is electronic conveyancing? My working definition is that it is the result of crossing electronic commerce with conveyancing. There are therefore two elements to the definition. E-commerce needs little introduction and is in any case only the means to the desired end. Conveyancing may require a little more explanation. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives two meanings of the word. The first is "a deceitful contrivance", which might have made an interesting subject and secured a slightly better attendance for our debate, but I am pleased to say that that is not the meaning that I have in mind.

Mr. Hawkins: That is the meaning of the next Labour manifesto.

Mr. Lock: Unlike the hon. Gentleman's observation, the second meaning, which goes back to 1714, is more to the point. According to that, conveyancing is

> the drawing of deeds and other instruments for the transference of property from one person to another; the branch of law which deals with titles and their transference.

Putting aside the Dickensian shades of Tulkinghorn, Heep, Marley and Scrooge—a fine name for a firm of solicitors if ever there was one—suggested by the words "drawing deeds" and "transference of property", that definition conveys the essence of conveyancing. In plain English, conveyancing would be defined as something along the lines of "the process of buying and selling land".

What happens in a typical conveyancing transaction? The property in question might be a house or flat but could equally be a factory, a shop, a shopping centre or a farm. There are usually at least three sides to any such transaction—buyer, seller and lender. For simplicity and brevity, I will explain matters from the viewpoint of a buyer's conveyancer. Typically, the conveyancer will be a solicitor or licensed conveyancer, but may be a buyer in person. There are four stages to the process—investigation and report, exchange of contracts, completion and registration.

The first stage, investigation and report, is the "subject to contract" phase. That means that, although heads of agreement have been set, each party remains legally free to withdraw. The buyer's conveyancer considers the information supplied by the seller's conveyancer and carries out searches with various bodies to obtain information on the property. The number of searches will vary depending on the nature of the property and its location. For example, if the property is in an active or former coalfield, a mining

[Mr. Lock]

search is usual. In the Cheshire plain, a brine search may be wise. In my constituency of the Wyre Forest, which has the River Severn running through it, information on whether the property is on the flood plain might be sought. A commons registration search, which I am pleased to say has nothing to do with declarations of interest, would be wise if there were a hint of common land or a village green. A comprehensive list of all the possible searches would fill a small book—and indeed, to the relief of many legal practitioners, has done so.

Typically, the principal documents for consideration by a buyer's conveyancer at that stage will be a draft contract identifying the buyer, seller and the property to be sold. It will also include details of any obligations that the seller is to impose on the buyer—and, in the fullness of time, vice versa—and replies to the inquiries about the property from the buyer's conveyancer. The answers will give information about disputes, third-party rights, fixtures and fittings, damp and timber guarantees and a host of other matters. The local authority search gives information, among other things, about highways, drainage and sewerage, planning and building regulation matters. A copy of the title register and filed plan of the property issued by the Land Registry sets out the name of the owner, a description of the property and the rights to which it is subject, and may refer to other documents that may also have to be inspected.

The object of that stage of the exercise is to enable the conveyancer to find out who owns the property, what people have rights over it, what rights it has over other property, what it may be used for or not used for, and so on, giving the conveyancer full knowledge of the nature of the property that the buyer is to buy.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): When the Minister's Department considers the important matter of e-conveyancing, will it consider contractual provisions that vendors' solicitors often impose in order to extricate their clients from any liability in matters of title and of easements to property? In other words, in such matters it should be the duty of vendors to make full disclosure and not contract out.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. E-conveyancing is essentially about turning the existing conveyancing process into one which can be done much more efficiently in a world of electronic communications. It is a different policy issue to try to shift the balance in a conveyancing transaction between caveat emptor, disclosure and easements. The policy ramifications of shifting that balance are profound. Although a debate on that would be legitimate, it is not the same debate as the one that we are having today on the electronic transference of the existing process.

Mr. Burnett: I fully agree with the thrust of the Parliamentary Secretary's comments. I do not want to interfere with people's opportunities and abilities to make their own contracts. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the process might be rather swifter if there was some sort of convention, perhaps of the Law Society, of full disclosure of title, easement and covenant matters?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion, the germ of which contains part of the answer. The matter should not necessarily be pursued through legislation, but might be pursued through a Law Society code of practice. Having spent several years dealing with property litigation, I am conscious that disputes often arise over rights over property that the property owner either did not know that he had, or was not aware that he was subject to. Therefore a duty to provide disclosure of easements over a property of which the seller is unaware would have to be treated with some caution.

Mr. Miller: My hon. Friend refers to turning the existing process into an electronic one. I hope that by that he does not mean simply replicating an existing process electronically. It would be a shame if that were so. The steering group should investigate much more widely how greater efficiencies might be gained from the opportunities created by its deliberations.

Mr. Lock: If my hon. Friend will allow me to make some progress, most of his anxieties will be dealt with later in my speech.

Gathering the information from its disparate sources takes time. Inevitably, the buyer will have to wait while the information is collected, interpreted and reported. A good deal of time can therefore be taken up waiting for someone else to do something, and the process can resemble a slow courtly dance. The length of the "subject to contract" period was identified as the source of most of the main problems in residential conveyancing in the extensive research carried out for the Government in 1998.

The second phase is exchange of contracts. Exchange is the moment when a legally binding contract to buy and sell land is created. Usually, a deposit is paid and a completion date fixed. Except in certain circumstances, such as a public auction, the contract must be in writing and signed by the parties involved. In arranging an exchange, co-ordination is the name of the game, especially in residential conveyancing, where chains of several dependent sales and purchases mean that no one can exchange until everyone is ready to do so. In those cases, the process is more akin to a courtly ball than a mere dance.

Conveyancers will want to be sure that all the financial arrangements for completion are in place. If there are transactions with or without mortgages, one can readily see the scale of the logistics. Again, the issues for the buyer and the seller are time and certainty. The buyers will want to be sure that the completion date proposed is practicable and suitable, and so on. The sellers will want to be sure that they have money available to meet their obligations on completion.

The third stage is less worrying. Everyone works to an agreed timetable. The problem, which is ironic considering what has gone before, is often that everyone is suddenly working to tight deadlines. Final searches are carried out, most importantly at the Land Registry, money is moved into place and documentation is prepared.

The fourth and final stage of this strange, eventful history is completion. Traditionally, the legal ceremony was done in person. The lawyers would gather and money would be swapped for the title documents. Once the ceremony was complete, the buyer would be informed and take the keys to the mansion of their dreams, or flat 37 Roehampton court, as the case may be, and take possession.

Taking possession used to be a ceremony in itself. A symbolic clod of earth might be handed over, or an actual entry onto the land might be staged. I am even told that, in some parts of the United States, a horseshoe would be thrown into the land accompanied by a loud yee-ha. However quaint, the object was to announce the new owner of the land to the world.

Nowadays, I am afraid, the romance has gone and there is very little ceremony. Completion is effected by electronic transfer of money, telephone and the posting of the title deeds from the seller's conveyancer to the buyer's conveyancer. They include a deed executed by the seller—executed in this case meaning signed in the presence of a witness and delivered as a deed. That is probably not a helpful definition, but it illustrates the fact that conveyancing has its own language.

Completion is usually the end of the process from the buyer's point of view, but the conveyancer is still not home and dry. Full ownership will pass to the buyer only on registration of the buyer at the Land Registry. The conveyancer must ensure that the application for registration is received at the proper district land registry before the expiry date of the pre-completion Land Registry search. As the application for registration can be made only when the buyer has received the transfer from the seller, the application is almost bound to be made at least a couple of days after completion. It then has to be checked and processed by the Land Registry. Only when the Land Registry is satisfied will the register be changed and, as I am sure hon. Members appreciate, the legal title vested in the buyer as from the date of receipt of the application. The gap between completion and receipt of the application at the proper office is the so-called registration gap, of which I shall speak more later.

Electronic conveyancing will not necessarily change those four stages, but it could revolutionise the internal workings of each. I shall start with the most generic change, which is the use of e-communications. Already, e-mail is a usual means of business communication. It speeds up communication. Think of the amount of correspondence that is carried about the country at any moment between the several players in a conveyancing transaction. Even the simplest transaction will probably involve buyer and seller supported by their respective lawyers or conveyancers; there could also be surveyors, estate agents, mortgagees and insurers and their respective brokers. Electronic communication enables them to keep in touch more easily. It will allow the progress of a transaction and any related transactions to be managed more effectively, not least because it will be possible to provide a single point of information for all concerned.

Electronic conveyancing, however, is about much more than substituting e-mail for the typed page, and the digital signature for the flourish of a fountain pen. Searches are about assembling information that, by definition, already exists. They are concerned with the collation of information, not primary research. Imagine a world in which all searches could be carried out online, extracting information directly from databases that already hold the data and can communicate with the conveyancer directly. One might receive answers in minutes rather than weeks, perhaps with the option of an automatic electronic updating service. One can imagine a world where contracts, deeds and other key documents could be kept in secure permanent electronic form.

Mr. Hawkins: The Parliamentary Secretary will, no doubt, go beyond his imaginings of the world of the future and give some more precise detail. However, before he leaves the subject, will he tell us whether the inefficiencies of searches in local authorities, especially in the inner cities, will be addressed by the new technology in the near future? Is he aware that a local search from a Labour-controlled London local authority can take as long as 10 weeks, even for the simplest piece of conveyancing, in which there are no chains on either side? No great brave new world will result from the changes that he mentions, because local searches are too inefficient.

Mr. Lock: One day, in that brand new world, the hon. Gentleman will make a speech that does not have a party political sting in its tail. Clearly, there are efficient and inefficient authorities of all political persuasions. The Audit Commission would not agree with his equation of efficiency with one side of the political fence and inefficiency with the other. To answer his question without taking his pejorative tone, I can tell him that some significant steps are being made. If he gives me time to develop the subject, I will explain precisely what has happened, what can happen and what is happening.

One can imagine a world where completion of a purchase and an application for registration of the buyer and the mortgagee could be completed almost simultaneously—a world without a registration gap. A fully developed system of electronic conveyancing would have many advantages. The changes that we are discussing would put the conveyancing system at the service of the people who use and depend upon it. I shall briefly highlight how e-conveyancing will help to make easier the four stages of the typical conveyancing transaction that I described.

First, electronic databases and search facilities offer obvious advantages of speed and accuracy for investigation and report. Those advantages apply whether the information is available on a public register or in a private electronic data bank, as parts of the searches go to public authorities and parts to private companies, such as the water utilities.

Another area in which efficiency will be improved is that of exchange. The ability to find out where all the connected transactions are at the click of a mouse will prevent anxiety and decrease the need to chase people over the telephone. Making a contract need no longer depend upon the safe arrival of an exchanged document in the post.

Completion will also become easier and quicker for all concerned. No bulky packets of deeds will need to be shipped around the country and stored safely for ever after. If the registration stage could merge with the

[Mr. Lock]

completion stage, a simpler system would be created. However, even if registration remains a separate stage, electronic communication will prevent many errors that, at present, are corrected only after completion by the Land Registry. Electronic conveyancing can provide intelligent quality assurance.

A system offering all those advantages will not appear overnight. Electronic conveyancing is not a short-term project. The Land Registry, for example, is planning for a decade or so of progressive change. Advances will be made incrementally as experience is gained and methods tested. We must not prejudice the security and integrity of the land register, or any other public register, through undue haste. A big-bang approach would be a long time coming, out of date before it was launched and impossible to manage.

In case that gives the impression that electronic conveyancing is no more than a gleam in the eye, I shall explain what has happened so far, as well as what is planned for the future. There are four main strands of electronic conveyancing activity within Government at the moment. The first is the development of the National Land Information Service and the National Land and Property Gazetteer. The second is the introduction and continuing development of electronic services at the Land Registry. The third is the preparation of a draft order under section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 by the Law Commission, the Land Registry and my Department, with the prospect of further orders to follow. The fourth is the drafting of a new land registration Bill by the joint working group on land registration of the Law Commission and the Land Registry. I shall describe each in a little more detail and relate them to the four stages of the typical transaction that I have described.

Before I do so, it would be helpful to consider the private sector. There, complementing Government activities and, to some extent, making them worth while, electronic business techniques are being adopted by legal services providers and others connected with the property market. Already, property owners and their advisers are creating electronic data banks of documents for property management and disposal purposes. Firms offer secure virtual dealing rooms for transactions. Those practices may not yet have reached the mass market, but I expect that rising consumer expectations generally will find their way into the world of conveyancing. When they do, the competitive edge will lie with those who can offer the services that the public and business want.

In the Government context, the NLIS computer system will provide access to information from the Land Registry, local authorities, statutory undertakers, the Coal Authority, the British Geological Survey, the Ordnance Survey and others. NLIS will be underpinned by the NLPG, which will, in effect, be a definitive digital index of land and property. It will provide a unique digital identifier for each property to be searched. That will enhance the accuracy and speed of the searching process by giving the computers a geographical address and description for the property, be it a field, a factory or a flat.

NLIS is a joint initiative of central and local government. It was the first channel implementation project to be announced in the "Modernising Government" White Paper, and it was successfully piloted in Bristol in 1997. The success of the pilot was recognised by a major British Computer Society award and led not only to the pilot's continuation—it continues to this day—but to the injection of funds from the invest to save budget, which enabled the Land Registry and the improvement and development agency to carry forward the project at speed. A contract for the provision of the hub of the service was placed with MacDonald Dettwiler and Associates in July. Contracts are now being negotiated with service providers and it is planned that the service will go live in April next year, with a fully electronic service operating from July 2001.

Of course, bringing all the information held by all the different authorities and other bodies across England and Wales on to electronic databases is a long-term aspiration. It will be achieved piecemeal in the coming years. In the meantime, NLIS will provide an online search submission and handling service, obtaining information from data providers by the quickest means possible. Even that mix and match of new and old will provide a significant improvement on the present cumbersome and time-consuming system of preparing and submitting separate searches to every relevant authority or body.

NLIS has been proved in Bristol. I am sure that the ability to conduct all property searches at the speed of the click of a computer's mouse will be a great boon to everyone involved in the conveyancing process. It will change the face of the investigatory stage of conveyancing. It will also have benefits far beyond conveyancing by providing access to so much reliable information about property. Indeed, the system has been described as an online Domesday book. However, there are two key differences: first, NLIS information will be continually updated, and, secondly, unlike the Conqueror's inspectors, NLIS will not describe everything north of the Humber as waste.

Mr. Burnett: The Parliamentary Secretary has a good point and is not shying away from the fact that the task is huge. Has he dealt with the significant difficulties associated with keeping this register—or Domesday book—up to date, particularly given the plethora of different agencies that will have to contribute to it continually in respect of properties?

Mr. Lock: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but we are dealing with information that, by definition, already exists, whether it is held by the Environment Agency, Severn Trent Water or a local authority. We are talking about providing access to existing information and tying it into the relevant property.

Mr. Burnett *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I call Mr. Burnett.

Mr. Burnett: I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I realise that this matter is at a rather inchoate stage, but is it envisaged that it will be the duty of the planning authority or the utility—or whichever body is responsible—to feed up-to-date information into this central computer network?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Lock.

Mr. Lock: I, too, welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this exciting and interesting debate on electronic conveyancing, which you have, no doubt, looked forward to all week.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Immensely—for more than a week.

Mr. Lock: The question is an important one. Bodies that hold information that is required before a conveyancing transaction can take place are already obliged to store it in a way that allows a search. We are concerned with an obligation not to hold the data, but to provide access to data in an electronic form so that it can be searched. Changing to an electronic form offers considerable advantages for local authorities and private companies such as utilities. Apart from anything else, they will save considerable staff time, inquiries could be answered in a non-labour-intensive way, and they will be paid for providing that information. There are sound business and organisational reasons, therefore, why the existing duty to hold and make available such information should be translated into a duty to provide it in electronic form.

Mr. Burnett: I point out to the Parliamentary Secretary's Department and the interdepartmental group to which he referred that it would help to speed up such transactions if one body—probably the borough or district council to which the search is made—held all the information on a particular property. Those bodies already have most of the information, but it would help if they had it all and collated it. Purchasers or their representatives could thereby access it through one route rather than from a multiplicity of sources.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful for that suggestion, but it seems that I am not making myself clear. The purpose of NLIS is to be one hub. Data requests will come into that hub from those who seek the data. The hub will, in turn, have connections to local authorities, the Land Registry, Severn Trent and a variety of bodies such as the Environment Agency, which hold the necessary data. Once the returns are made by those bodies—either manually, to themselves, before being fed back into the system, or by electronically interrogating an existing database—the information is fed back to the hub, then from the hub back to the person who raised the original inquiry.

The information is, by definition, held by a wide variety of bodies, which update it from their own information sources. The purpose of NLIS is to provide an electronic communication system—a hub—to enable electronic interrogation to take place from one place, the hub, to the variety of bodies holding data relevant to a particular property.

Mr. Miller: Has not the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) a point, in that there must be an appropriate duty of care on the data holder to act in the public interest? For example, I might wish to buy an acre of glorious Cheshire. Indeed, you or I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, might well choose to do that. Let us say that there were 1.1 acres of land. The small matter of a decimal point might be missed out. Therefore, a clear duty of care would have to be established with the data holder to provide the correct information.

Mr. Lock: I appreciate what my hon. Friend is saying. Yes, those who provide information are under a legal duty to provide it accurately and in a timely fashion. We are concerned here with the more efficient discharge of existing duties by electronic means, not with a change in the nature of the duties. The existence of the hub would, I hope, enable the Environment Agency to update its computers with information on floods and developments, and on its own view as to what is on a flood plain. It would have its own computers interrogated through NLIS, when necessary, rather than have to collate that information itself and pass it to a third party, which would then provide it to others.

Mr. Burnett: The interdepartmental group will, no doubt, discuss this matter. Purchasers will have to have confidence in the hub—NLIS—which will have to be liable for any errors that it makes in giving property details to purchasers. The hub will also wish to recover any damages for negligence or omissions by statutory authorities, planning authorities or other bodies, which are—or should be—duty bound to provide such information to it.

Mr. Lock: The duties of care on information providers are a whole new subject. The providers are under obligations at present and the proposals for the electronic conveyancing system being developed through NLIS will provide a better way for them to discharge their existing obligations.

Any proposals for a series of new obligations relating to accuracy and timely provision would have to be considered extremely carefully, both from the perspective of framing those obligations to ensure that the maximum information was given in as timely a way as possible, and to ensure that the right division of risk and the right amount of exposure to that risk was managed. I am sure that the Local Government Association would have a considerable amount to say before any change in the law, because its member authorities are the holders of the majority of the information that is sought.

Hon. Members may be interested to know that of the many millions of transactions that take place each year, more than 80 per cent. occur in just 50 local authorities. It is quite a concentrated series of transactions. Most local authorities provide searches within two weeks. For searches to take as long as 10 weeks would be unusual and extreme.

The second aspect of electronic conveyancing activity to which I referred is the development of services by the Land Registry, which I have already mentioned numerous times. That is hardly surprising, because the future of electronic conveyancing and the future of the Land Registry are closely related.

The purpose of the Land Registry is summed up by its three principal aims, which are: to maintain and develop a stable and effective land registration system

[Mr. Lock]

throughout England and Wales as the cornerstone for the creation and free movement of interests in land; to guarantee, on behalf of the Crown, title to registered estates and interests in land for the whole of England and Wales; and, to provide ready access to up-to-date and guaranteed land information, enabling confident dealings in property and security of title. The registry was established in 1862. Since then, it has been quietly and effectively getting on with its business of registering title to freeholds and long leaseholds. It is a success story. There are now 17 million registered titles, of which more than 95 per cent. are computerised and available for online viewing.

For comparative purposes, I should add that there are thought to be around 4 million titles that are not registered. Perhaps the benefits of electronic conveyancing will encourage the owners of some of those unregistered titles to come forward for registration. However, even if they do not, England and Wales now comprise an entire area of compulsory first registration, so any sale of such property must be registered. The days of unregistered land may not yet be numbered, but the future is in registered property. We can look forward with optimism to the creation of a complete, or very nearly complete, register.

In parallel with the process of computerising the title registers, the Land Registry is computerising the title plans and the 6 million or so deeds and documents that are referred to in those registers. That process is well advanced and will, when complete, provide a fully integrated online register. The next stage of the computerisation project will be the computerisation of the general index map, which, as its name suggests, is a map that shows all the land in England and Wales, whether or not it is registered. Conveyancers use the map to find out whether land is, or is about to be, registered.

This computerisation is, of course, only a means to an end. The Land Registry is at the forefront of the Government's drive to electronic service delivery. In July this year, the registry launched a new internet browser-style version of its successful direct-access service. DAS was established in 1995 for telephone and fax access to services. The new service, Land Registry Direct, enables customers who are account holders to view the computerised register and the filed plan. It is already proving highly successful and it generated more than £450,000 of fee income in October alone. Land Registry Direct, which is directed at account holders, is complemented by Land Registry Online, which is targeted at the casual user. Payment is made by credit card.

The provision of information at the touch of a button is an important improvement in the conveyancing process. The creation of an integrated computerised register and the new access services will speed up the flow of information and the crucial pre-completion searches of the register. The Land Registry's information will form a key element of NLIS.

Mr. Burnett: The Parliamentary Secretary referred to pre-completion searches. I should declare an interest because some of the property that I own is unregistered and is likely to remain so, because I hope that it will pass to my children on my death. However, I hope that the computerisation process will take account of the land charges register.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Mr. Lock, potential fee payer.

Mr. Lock: Is it not wonderful to be able to say, "some of the property that I own"? As I am not in that advantageous position, perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me a little time before I reply to his interesting question.

These services cover the provision of information. Electronic conveyancing implies electronic dealings and moving from the inactive provision of static information to the active creation of transactions by electronic means. The first step in that direction was the piloting by the Land Registry of the electronic notification of discharge system; hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that that is abbreviated to ENDS. This project concerns the deletion of the entry of a mortgage from the register when it is paid off. It was piloted successfully in 1998 and it is expected that electronic notification will soon become the norm. Work is also progressing towards the introduction of real-time priority for substantive applications for registration. I have already referred to the need to get the application for registration to the proper district land registry before the time for the search expires to ensure that a transaction—for example, a first mortgage—is not overtaken by a later transaction, such as what should have been a second mortgage. In technical terms, the search enables the first mortgage to preserve its priority over the second. Without that facility, every completion would have to take place at the Land Registry.

At present, all applications for registration that arrive at a district land registry after 9.30 am are deemed to have arrived at 9.30 am on the next working day. This is clearly incompatible with and would, at the very least, make nonsense of an electronic system. The introduction of real-time priority, which we anticipate will be in 2001, is a vital building block for electronic conveyancing. Electronic conveyancing is, inch by inch, being introduced. NLIS and Her Majesty's Land Registry clearly show that we are on the road to a better system. However, there is still a lot to do and the Land Registry is working to identify how it can develop its services further.

Despite that progress, some limitations can be overcome only with legislation. I have mentioned that contracts for the creation or disposal of an interest in land must, in most cases, be in writing. That is a requirement of section 2 of the snappily named Law of Property (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1989, but the basic policy can be traced to the Statute of Frauds, which was made in the reign of Charles II in 1677. Conveyances, mortgages, transfers and leases for terms of more than three years must be made by deed; the relevant legal requirements are found in the Law of Property Act 1925, although, again, the policy of the law is much older.

Deeds must be executed properly. For individuals, that includes signature in front of a witness who also signs the document. For companies, the company seal may be affixed and witnessed, or the document may be

signed by authorised signatories. I shall not go into details, because all that matters for present purposes is that there cannot currently be an electronic deed.

The Government are committed to removing those legislative obstacles to electronic communication and electronic data storage. We took powers to do so under section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 and we propose to use those powers to make orders to create a legal framework for electronic contracts for the sale and creation of interests in land and for electronic deeds. Work is already under way on drafting the first of the orders. When complete, the order will be issued for public consultation. We must also ensure that stamp duty on these virtual documents can be collected. I am pleased to say that, yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget statement that the enabling legislation will be included in next year's Finance Bill. We intend our proposals to be rigorously tested before they take effect. The order will be made subject to affirmative resolution procedure to ensure full parliamentary scrutiny. It is important that we get the product right and that nothing is permitted that might undermine the security of the land register or the confidence of the property market.

The section 8 order, which will amend primary legislation, will have to be supported by other legislation such as new land registry rules. We acknowledge that it will be vital to allow sufficient time for practitioners to come to grips with the new rules before they are introduced. The new framework under section 8 will co-exist with the traditional framework.

The fourth area of Government activity that I mentioned was a draft land registration Bill, which is being prepared by the Law Commission and the Land Registry. I hope that they will publish it jointly next year. It would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail on the contents of the Bill until the Law Commission and the Land Registry have completed their work. I can say with confidence, however, that the Bill and the accompanying report are eagerly awaited.

The Bill will build upon the successful consultation document, "Land Registration for the Twenty-First Century", issued in September 1998 by the Land Registry and the Law Commission, which propose that the Bill should completely replace the Land Registration Act 1925. For those outside the property world, the year 1925 has little significance. However, for people who work with property day in, day out, 1925 is the defining year. The 1925 Act has been described as the poor relation to the giants of the great 1925 property legislation, which include the Settled Land Act 1925 and the Law of Property Act 1925. It was seen in some quarters as a bureaucratic variant of proper conveyancing. The new Bill will put matters to rights. It will be built upon sound land registration principles and will recognise that a registered title is not the same as an unregistered title with a registration number.

The Land Registry's 1998-99 annual report suggests that a central plank of the reforms will be that transfers of land and the creation of many rights and interests in or over land will be dealt with electronically. That proposal will fundamentally change the legal basis of much of the conveyancing system. As I heard it rather neatly described at Tuesday's seminar in Birmingham, we would move from a system of registration of title to a system of title by registration. That would open the way to the fullest possible exploitation of the benefits of electronic conveyancing.

Whether the Government accept the recommendations of the Law Commission and the Land Registry and whether Parliament will enact the Bill, with or without amendment, remains in the future. I cannot prejudge matters. I should like, however, to pay tribute to the people who have carried this project so far in such a short time. In particular, I express my thanks to Charles Harpum, the property and trust law commissioner at the Law Commission, and to Chris West, who, although a barrister, is the solicitor to the Land Registry. They have led the work done since the establishment of the joint working group in 1996. They already have the Land Registration Act 1997 to their credit. Speaking personally, I hope that they will also chalk up the much greater prize of replacing the 1925 Act with land registration law fit for the 21st century.

A new Act would be supplemented by new land registration rules, which is where the detail of the new system for electronic conveyancing will be found. Placing the technical details in secondary legislation is necessary to ensure that we can keep pace with technological change and the needs of the development programme for e-conveyancing. To allay any fears that hon. Members may have, I must mention that there will be consultation before any new standards or procedures are created.

I have spoken so far about the electronic conveyancing process and the machinery to support it. I shall now refer briefly to some of the more generic issues applicable to acceptance by the public and business of e-commerce in our environment. Such issues are inevitably relevant to e-conveyancing. The essential ingredient to ensure the success of a new service is confidence: if users have confidence to take up the service and it is successful, others will be tempted to follow suit.

Confidence will be built on good interoperable technical IT systems, on user-friendly systems, and on the use of electronic—or more accurately, digital—signatures. We must bear in mind in conveyancing and e-commerce that people need to have confidence that they really are dealing with the people with whom they think they are. People need to know that the message they send is the electronic message that will arrive, they need to know that the message will not be corrupted at some date in the future, and they must be confident that private information will be treated confidentially.

The Government and industry are working together to deal with authentication, integrity, trust and security. Our approach is one of co-regulation with providers and users. In support of that aim, the law already provides that electronic signatures are admissible as evidence in legal proceedings. The probative value of the signature will be tested by evidence in the usual forensic way. It seems likely, however, that the electronic system will offer far stronger proof of authentication than exists with handwritten signatures.

We are working with the Alliance for Electronic Business to develop a co-regulatory certification system for digital signatures—the so-called t-scheme, "t" meaning trust. Should the t-scheme fail, the

[Mr. Lock]

Government have taken powers under part I of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 to set up a statutory scheme. The basic concept of a registration and certification system is, of course, tried and tested. Electronic systems already operate in many parts of the world. In the e-conveyancing context, it is likely that high levels of authentication and security will be required for electronic contracts and deeds.

Concepts such as algorithms, encryption and hashing, which underpin the creation of digital signatures, are a wonder of mathematical science. The people who devised them are very clever. For our purposes, the important thing is that they work. The technology required to deliver secure communication already exists. The task is to apply it in the best possible way. If we succeed in that, trust and confidence will follow.

In summary, electronic conveyancing is important and it is already here, in part. The Government are determined to use it to improve the conveyancing system. The electronic system will make great speed and accuracy possible, not a matter of Herculean effort, as is the case now. It will put people in charge of the process, not the other way round. All that will involve considerable change to the law and to conveyancing practice and business, and that will be all to the good.

3.28 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I am glad to tell the few hon. Members who are present this afternoon that I shall be brief. The Minister spoke for only a fraction less than one hour, but he explained to us that he felt that it was incumbent on him to set out the picture in full. I can certainly say that he has sought to do that. In thanking him for setting out the Government's thinking on this important matter, I must say that, for people who wish to move house, any improvement in the conveyancing system is bound to be welcome. I raised earlier a particular concern that had been expressed to me by legal experts. Some of the things that the Minister set out in what he called his "brave new world" may not work out as he and his officials expect.

I was glad that the Minister responded to my intervention about his interdepartmental working group. I was reminded of some of the more arcane problems exposed to the public gaze by "Yes, Minister". Everyone knows that those programmes were based on the scriptwriters' civil service experience under a previous Labour Government. Those problems were exposed also in the Crossman diaries. I am greatly sceptical of interdepartmental working groups.

The Government have engaged in a great deal of rhetoric about joined-up government, but, in practice, it is not joined up; instead Ministers, their civil servants, political advisers and spin doctors are always fighting turf wars. I hope that this might prove to be the exception, but that will be only because those at the sharp end are involved. The Minister was kind enough to confirm that the professional bodies will be involved, including the Law Society and the Institute of Legal Executives. I hope that consumers, the people who suffer the endless delays of the current system, will also be represented.

Mr. Burnett: I feel sure that the hon. Gentleman did not mean to omit it but, for completeness, I am certain that he will agree that the Council of Licensed Conveyancers should also be drawn into the regime.

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me of it. A welcome development under the provisions introduced by the previous Government was the great expansion in the numbers of licensed conveyancers. The fact remains, however, that the vast majority of people have their conveyancing done by solicitors or legal executives working for firms of solicitors.

As I said to the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), there is a certain irony in the fact that none of the three Front-Bench spokesmen participating in today's debate has done any conveyancing. At least the hon. Gentleman is on the right side of the profession, but I know from the valuable contributions that he regularly makes that he is a specialist on other matters, such as taxation. He might have done some conveyancing and he has certainly passed examinations on it, but the Minister and I, being on the other side of the profession, have not done any. However, the Minister may have had the same experience that I had in my time at the Bar. When a solicitor was accused of professional negligence in conveyancing, the matter was dealt with by members of the Bar. Unfortunately, members of the Bar sometimes found it difficult to judge whether there had been professional negligence, because they had not passed exams in conveyancing.

I may have one small advantage over the Minister in that, for the three years before being elected to the House in 1992, I ceased going into court from chambers every day and became a corporate barrister, acting as the group legal adviser for a public limited company, one of whose subsidiaries was a national chain of estate agents. In that position, I was instrumental in creating the legal framework for the first ombudsman scheme for corporate estate agents. I know that Governments of both parties welcomed the creation of the estate agency ombudsman scheme, because things sometimes go wrong, perhaps through negligence or the inadvertence of lawyers, because of mistakes at the Land Registry or—I hope rarely—because of fraud by estates agents.

The ombudsman scheme was an extremely welcome development, and I was pleased that my former colleague Mr. Peter Constable, who created the ombudsman scheme for corporate estate agents, was able to see it successfully brought into existence while he was still the most distinguished chief executive of the Black Horse estate agency. He had to retire shortly afterwards because of ill health, and it is only proper to pay tribute to his work and to say how much the estate agency profession, both corporate and independent, regretted his retirement. I also pay tribute to the work of the National Association of Estate Agents in raising standards in the profession of estate agency. We all welcome improved standards in that area of the law, because, as has been said many times, the vast majority of members of the public deal with lawyers, perhaps luckily for them, only when they move house.

As the Parliamentary Secretary said, 70 per cent. of housing in this country is owner-occupied. He might have paid tribute to the distinguished former Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven, for achieving a huge increase in the number of owner-occupied properties by introducing the sale of council houses, which was bitterly opposed by Labour in opposition, but subsequently adopted by them in a manner that would lead one to think that they had invented it. Nevertheless, I recognise that the fact that a large proportion of property in this country is owner-occupied inevitably means that the vast majority of people become involved in conveyancing at some time. Anything that speeds up that process is bound to be welcome.

My consultation with those who are at the sharp end of conveyancing has alerted me to some points that should be raised, although I do not ask the Minister to give a detailed reply this afternoon. With so few hon. Members present, it would not be appropriate to prolong the debate unduly, but I should explain what has been said to me by those experienced legal executives who are at the sharp end. I hope that the Minister and his officials, or both, will write to me and other hon. Members present this afternoon.

It has been suggested to me by those who carry out conveyancing regularly that the main problem is the slowness of local searches. When I raised that point, the Minister thought that it was politically partisan, but it is a real issue. The Minister recognised that the register of land is a vital part of what I am concerned about. My consultations suggest that what is most needed to speed up conveyancing is not only greater use of information technology, but a system in which there would be a logbook, rather like the registration document for a motor vehicle, for each parcel of property. If every change—every extension to a house, or sale of part of a parcel of land, for example—was entered in the logbook, which could be done electronically with IT, the process would be much quicker.

The other matter that has been pointed out to me is that the vast majority of properties in this country are subject to some sort of mortgage or legal charge. Not only does a chain of purchases frequently cause delay—for example, because it is not possible to ask one's solicitor, legal executive or licensed conveyancer to proceed to the next stage in the process until one's purchaser has received a mortgage offer—but the status inquiries of building societies or other mortgagees can take a long time. For example, it can take some time to obtain medical or other information from the employer of someone in the chain who has applied for a mortgage. Some large companies have efficient personnel or human resources departments that respond quickly, but other, small companies cannot treat those status inquiries with such urgency. Improving IT in the conveyancing system is not all that is needed; other problems jam the works. At a time when many people are moving house, there are inevitable problems such as chains and gazumping.

I had discussions with the Law Society about what it considers important. The Minister referred at length to developments at NLIS. A joint bid was made by the Law Society and MacDonald Dettwiler and Associates, with Hays plc, Laser-Scan and the Halifax. That group won the right to operate the United Kingdom's first online conveyancing service for the next 10 years. The then vice-president of the Law Society, Mr. David McIntosh, was enthusiastic, saying that:

> Homebuyers and solicitors will benefit from this innovative online conveyancing system and the Law Society is delighted to be part of this exciting project.

When I asked people at the Law Society whether any firms were extensively using that facility, I was given the name of a go-ahead, information technology-oriented firm called Sykes Anderson. That firm was mentioned as a good example of one that has proceeded with the use of new technology. Clearly, it is welcome news that any firm—small, medium or large—is taking full advantage of that facility.

The Law Society has been at the forefront of encouraging the Government to use information technology to the full. The Minister and his colleagues will be aware that several Members are involved in the all-party group on information technology—PITCOM. That group is unusual because industry experts in IT have as firm a membership of it as parliamentarians. It is one of the strongest groups in the House and all of its members, including the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), who has been involved in it for as long as I have, know what valuable work it does. We all want there to be greater use of IT, not merely in the legal, but in every field, for the benefit of the public.

The Law Society referred me to the work of Ken Byass, a member of the council of the Law Society. His name is spelt with a y, so it has no hint of a double meaning. His article on electronic conveyancing begins with the words:

> In spite of anything you may have been told, e-conveyancing is not possible today.

He goes on to set out, as the Minister has, some of the legislative obstacles there have been in the past, and to welcome the changes that are being made.

I hope that at least some of those changes to which the Minister has referred will come to pass. I do not want to be a prophet of doom and gloom, because I welcome the use of IT in conveyancing as long as the public is properly safeguarded. However, those at the sharp end, not merely civil servants on an interdepartmental working party, should be involved. I join the Minister in his tribute to Mr. Charles Harpum; it is a pleasure to be able to pay tribute to that law commissioner twice in successive days, as we both referred to him in our remarks during the debate on the Trustee Bill.

It is a matter of some regret, although it is perhaps not surprising on a Thursday afternoon, that so few hon. Members are present. I totted up the number and I believe that 25 hon. Members are solicitors but, of the six of us present today, only the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon belongs to that profession. The issue is important, and I wish that it were being debated on the Floor of the House. I have expressed my reservations about Westminster Hall to the Leader of the House, because debates here are not usually well attended. Debates such as this, which should have a wider attendance, should take place on the Floor of the House.

3.44 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I do not know whether I am becoming a masochist, but I have found this debate interesting. I should declare the fact that, although I am a solicitor, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said, I do not practice and I am not especially conversant with conveyancing. Although I did a bit of it in the past, I was, as has been mentioned, mainly a specialist in taxation. I declare also that I am not as computer literate as I should be.

I, too, pay tribute to Mr. Charles Harpum, as I did during the Committee stage of the passage of the Trustee Bill. Unfortunately, I was unable to participate on Report and Third Reading yesterday as I had to be present in my constituency. You will be delighted to hear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I opened a new primary school at Holsworthy.

I believe that electronic conveyancing will expedite the conveyancing process, although I understand that that is a huge task. Before I speak on it in more detail, however, I remind hon. Members that, as the Minister pointed out, some property information should be private to the property owner and/or the buyer.

For one reason or another, there is a lot of dissatisfaction with the conveyancing process. It has arisen largely because of delays. It has always been my view that, if the vendor has no contingent purchase or the purchaser has no contingent sale, conveyancing should be pretty swift, especially if the property is registered. Problems and delays sometimes arise because of tight financing, but purchasers should have sorted that out before they made offers for property. Delays invariably arise either because the purchaser has a property to sell, or the vendor has a property to buy, or both. Delays can also arise in relation to local authority searches. It is important to ensure that most people manage to synchronise property purchases and sales. Most of them are selling their only dwelling and rightly want to complete and move into their new dwelling on the day when they complete and move out of their existing property.

We should not be concentrating today on delays caused by chains of transaction, but on the speed of the conveyancing process and how it can be assisted by electronic conveyancing. I should like to refer to some of the problems that arise in the first stage of the transaction, which precedes exchange of contracts—investigation and report, as the Minister called it. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath referred to the delays that can occur with local authority searches. Even the most efficient local authorities—I count both Torridge district council and West Devon borough council in that category—will take about five working days to conduct a search, which is swift. Of course, local authorities have to collate a huge amount of information. It can relate to strategic plans—one hopes that under a new electronic regime, information about emerging local plans will be given to purchasers—and to land charges, planning agreement, enforcement notices, tree preservation orders and countless other matters.

It is costing a fortune for local authorities to collate those records and pay for the computer equipment, software and expertise necessary to do the work. I understand that information is brought together, collated and included in maps. Individual properties are identified and the information is collated. As the Minister said, a gazetteer of all properties is being created. It is of great assistance to a buyer, as I said in an intervention, to get all the information from one source, which we called the hub and the Minister says is the National Land Information Service. I understand that a Canadian company called MacDonald Dettwiler is to make loans or other financial assistance available to local authorities. The local authority to which I have spoken is not aware of the terms of such loans, although it has been stated that £205 million will be made available to local authorities. I would be happy if the Minister would write to inform me of the terms and conditions on which the money will be lent to local authorities. What will be the duration of the loan? What interest rate will apply? A coach and horses will be driven through a swift, reliable electronic conveyancing procedure if timely information is not given to a central source, which can be accessed readily by purchasers and their representatives. That is one of the greatest sources of delay in the conveyancing process.

The stages of conveyancing are familiar to all hon. Members, and have been outlined by the Minister, and, to some extent, by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. As I said in an intervention, it would be wise to introduce a convention whereby proper and full disclosure must be made of problems relating to title, rights of way, covenants and encumbrances. I do not think that it is wise to change the rule of caveat emptor, but perhaps the matter can be resolved by a market solution of a title insurance policy, which could be assignable to purchasers. I concede that it is up to the purchaser, by survey or inspection, to be satisfied of the state and condition of the fabric of the property. However, it would speed up the title process, whereby the purchaser or his representative should be satisfied that there are proper easements of water, electricity and gas, if full disclosure was made on those matters, buttressed by a system of insurance. I believe that that is done in the United States, and I hope that the interdepartmental working group to which the Minister referred will consider the matter.

Mr. Lock: I want to respond to two of the hon. Gentleman's points.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Does the Minister wish to intervene on the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). Could not the Minister deal with the matter in winding up the debate?

Mr. Lock: I will take your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In relation to the issue of post-exchange of contracts, I want to comment further on a matter that was touched on only lightly by the previous speakers—the swift movement of funds from building societies to conveyancers and from conveyancers to conveyancers. I have always been led to believe that CHAPS—clearing house automated payment systems—or at least the central clearing banking systems, are something of a cartel. Part and parcel of achieving a swifter system and

aiding electronic conveyancing should be the ability to move money in a matter of minutes. That means not only mortgage advances and completion money but, because of high property prices, deposit moneys. It is important in all commercial transactions to have the ability to move money fast. I hope that the interdepartmental committee will give its views on that matter and consider it carefully.

Electronic conveyancing will involve the purchaser or his representative being able swiftly to access details of title and up-to-date office copy entries from the Land Registry on computer. I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the matter was in hand, and that the information could—if I understood him correctly—be accessed immediately in relation to some properties in the United Kingdom.

I hope that the Minister will respond to another point that I made about the land charges registry. The registry is a rather arcane institution that deals with the records and registration of entries in relation to unregistered property. There is still a considerable amount of such property. I dare say that there is quite a lot of it in or near Macclesfield, so you might have an interest in the matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Electronic conveyancing will be involved in a third matter, that of local searches. Replies should be immediately accessible. There should be a duty of care on the hub or central authority to provide up-to-date and accurate information on the plethora of entries relating to property, from planning and enforcement notices to details of mining.

It is important that the public trust the electronic system. For them to do so, there must be a method by which the people who provide the information are liable for any mistakes, errors and delay. I believe that the proposals are exciting and interesting and will help the public. If the public are to have confidence in the system, institutions and organisations must take responsibility and stand by the information that they provide.

3.58 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): First, I want to praise the Lord Chancellor's Department. Contrary to the rather silly remarks of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), it is one of the most innovative bodies involved in the programme of modernising government. I know that it is a rarity for any of your constituents to find themselves in court in Chester, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, if they had done so before some of the changes made by the Lord Chancellor's Department, they would have found that the system required paper to chase itself around the town between the Crown Prosecution Service, the courts, the police and so on. That is coming to an end, so the Department deserves credit. I hope that that is another example of a progressive move from which industry, the consumer and, in the longer term, the state can benefit. Given the right level of early investment, it could drive down costs and time delays in the system.

I appear to speak today as the voice of the consumer, as lawyers outgun me. I can claim no expertise in conveyancing—other than that of a consumer—although I claim some expertise in the management of IT systems and the management of change. Irwin Mitchells, the well-known firm of solicitors, conducted my last conveyance brilliantly. I give credit to the firm for its efficiency, but the purchase involved several unreasonable delays as a result of the rather stupid conveyancing system.

One cannot often use debates such as this to solve one's case work, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to ponder the difficulties that Thornton-le-Moors parish council faces in its dialogue with the diocesan registrar of the Church of England in Chester. For some time, we have been discussing the problem of who owns the parish rooms and is responsible for their upkeep and modernisation. As a result of the earlier legislation to which my hon. Friend referred, the diocesan registrar finally managed to find the conveyance, which is dated 31 December 1896. It turned up in this morning's post, which was timely, as I can use it to illustrate my point.

I should be extremely grateful if my hon. Friend would translate it into English for me, because it is written in a language that nobody could understand without referring to expensive lawyers who charge by the yard. My hon. Friend would be slightly cheaper. I am making a serious point. We now have an opportunity to collect data in a form that ordinary, sensible human beings can understand—unlike the arcane language of the conveyance, from which I quote:

> do hereby certify that the Rev Charles Collwyn Richard Rector of the Parish of Thornton-in-the-Moors within the said Diocese being about to convey a portion of land situate in the Parish of Thornton-in-the-Moors for the purpose of a school under the powers of an Act passed in the fifth year of the Reign of her present Majesty Queen Victoria entitled "An Act to afford further facilities for the conveyance and endowment of sites for schools—

and so on. That is just a part of one sentence.

My hon. Friend's work will ensure that the key pieces of information to which he and the hon. Members for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) and for Surrey Heath referred can be translated into English. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon about the duty of care that is required to ensure that those who have a statutory duty to provide information do so in language that is intelligible and accurate. The small example that I gave suggests that there cannot be any opposition to the case for change.

My hon. Friend the Minister touched on some of the technical issues, such as the registration gap. It is there because it has always been there, and it has always been there because it takes a long time for a horse and cart to travel around the country between legal firms. The delay seems to me, as a lay person, to be entirely unnecessary in these days of electronic mail. I shall return to the question of digital signatures, to which my hon. Friend referred.

My hon. Friend also referred to real-time conveyancing and I want to raise a technical point with him. Does he mean absolute time, because conveyancing, especially for property in London, may take place between people in different time zones and on different days of the week, such as a transaction between someone here and someone in Hong Kong? Has that been thought through?

On digital signatures, my hon. Friend was right to refer to the mysteries of the science of mathematics. I commend to him and the House the brilliant book written by Simon Singh, "The Code Book", which has

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

recently been televised. It demystifies the matter and shows Britain in a good light because of our brilliant expertise in mathematics. I am sure that the t-scheme will provide a basis for a solution, because the industry has the will to achieve it.

I turn to what we want as consumers. I am sure that matters can be simplified. What do I want to know when I buy something? A reasonable starting point is to know who owns it, from whom it was bought, the history of that chain and the plethora of additional information that is held by different agencies. That presents an ideal opportunity to require agencies to participate imaginatively. My hon. Friend referred to the British Geological Survey, which has done some fantastic work to enable people to see on a website the geology surrounding their houses. Ordnance Survey is doing parallel work to show whether areas are at risk from flooding, which is particularly relevant today.

Many other agencies could be involved. The Environment Agency is subject to a statutory requirement to maintain information about ancient landfill sites and their safety, and that information could be included. The Health and Safety Executive in my constituency actively dissuades planning applicants from building domestic dwellings in some areas and it, too, should be included in the equation. Other bodies include the utilities, to which the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon referred, and the Oil and Pipelines Agency, which is relevant to your constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have a network of pipelines and much of the information is not in the public domain, for obvious security reasons. However, if I were about to buy a property and the largest gas pipelines in the country went through the next field or even through the property, it would be reasonable to want to unearth that information. The study should include a careful evaluation of all possible bodies that should be encouraged to participate and feed information into the hub in a form that is easily accessible to those with a legitimate need for access.

Every hon. Member will have experienced the problem, which always baffles me, of the constituent who visits one's surgery and says that a fence has been built that is 2 ft—sometimes, it is 2 in—inside his garden. I was somewhat intrigued by the suggestion of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath that some form of logbook be used, and it is true that there are problems associated with defining parcels of land. Given the scale of the plans, the thickness of a pencil line can prove to be a couple of metres in real terms.

The Post Office address files that are used for purposes of definition are somewhat inaccurate—if they do not believe me, representatives of the Post Office may examine the errors on my database. Increased use of Ordnance Survey grid references might provide a good technical definition, or one could increase use of global positioning satellites. Much more simply—and slightly closer to earth—one could consult the millennium map of the UK that is being created from an aeroplane by photographic means. That might provide a better definition of a parcel of land, and the two parties concerned could thereby reach agreement before entering into a contract. In terms of the necessary technology, it would not be particularly difficult to incorporate such information into a central website hub.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point—it is very difficult to collate such information. As I understand it, local authorities have different references for a property: the electoral roll reference, the council tax reference and the land charges reference. That is a measure of the huge and exceptionally expensive task that falls on the shoulders of the various agencies.

Mr. Miller: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. At the moment, I am dealing with a case involving a single utility that cannot agree the proper definition of its metering service for a property because the meter is not located where the service claims that it is located. That seems bizarre, given that one can go and look at the meter, but such problems are not unusual.

Definitional issues can be dealt with through the simple application of technologies that are available today. For less than £200, professional walkers can buy a portable device that will locate their position to within a couple of feet anywhere in the British Isles. I am not talking about rocket science or the next generation of technology; such technology is available today. Ordnance Survey's high-quality work has resulted in a fantastic base map that, combined with better use of aerial photography and GPS, could alleviate silly problems. That is why I intervened on my hon. Friend the Minister. May we please, when examining the scope of the proposals, look for ways of improving the service to our constituents?

I hope that Opposition Members will accept that these matters cannot be rushed. We are dealing with the creation of a very complex database. As my hon. Friend the Minister said, it will not be a single database but a hub access mechanism. All the suppliers of data into the hub will have to operate within common standards, using common terminology that lay people can understand rather than silly sentences such as the one that I read earlier—I shall not try your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by reading it out again. It will require a lot of hard work to bring that about. I urge all parties in the House to work co-operatively on this exciting venture, which should, within a few years, provide a radically different form of conveyancing, giving the consumer more information more accurately, more quickly and more cheaply.

Those are worthy goals, and I hope that all parties will give the Minister every support in introducing these complex technical changes. However, I would also say to him that the measure of whether we succeed in this drive for greater efficiency will be whether the consumer gets a better deal. I am sure that that will happen if we adopt the right approach, and I wish the Minister every success with his endeavours.

4.17 pm

Mr. Lock: This has been a good debate. I shall not respond to every point that has been raised, but I assure hon. Members that the working party that I announced at the beginning will be improved by this debate and that its members will study it as part of their deliberations.

I assure the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) that the interdepartmental group does not have the Orwellian overtones that he fears. It is the usual system that operates in government: no doubt, it operated before 1997, just as it has since. However, the group will consult and draw on licensed conveyancers, the Law Society, surveyors, estate agents, the Institute of Legal Executives, and representatives of others concerned with property—we must not forget the lenders, or the consumers. A wide constituency of stakeholders is involved, because most of us will, at some point in our lives, own a property—or, in the case of the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), very considerable amounts of Devon.

Mr. Hawkins: I appreciate that the Minister is being helpful and I realise that he cannot deal with all the matters raised. However, the point that I was trying to make was a serious one. The process would be improved if all the bodies that the Minister mentioned, including consumers, lenders and professional bodies, were full members of the working party, rather than merely consultees.

I have a great fear of consultation processes in which the only people on the working party are civil servants. I am not attacking civil servants collectively; I am saying that, as a principle, I prefer Government consultation processes that involve consumer and professional organisations as full members of the discussion rather than as consultees.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. At present, we do not propose to include external members in the detailed working group. However, I can assure him that there will be full consultation. Any consultation in which I am involved means precisely that—listening to and taking careful note of views. However, in the end someone has to make a decision and, inevitably, not everyone who has been consulted will agree.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a logbook for properties. Several Governments have considered that as a possible way forward. There are several problems with the idea. First, a logbook would by its nature have to be updated. In the current system, information in one form or another is searched from its primary source. It would be a considerable administrative exercise to extract information from its primary source and effectively turn it into a logbook that would have to be continually updated. It is not clear that it would be preferable to locate that information in a logbook, rather than through an electronic interface used by a local authority, concessionary undertaking or private body for suitable inquiries relating to the property. The second problem is that, even if that system were possible within a local authority, because of the nature of the disparate groups that hold information on any property, different locations and properties will give rise to different inquiries, even within a local authority area, and there cannot be complete information.

Thirdly, I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind that in conveyancing we are concerned with the transfer not of property, but of interests in property and, therefore, in the multiple layers of interests that can occur in regard to the same property. The concept of there being only a logbook for a house, which is a nice idea in theory, might not work in practice where a freeholder, a head leaseholder, and a sub-leaseholder all own different parcels of land.

Mr. Hawkins: I recognise what the Minister says and agree that those are important issues. All I ask him to confirm now, particularly in the light of the comment of his hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), is that, as we have the opportunity to consider a new system—which, as his hon. Friend pointed out, is not rocket science—he will at least undertake to present it as one subject for consideration by his new working party and its consultees.

Mr. Lock: All that I can say now is that I will consider it.

Mr. Burnett: Having done some trust law, I take the point that there may be myriad interests in one block of property. That is a difficulty when it comes to a logbook. I think that we all understand that. However, will the Minister advert to the fact that there is every good reason for the existence of a central register, not of encumbrances in terms of mortgages, charges and so on—not title matters—but of the hub, for want of a better expression, around which all information can be accessed in relation to planning, mining and all the statutory information that can be obtained in regard to a property?

Mr. Lock: The hon. Gentleman is right. That is precisely what NLIS is. It is a hub that, while not holding the information itself, provides electronic links through to the various private and public bodies that hold it. If NLIS is working—the pilot in Bristol has been extremely successful—the fact that there is no one physical location where the information is held is not relevant. The joy and benefit of electronic communication is to access information from the different physical locations where it can be properly updated, given the core business of whoever is the holder of that information. For the purposes of the person who is inquiring and then receiving such information, it appears on the computer screen—in the solicitor's office in Torridge, say—as if all the information sought has come from a single source. That is how NLIS is designed to work.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the investment required downstream, particularly with regard to local authorities. They are undertaking considerable investment in their IT systems as a result of the NLIS programme. He asked for information about that, but the details of major contracts between the contractor and different local authorities are, unfortunately, subject to a veil of commercial confidentiality. I undertake to write to him and to other hon. Members who are in the Chamber setting out the information that I have available, but the majority of information on detailed costings and investment structures is not in the public domain.

Mr. Burnett: To help our local authorities, we want to know from where the loans can be obtained. Which companies are providing them and on what terms are they being made? The local authorities that I have

[Mr. Burnett]

spoken to are not clear about where they can get financial assistance to cope with the huge cost of what we have been discussing.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful for that information and I undertake to give the best information that we have available.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the land charges searches are a feature of unregistered property conveyancing. I am pleased to say that searches can already be made electronically and, ever one for statistics, I can say that 42.6 per cent. of the searches undertaken last year were not processed by document exchange or post. I am sure that the majority of them were undertaken electronically and that that part of e-conveyancing is storming ahead.

The hon. Gentleman referred also to title insurance, which is a difficult and interesting topic. In their work on the housing market, the Government considered the option of title insurance as an alternative to an approved title. It is right that that is available and used widely in the United States. The extent of title insurance is essentially a matter for the market to develop, but the more effective and reliable it is and the more confidence we have in our system of title, the less room there is for the sort of risks that title insurance guards against. It is essentially a matter for the market, but we have a secure and established system of title from the land registration system. That may be one reason why the market in title insurance—in effect, insuring against the possibility that land is owned by someone else—has not developed here as it has in other places where establishing who owns land is not as easy.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to the Minister for his comments about insurance. Unfortunately, mistakes happen and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will confirm that not all the entries in the land register, or all office copies, are correct, for reasons that have already been referred to, such as the width of a pencil mark. Perhaps, to speed matters up, title insurance would be a valuable form of assistance. Will the interdepartmental group at least discuss the merits or otherwise of such assistance in the conveyancing process?

Mr. Lock: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall consider its suitability for reference to the group.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon and other hon. Members made a point about the relationship between electronic conveyancing and boundary disputes. It is not the job of the Land Registry to settle boundary disputes. The nature of land registration and the filed plans—and their degree of accuracy—is to provide indicators of the position of boundaries, but the existing land registration rules make it clear that they are not final evidence. It would not be right for the land register to be the final arbiter of 6 in here or there, or the route of a fence now as compared with 15 years ago. It is impossible to devise a system of land registration in which there is a duty on the land registrar to maintain that level of detail.

Of course, if a dispute arose about whether a field was in one farm or another, the Land Registry would be approached, if the land was registered, and would provide, to all intents and purposes, the definitive answer. However, I caution hon. Members not to try, through the process of changing from paper-based to e-conveyancing, or by any other means, to impose on the Land Registry duties that are not its business. A boundary dispute over 6 in of fence, or who is to maintain a wall, is a matter of property law, to be determined in accordance with the law between two neighbours and, if it cannot be resolved any other way, in the county court.

Mr. Miller: I entirely accept my hon. Friend's point about the Land Registry, especially given the nature of the historic data that it keeps, in addition to the legislative provisions. However; does he agree that it would be beneficial to the conveyancing process if, where more modern and accurate definitions exist, those were considered as being among the spokes relating to the hub?

Mr. Lock: Certainly, computerisation of the map, which involved the use of many of the techniques to which my hon. Friend has alluded, will assist in resolving many disputes whose outcome would otherwise have been uncertain. However, my point is that it is not the Land Registry's function to resolve all disputes. By its nature, it cannot do so.

The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon mentioned the movement of money. Of course, on a tough Friday afternoon towards the end of the month, CHAPS, impressive as it has been at some times, creaks a little under the strain. I shall ask the group to examine the issue, although I fear that, as in many similar instances, and while the hon. Gentleman is right about the need to move money quickly, accurately and reliably, the problem goes far beyond the remit of e-conveyancing. It concerns the generation of a climate in this country's business environment in which e-commerce works much more widely than in the buying and selling of land. To the extent that the matter is an important part of the e-conveyancing system, I shall ask the group to consider it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) quoted the language of a conveyance that seemed perfectly straightforward to me as a lawyer. I could not see why it was unclear. Perhaps I have spent too many years in the Chancery Division and not enough in my hon. Friend's constituency. All professions have their language. The language of professionals has always been used as a barrier to the layman, and the legal profession is no different from the medical profession in that respect. I agree entirely that the language needs to be simplified. Hon. Members may have noticed that I have referred not to vendors and purchasers during the debate, but to buyers and sellers. We all understand that simple form, but using the words "vendor" and "purchaser" means getting into lawyers' language. We are taking steps the right direction, but I agree that further steps are necessary.

An awful lot has been and is being done to promote better conveyancing. A degree of co-operation has been established between all of the various players that are involved to achieve the prize of a better conveyancing system that is fast and reliable and cuts out a great deal of the uncertainty and pain of house buying and selling. I am grateful to have participated in this good debate, which has provided an opportunity to show how much has been done, as well as to look ahead and see the prize that is before us: a conveyancing system that is accurate, which can work electronically and in which conveyancing will occur when people want it, rather than when the system gradually creaks into life.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes to Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 November 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Great Lakes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

10 am

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): It is an honour to introduce my first debate in Westminster Hall, which is on the prevention of genocide in the Great Lakes region. That issue is not only vital in the context of international development, but of great significance to my constituents, both black and white. The fact that between 800,000 and 1 million people were killed in 100 days purely because of their ethnicity should challenge anyone's conscience, but hon. Members will appreciate that I represent Britain's most multi-ethnic constituency, in which communities from all over the world live and work side by side. How could any Tottenham person remain unaffected by the genocide that took place in Africa in 1994 and the conflict before and since?

I recognise the great strength of diversity in our community, but I also know how fragile such diversity has made communities throughout the world. We must learn the lessons offered by the Great Lakes region. This Adjournment debate was requested as a result of a fact-finding visit to the region that I made with my hon. Friends the Members for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne). We made that journey under the auspices of the all-party parliamentary group on Rwanda—Prevention of Genocide. The visit was sponsored and facilitated by Christian Aid. I give particular thanks to Ben Crampton, the co-ordinator of the all-party group, and Richard Burge, the regional co-ordinator of Christian Aid. My hon. Friends and I saw many projects on which Christian Aid's dedicated staff were doing incredible work in difficult circumstances. The visit was a chance for us to gain an understanding of the concerns and aspirations of people living in the region. We returned with a report, published last Wednesday, that makes sensible suggestions for improving policies in the region.

The strong view among the people whom we met was that conflicts in the region—the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the current civil wars in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo—should not be viewed as separate; they are inextricably linked. The deaths of the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda were hugely destabilising for the region. They preceded genocide in Rwanda and increased violence in Burundi. The Rwandan genocide justified the tight rein on power held by the Tutsi ethnic group, which returned to power after a coup in 1996. The perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda crossed the border into the DRC from where they continue to mount attacks into Rwanda. They have become involved in fighting a civil war in the Congo. We cannot regard war in one of these countries as an internal matter. It is not possible to address conflicts in one country without looking at the causes and implications of conflict in neighbouring countries.

We should also apply a regional interpretation to our aid policies in the region. People living in Burundi find it hard to understand why the British Government are prepared to give so much aid to Rwanda compared with the resources that they have granted to Burundi and the DRC. In 1998-99, UK gross expenditure on aid in Rwanda was £13.7 million. The DRC received about £1.5 million and Burundi just over £300,000. During the visit I was proud of the British Government's role in rebuilding Rwanda post genocide. Of course one would not want to lend too much ear to squabbling over humanitarian assistance, but it was difficult to explain why our assistance should be so great in one country compared with the others. Clearly, we in Britain cannot do everything, but we must encourage our European partners to play a full role in the other countries in the region.

If we cannot achieve parity of aid and funding across the region, I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to continue to press our international partners in Europe to do more. It is particularly distressing that the French Government are currently blocking international attempts to offer Rwanda debt relief. British policy in the region needs to be co-ordinated with other Governments in the European Union. Although the EU is often criticised for putting more aid into eastern Europe than Africa, it is by far the most important donor to development work in central Africa and its aid to sub-Saharan Africa has continued to increase as the volume of world aid to the region has significantly decreased.

A co-ordinated approach to aid between European Governments is vital to development in Africa and so too is fast tracking of that aid. All too often we heard tales of financial assistance offered in one month that would turn up 18 to 36 months later. I hesitate to parody Opposition Members, but this is the worst example of European bureaucracy.

Our visit to the region was also a personal odyssey for me. My forebears come from Africa and I was preceded in the Tottenham constituency by Mr. Bernie Grant, who was clearly one of the greatest Africanists in the House. That makes the subject personal and important for me, but all British people can be proud of their commitment to the African continent.

The trauma in Rwanda defies imagination, which brings me to another of the report's recommendations. I struggle to describe the work of a group called AVEGA—the Association of Widows of the Genocide. Esther Mujawayo, one of the founders, provides a self-help group and an empowering philosophy for widows, which have dramatically changed the lives of the women and children involved. Not only does it provide physical and emotional space, but it is now able to fund co-operative financial projects for women to secure their livelihoods. Its work cannot be underestimated because women have traditionally been considered second class and were the easiest targets of the war. They lost husbands, were sexually exploited and returned to their villages marginalised and alone.

AVEGA believes that dialogue is important for mental health. Images of horror remain bottled up inside these women until they are able to speak about their experiences. AVEGA has managed to document cases of more than 1,000 women and girls as young as

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seven and as old as 70 who were raped during the genocide. If it can be believed, in the national trials only two people have been charged with sexual violence. Among the women who experienced rape, an estimated 66 per cent. are HIV positive. About 80 per cent. are clearly traumatised and 32 per cent. have become physically handicapped and unable to cope with family life. About 80 per cent. have had no help whatever. Sadly, only two of AVEGA's staff are professionally qualified in counselling.

In areas subject to conflict, we must invest in people's minds and souls as well as in their basic needs. Psychological assistance is not a luxury but essential if we are to ensure that history does not repeat itself for the sake of the children who witnessed such horrors and ran timid when I approached them because of their experiences at the hands of male adults, and for the sake of the many hundreds of thousands of prisoners who still fester in local jails.

I am conscious that my hon. Friends want to participate in the debate, but I want to refer briefly to other countries in the region. In the DRC the Lusaka accords were signed in July 1999 by Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and the various rebel groups. The accords pledged the parties to call an immediate ceasefire and to implement demobilisation and disarmament. They agreed to accept the interposition of monitors, followed by a UN peacekeeping force. The peacekeeping force—MONUC—has been put in place, but it is too small to be effective. The promised ceasefire and demobilisation never happened and the current UN force on the ground is tiny, with only 90 military liaison officers scattered between Congo and the capitals of the countries involved.

In a country as huge and undeveloped as the DRC—as so many African countries are involved in conflict, there are no easy solutions—if nothing else, the Lusaka accords provide a framework for military withdrawal and recognise that the forces responsible for genocide in Rwanda—the Interhamwee and the FAR—are now influencing Congo's civil war. I urge that development and aid continue in the areas where it is safe and that the international community continues to put pressure on President Laurent Kabila to allow more human rights monitors into the country. Our priority must be to promote justice as well as peace.

After seven years of civil war in Burundi, the Arusha accords brokered by Nelson Mandela and signed during August and September this year provide a blueprint for Burundi's reversion to peace and democracy, fragile though that is. At present, details of the ceasefire and implementation of the transitional administration are unclear, but when the Arusha accords begin to work, Burundi will require developmental and humanitarian aid proportionate to the level of aid received by Rwanda. Although financial limitations are likely to ensure that the United Kingdom can never, on its own, be Burundi's main partner, I emphasise that the UK will have an important role in Burundi to ensure that assistance is forthcoming from our European partners.

Although many of my comments have been about aid, I preface those remarks with the assumption that unless education and the resolution of conflict through peaceful means is a priority in Africa, African countries will never achieve parity with their international neighbours. None of us can take comfort in what is sometimes perceived as a paternalistic status quo and we must work to ensure that those countries can take a fully mature place in determining their histories.

I hope that Departments, especially in education, are taking steps to ensure that our children learn about the histories of the region. Too often, when we talk about genocide, we refer to the atrocities of the second world war, and it is right that we do so. However, two days after Remembrance day, it is vital that our children recognise that such atrocities continue—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The h Lady knows how strongly the hon. Gentleman feels about these matters.

Mr. Lammy: The atrocities continue; a black life is as a valid as a white life and it is important that our children learn what has taken place within the past 10 years.

10.19 am

Ms Tess Kingham (Gloucester): I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the debate. I apologise for the fact that, as I have explained to Opposition Members and my hon. Friend the Minister, I shall have to leave halfway through, for a Select Committee meeting. That is no reflection of the importance that the debate has for me.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) mentioned, our visit to the Great Lakes region in July and August was sponsored and facilitated by Christian Aid. It was my second visit to Rwanda and my first to Burundi, but it was probably my 13th or 14th visit to a country in conflict. This time more than any other I realised the importance of what my hon. Friend has explained about the interrelationship between conflicts in that region.

I was pleased by the British Government's relationship with the Government of Rwanda and the extent of the aid and support that we have given that country in the aftermath of the genocide, towards rebuilding and reconstructing society. However, I also experienced some forebodings and wondered whether all the effort would be in vain if nothing were done about the conflicts in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I noted the close connection between those countries and societies, the similarity of the tensions in them and the deeply ingrained suspicion and hatred among some sections of society there.

I have been gratified in recent years by talk of post-conflict reconstruction and conflict prevention, in British Government Departments, the European Union, the United Nations and even the World bank. That focus on and prioritisation of world development and world relationships is right, but it distresses me that much of our foreign and international aid policy is still linked to the days of the British empire and colonial relationships. That is true of other countries besides

Britain, but often our relationships with respect to aid, and our support in international relations, focus more on countries with which we have a historic relationship. That is understandable, but it means that we miss opportunities for joined-up thinking and for regional approaches that could contribute to conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction.

I hope that the Government will pursue the recommendations in the report produced by the all-party group in an attempt to persuade the European Union and the United Nations to adopt a more joined-up and regional approach to the Great Lakes area. I have in mind in particular, after the Rwandan genocide, securing an adequate early warning system, co-ordinated by the United Nations, for the whole region rather than for individual countries. We should learn from the well-publicised mistakes made in relation to the Rwandan genocide that emerged from internal investigations carried out by the United Nations and countries such as France.

I should like the international community to contribute to the dissemination of the peace process into civil society in countries such as Burundi. We had excellent meetings with the United Nations special representative for the Great Lakes region and many other players in the peace process. It was obvious from speaking to them and speaking to members of civil society that resources had not been provided to ensure that society was engaged fully in the peace process. The process was not, in Burundi, making its way from top to bottom. The ingrained deep hatred and suspicion that we encountered in a meeting with a group of Tutsi whom I would describe as extremists, in a meeting facilitated by Christian Aid, knocked me for six. Any influence by such people on communities bodes badly for the peace process.

The involvement of Nelson Mandela in the peace process was very welcome and the United Nations provided considerable resources, but I was distressed to learn that little thought had been given by the UN and member countries to providing adequate funds for the demobilisation of combatants in Burundi and their reintegration into society. In my experience of working with aid agencies, I have been told repeatedly that if ex-combatants are not properly integrated back into society and given livelihoods and land, the cycle of violence can easily start again. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Ministry of Defence and the new Africa conflict fund will now consider conflict in Africa together. I consider that new grouping to be an excellent example of joined-up government from this Government, and I hope that it will consider some of the issues in-depth and focus on Burundi and the Great Lakes region.

Another subject on which I want to focus is post-conflict psychological support for societies, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham. I have visited places such as Kosovo, El Salvador and Mozambique, and there increasingly seems to be a terrible lack of support for people who have suffered from conflict and its traumas. In Rwanda, mothers had to watch their whole families being wiped out. One of the workers that we met from AVEGA—my hon. Friend mentioned her—counsels widows of the genocide every day, yet she herself saw six of her children and her husband being hacked to death. Day after day, she responds to the needs of other women in the same situation. If the issue is not tackled when we deal with post-conflict reconstruction, there will be a great gap. The cycle of violence is bound to start again if psychological support at a local level is not given in a strategic way. I do not want non-governmental organisations to go over to do one-off projects, but for there to be a proper, professional and strategic approach.

I shall give an example. We went to a village to meet a woman called Jeanne d'Arc, who was a member of AVEGA. She had to be helped from her house because she was so sedated. As they put it, she went mad every now and then, and had to be completely drugged. On that site, she saw a terrible thing: her husband and all but two of her children being hacked to death. The trauma has been so great that she cannot tend her land. She can rarely get out of bed in the morning and cannot care for her two surviving children, who are very young, in a society in which there is no social help. She is therefore reliant on other people to look after those children. They are deeply traumatised; their eyes appeared dead.

Jeanne d'Arc's case is representative of another 125,000 similar ones across Rwanda. If nothing is done to support those children in a strategic way, I believe that they will go out for revenge, or they will become deeply desensitised. The country's future looks grim if one takes them as representative of thousands in Rwanda's young generation.

Sadly, AVEGA works pretty much in isolation. It deals with 125,000 women, helping them with micro-finance, housing support and counselling, but has few resources. In none of the United Nations programmes for support in post-conflict countries is psychological support seen as so much of a priority as providing water, housing and long-term livelihoods. That message has been endorsed by SURF, the United Kingdom survivors fund for the victims of the Rwandan genocide. It says that the support is simply not there, and that it must be a priority if we truly believe in post-conflict reconstruction.

We were also given the example of a woman—again, the case can be multiplied thousands of times in Rwanda—who was mass-raped during the conflict. Many members of her extended family were murdered, including some of her children. As a result of the mass rape, she contracted HIV. On the day that we arrived at the project, two of her children had turned up at the AVEGA headquarters in a taxi. She had saved enough money for them to make that journey, and also to buy a coffin, because she died that day of AIDS. She told her children that, because of the genocide, they no longer had either their mother's or father's family, and that AVEGA would have to support them. Such cases occur repeatedly across the country. Not only physical support, in terms of livelihoods and material, but psychological support must be provided for the children.

The most pertinent comment made to me during the visit was at a meeting of civil society leaders hosted by Christian Aid, when a very experienced senior Minister told us that Rwanda had a broken heart and the international community must help to heal it. I would like psychological support to be considered by the

[Ms Tess Kingham]

British Government and the international community in a strategic manner, as a fundamental part of post-conflict aid and support.

10.30 am

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) on securing this debate on British Government policy in the Great Lakes region.

Although the problems facing the region are indivisible, our Government's response to them is necessarily divided along departmental lines. One cannot divide poverty from conflict, but departmental responsibility for those problems is divided respectively between the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. While the former will concentrate on humanitarian aid and development assistance and the latter will take charge of areas such as the national strategic interest, arms control and the military, it is clear when examining the situation in the Great Lakes region that all those issues are tangled up in a melting pot. For example, in 1994, when the international community eventually became involved in the disaster, it concentrated on the refugee camps. One might say that they would be the responsibility of DFID, but at the time DFID did not yet exist—the present Government were not in power. Unfortunately, the efforts of the international community did nothing whatsoever to help. The refugee camps were awash with guns and controlled by the militias, many of which had been responsible for the genocide. I would like to use that as an illustration of why the Government's approach to the area must be cross-departmental.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) in welcoming the new conflict fund that the Government have introduced. However, I would also like to touch on the issue of small arms and their devastating impact on the region. There have been calls to introduce tougher arms legislation—which I support wholeheartedly—to control the activities of arms brokers, for example. One needs a licence to get married, but not to broker arms. If it can be arranged for weapons to be transported without touching British soil, then that is all right, and that is exactly what the British company Mil-Tec did during the Rwandan genocide, by flying Albanian and Israeli guns into the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is just across the border with Rwanda. Will the Minister tell us what the Government's proposals are to bring brokers' dealings more under control? Are we considering a system for monitoring the end use of UK arms exports? Amnesty International and Oxfam have argued—very reasonably in my opinion—that if we can track British beef every step of the way, from producer to consumer, we should be able to track British arms.

In 1998, the Government said that they would tighten United Kingdom arms controls and they deserve credit for that. I believe that such an intention was firm and it would be the first such change to the law since the second world war. Will my hon. Friend the Minister say whether such a policy change will be made in the near future?

I refer now to the recommendations of my colleagues who visited the Great Lakes region. I was sorry not to be able to go with them. In fact, I have not yet stopped sulking about it. However, I am delighted that, after my first trip to the region that I made with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), the issues contained in the Select Committee's report on conflict have been followed up in the work undertaken by the all-party group on Rwanda, the Great Lakes region and the prevention of genocide. One of the most important aspects that we must focus on is the regional aspect of the conflict.

I hope that Europe will soon be able to have a common policy on the Great Lakes region that will lead to a regional stability pact. The Department for International Development's regional strategy paper should—in theory, at least—complement the policy-making processes of the EU and its member states. I hope also that the Government will support the holding of an international conference on the Great Lakes region after the signing of the Arusha peace accord, which has now happened, and the implementation of MONUC II, which is still awaited. At present, there is a reality gap in Europe and in some of its capitals there seems to be a blanket denial first, of the responsibility that Europe has to the region and secondly, of the lack of action being taken now that could engender a similar situation to that which was witnessed in 1994.

I support an EU embargo on the import of diamonds. The Minister has been particularly active on the issue of conflict diamonds and, given that the DRC is the third largest exporter of diamonds in the world, that is of great importance. I am glad that diamonds get into the news when there is a James Bond attempt on the dome, but I would be more pleased if they were in the news because of the suffering that they have caused and because of their impact on the conflict. My hon. Friend the Minister has done more than almost anyone else to highlight that and I hope that the position in the DRC will improve. The position of those in the diamond mines would improve if there were more transparency in the methods that are used to extract the diamonds and get them on to our high streets. Perhaps it would be more accurate for me to refer to the international diamond dealers' warehouses—although that might be an exaggeration, as I cannot imagine warehouses full of diamonds. One of the saddest things is that, because diamonds are so small, and warehouses are not necessary, they can be easily smuggled.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has responsibilities in the FCO, not DFID, but, as I said earlier, it is impossible to draw a line dividing aid and Foreign Office policy in the region. Two years ago, when I was in Burundi, I visited a humanitarian centre where food was given to underweight babies. The babies were measured, and once they had reached a certain level of malnourishment, they were brought into the feeding centre. At the same time, DFID had taken the decision—which I understand, but do not necessarily agree with—to give humanitarian but not development assistance to the region because of a regional embargo on Burundi and the imposition of what some people would describe as a military dictator. The FCO perspective was also involved in making that judgment.

For whatever reason, we were giving only humanitarian aid. When a baby was brought to the centre to be given aid, a nurse remarked how ridiculous the circumstances were, as the same baby had been treated three months previously. As we had withdrawn what was considered to be a long-term development assistance programme to bring clean water to his village—dropping wells—it was inevitable that that baby would get sick again and be returned to the centre. When a baby has lost enough weight, the Government are able to provide assistance, but until that time, we cannot. In other words, we cannot consider long-term assistance. Consequently, the baby's father felt that, as he had no way of safeguarding his children's health or his family's future, it might be best to take up arms.

Hon. Members might not think that such an anecdote is relevant, but I believe it to be fundamental. Until we can see a continuum, with humanitarian assistance at one point, development assistance at another and peacekeeping operations at the extremity, we cannot have the type of joined-up government that is envisaged in the conflict fund, for example, in enough areas of Government policy. Our humanitarian aid should be both preventive and reactive. That means more strategic and long-term thinking in granting humanitarian aid in the region.

United Kingdom military advisers should assist moves to reform military structures in the region. That has been successful in Mozambique and could be equally important in the Great Lakes region.

I reiterate my thanks to Christian Aid, and to Richard Burge for facilitating our visit. I also thank Ben Crampton, co-ordinator of the all-party group. I welcome Anya Bensberg and wish her well, because the all-party group is exceptionally important in raising issues of relevance to British Government policy in the Great Lakes region.

10.44 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) on securing this important debate, and I commend him on his contribution to it. He carefully and accurately reported our experiences during our visit to the region, and in doing so and in initiating the debate he has done the House a great service.

In my 30 months as a Member of Parliament I have twice had the opportunity to visit areas of conflict abroad, and on each occasion I have had the honour and privilege to meet people of extraordinary dignity and courage. In Rwanda and Burundi the people who fitted that description are too numerous to mention. However, one particular meeting stands out, and the impression that it left will remain with me for ever.

At Cyangugu in Rwanda, on a beautiful hillside overlooking Lake Kivu, one of Africa's great lakes, we met several civil society activists from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country that is in the grip of bloody confrontations between Government troops and disparate rebel forces, which are backed variously by the Governments of Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and Burundi. Life for the 50 million innocent Congolese caught in the eye of the storm of that conflict is desperate. Without sustainable peace, the disastrous humanitarian circumstances will deteriorate further. Some 14 months ago in Lusaka the protagonists, including all but one of the foreign Governments involved, signed a series of peace accords. However, the war still rolls on, and the civilian population, especially in the eastern DRC, continues to pay a heavy price for it.

In June, shortly before we arrived in Africa, Ugandan and Rwandan soldiers, who are nominally allies, fought a full-scale battle in Kisangani, where over six days a comparatively minor local disagreement between commanders escalated to the point at which opposing troops exchanged artillery fire and fought hand to hand in the streets and houses of their host city. Entire neighbourhoods were destroyed and reduced to rubble, and when the smoke cleared more than 600 civilians and about 300 soldiers lay dead.

In implementing the Lusaka peace accords, the United Nations mission to Congo, MONUC, should by now have 5,500 soldiers deployed throughout the Congo to monitor the ceasefire. Instead it has just 250, and even that token force may soon be withdrawn.

At the end of this month, the UN will have to decide whether to send the promised 5,500 troops to the region. It seems highly unlikely that it will do so. If it pulls out completely, it will kill all chances of peace in that part of Africa.

It was from that environment that several civil society activists travelled to Rwanda to meet us. They had come from Bukavu, the main Congolese border town on the southern shore of the lake. Bukavu is under the control of Rwandan-backed rebels from the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie, but is in effect run by the Rwandan Patriotic Army.

One of those activists, a human rights worker, produces a regular newsletter detailing alleged human rights abuses by the RCD and the RPA. He is never short of copy, but he has few friends or allies among the powers that be in Rwanda or Burundi. To meet us, that brave man travelled across the Rwandan border, carrying on his person a letter from the RCD authorities that specifically forbade him to leave the Congolese province of South Kivu. To him it was more important that three British Back Bench Members of Parliament should hear first hand how his people are suffering than that he preserve his relations, fragmented though they are, with the authorities. That man risked his liberty and, perhaps, his life to meet us. It was a humbling experience, and I am grateful for the opportunity to pay tribute to him and to the many thousands of other human rights workers throughout Africa who do such work.

From Cyangugu we travelled overland to Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, arriving there on 29 July. It was an important time to arrive in the city, because it was between the two deadlines set for the Arusha peace agreement. Nelson Mandela, who took over the facilitation of that agreement, had originally set 20 July as the date for signature. When that date came and went he enforced a later deadline of 28 August, with some degree of success. We entered a city that was in the grip of tension; when we met President Buyoya, he described the feelings of the city and the country as being between hope and fear. The fear in the streets was palpable. There was a fear of escalating violence and constant rumours of violence circulated in Bujumbura

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

and other parts of the country. People did not know in which direction the country was going, whether towards peace or into a deep and damaging conflict. For security reasons, we were restricted to Bujumbura, but many people came to meet us there to explain what was happening in their country.

Among ordinary people, there was overwhelming ignorance and some cynicism about the peace process. They felt disenfranchised by the peace process, to a degree, both because it was happening far away and because some of those taking part in the negotiations were felt not to represent anyone in the country. Despite that, some people were actively involved in building links and making peace at a local level. The best example of that approach that we found came in the quartier of Nyakabiga, which is a part of Bujumbura. On our second day, we visited that quartier, having visited other quartiers in the city, and were struck immediately by its cleanliness and orderliness. We were the guests of the chef de zone, Hazikimana Emmanuel, who sported one of the most glorious technicolour jackets that I have ever seen. He was a former Tutsi police officer and had been appointed to the quartier by the mayor.

In 1993, the Hutu population, that represented about 45 per cent. of the population of the quartier, fled Nyakabiga because of attacks by Tutsi extremists, in which some 250 homes were destroyed. After becoming the chef de zone, Emmanuel had striven to rebuild shattered communities. He started on a small scale, running sporting and cultural activities among the community. As his work expanded, he developed co-operation and partnership with local and international non-governmental organisations, arranging for houses to be rebuilt so that returnees could settle back in the area. At great danger to himself, he toured the country and visited refugee camps in Congo to find former residents and persuade them that their homeland was at peace again and a safe place to return to—and they did return. Many British politicians would welcome the adulation and respect that that man enjoyed as he moved around his community; clearly, he was a people's politician.

Hazikimana Emmanuel was a truly remarkable man but, in our experience, he was not unusual in seeking peace. His efforts, however, will be in vain—as will all those other local peace initiatives that we witnessed—if no political deal is struck.

Following Mwalimu Nyere's death, Nelson Mandela took up the facilitation of the Burundi peace talks, and pushed for a settlement. His focused contribution to those talks cannot be underestimated, although many in Burundi thought—and still think—that he went too fast. We heard that opinion from President Buyoya, among others. The deal has now been made, as promised, and signed by all 90 political parties at the negotiations. Unfortunately, however, no immediate peace has ensued, but that does not surprise those of us who practise politics in this country. The deal was part of a peace process, and such processes take time, as we have seen in Northern Ireland.

The major sticking point in the advancement of peace in Burundi is clearly the need for a ceasefire. Some groups that were unrepresented at the Arusha talks stayed at a distance from them until signature; thankfully, those groups are now in discussion with the Government of South Africa. The Burundian Minister responsible for the peace process has appealed for international pressure on those opposition groups to agree to the ceasefire and to be bound by the Arusha deal.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to a number of issues and questions prompted by my experience on that visit. Will the Minister tell the House what pressure the British Government can bring to bear on the rebel groups that have not yet signed the ceasefire to enable them to do so and what help can they give to the African initiative to achieve a ceasefire? The lack of a ceasefire continues to cost lives and money, which was made clear by the new refugee movement into Tanzania and will require action by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. What can the Government do to help Burundi when a ceasefire has been achieved? Nelson Mandela, among others, is convinced that there will be a ceasefire and there are some green shoots to suggest that it may be achieved in the near future.

Many people in Burundi and elsewhere in that part of Africa believe that poverty is at the root of the conflict. It was clear to those of us who visited the region that there was much truth in that and that there would be no lasting peace in the area unless the problem of poverty was addressed. I commend the Government's work in Rwanda to build on economic stability to lay a platform for peace. It is not the Minister's responsibility, but will he assure us that he and his colleagues in the Department for International Development are co-operating on plans for the donors' conference on 11 December, the purpose of which is to build upon the peace deal in Burundi and to provide the sort of economic development and financial structure that that country needs to cement peace?

I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that the setting up of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa—COMESA—was good news for the region, because economic development is at the heart of those countries' development. Burundi and Rwanda are not members, but economic development in that part of Africa is good news for them also. What support can this country provide with know-how and trade liberalisation to ensure that COMESA is a success?

Burundi and Rwanda are involved in the war in the Congo, but President Buyoya of Burundi told us that his only interest in the conflict was to fight a war that would otherwise have been fought on his territory and that he had no other interest in the country. What representations have the British Government made to the Governments of Burundi and Rwanda to encourage them to limit their involvement to just that and to abide by the terms of the Lusaka accords for the Congo? Does the Minister believe that Burundi should be a party to that agreement in contrast to President Buyoya's belief?

As if to demonstrate that the regional dimension, which is the principal recommendation of our report, is not just rhetoric, human rights organisations and those who work on the ground in Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, have banded together to form a regional group—the Ligue de droits de la personne de la region des Grands Lacs. Will the Minister join me in supporting that group?

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) made it clear that there will be no hope for peace in the region unless ordinary people take

ownership of it. They need information otherwise rumours fly and lead to conflict. Radio is the most widely received medium, so the BBC World Service has an important role, which the Government in Burundi and elsewhere recognise, in promoting peace, as do others such as Studio Ijambo, a production company that was set up by Search for Common Ground and works under difficult circumstances. I am confident that my hon. Friend the Minister will join me in praising the BBC and all other radio stations that promote peace, but will he assure the House that the BBC's Kirundi service will be maintained while there is a need to promote peace in the region? Will he also join me in congratulating Studio Ijambo on being named a grand citizen of peace by the Burundi Government?

Finally, does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that a lasting peace can be achieved only through the marriage of grassroots peacemaking efforts such as those in Nyakabiga, national peace deals such as Arusha and a regional approach to conflict such as that mooted by the conference on the Great Lakes, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) referred? What steps is his Department taking to promote such initiatives?

11am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Thank you, Mr. Maxton. To save time, I shall, with your indulgence, cut out the niceties and plunge straight into my comments on the report.

I am the vice-chairman of the all-party group on Rwanda and, as the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) said, I have visited the country. Today, the debate has consisted of listening to the experiences of the people who went out there in July, which is important and interesting.

One or two matters arise from the recommendations in the report. First, on psychological aid, I have worked in a British counselling and psychotherapy centre and I know that such aid is enormously expensive. In some cases, it takes years to have any effect on even the relatively mild cases that we have in Britain. In psychotherapeutic terms, I dread to think how long it would take to right some of the wrongs in Rwanda, which is my only reservation about the call for psychological aid. Unless such aid is set against a background of stability, security and prosperity in Rwanda, it will prove to be a waste of money. Before those people can come to terms with what has happened to them, they must have a better place in which to live. That is a rather depressing view, but it is how I feel.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow highlighted the distinction that we make in this country between humanitarian and development aid. I, too, am worried about that. In southern Sudan, the Department for International Development is keen not to dispense development aid because a war is raging and that view is equally applicable to the Great Lakes region. A great deal of humanitarian aid is wasted unless it is backed up by development aid. Minor items such as fishing tackle and farm implements are considered to be development aid, but they should be dispensed with humanitarian aid because they are so useful.

Education is cheap to dispense as development aid. As I saw in southern Sudan, we need only to supply slates, chalks and a teacher, and to find a tree to provide shelter from the sun. We must emphasise development regardless of the war.

No one has mentioned the appalling judicial situation that we saw in Rwanda during our visit two years ago. We heard many stories there that I could discuss for hours. The prisons were visions of hell—we had never seen anything like it. There were bare racks full of men who had been incarcerated for years, while the yard outside was equally crowded. For a change, the crowds in the yard sometimes swapped places with those in the racks, which were situated in what looked like old aircraft hangars. There were insufficient judges and resources, so there was no prospect of any case being brought to court. I had hoped to hear about the progress that had been made on that front.

Ms Oona King: Does the hon. Lady agree that the Rwandan Government should be supported in their efforts to introduce the Gacaca system, which is a more traditional system of justice, given the crises that we witnessed?

Dr. Tonge: I agree that we should examine that. The Minister cannot hope to answer all of our questions, so a paper that deals with all the issues—in the form of a letter to those participating in the debate—would be useful.

I shall emphasise some of the points raised by the chairman of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. If we are to achieve any form of peace in the Great Lakes region, we must look at the root causes of the conflicts, and diamonds are certainly one such cause. According to *The Observer*, diamonds are financing half of Africa's wars, but that is a modest estimate.

Sudan, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Burundi and Uganda have their fingers in the pie. We welcome the Pretoria agreement, but can we be certain that the system will be independently monitored? What pressure is being put on trading centres in Antwerp and Tel Aviv to ensure that they abide by the agreement and report uncertified diamonds? I fear that, unless African Governments have full control over their diamond areas, the system will prove ineffective. It would be interesting to study a progress report.

The illegal global trade in diamonds is worth £5 billion to £7 billion, which buys a great many AK-47s or kalashnikovs, and I want now to discuss my favourite topic of arms embargoes, to which the Minister would expect me to refer. Arms embargoes operate in countries throughout the region, but why are they not more effective? We need not discuss again the details of Mil-Tec and other such examples, but when will legislation on arms brokers, about whom I am particularly concerned, be implemented? Huge sums of money are spent on tracking drugs and infected beef. I guarantee that, were we to spend as much money on tracking arms brokers as we spend on tracking drugs, more lives—hundreds of thousands of lives—would be saved throughout the world. Please let us get on with it.

[Dr. Tonge]

Finally, as the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) said, the United Nations peacekeeping force in the Democratic Republic of Congo is isolated. When will the UN sort out that problem? Does it intend to establish a proper peacekeeping force?

Mr. Lammy: Before the hon. Lady concludes, I want to return her to the subject of psycho-social assistance. I am surprised that she does not take a holistic view of human experience. Psycho-social support should involve not merely psychological or psychotherapeutic support in the classic, western sense. We need also to spotlight this issue by recognising that a given community contains many stakeholders, such as priests, social workers and carers, who can provide support. We are talking about general support in the form of counselling, as well as psychiatric support. That is the holistic approach, and I am surprised that the hon. Lady feels unable to support it.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but we cannot debate that issue now because we are running out of time, although I shall discuss it at length in due course. Suffice it to say that we saw some crass attempts at psychotherapy and counselling during our visit to Rwanda. I should hate those attempts to be repeated in the mistaken belief that they will do some good, because they will not.

It is important that the UN decides whether it is going to keep the peace, or get involved in events in the Great Lakes region. This huge area of conflict needs to be taken seriously. If we are not careful, it is likely to spread throughout Africa.

11.09 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) on initiating this debate? That was his maiden speech in this Chamber and I hope that it is the first of many. He brings great interest and passion to a subject that has been spoken about passionately by hon. Members in Westminster Hall.

I agree with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) that it is difficult to do justice to the subject of the debate in a mere hour and a half. Indeed, the complexity of the situation in the Great Lakes region has been well evidenced in previous speeches and in the moving accounts of the most recent visit of the all-party parliamentary group on Rwanda and the prevention of genocide, so ably led by the chairman, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), to whom I pay a personal tribute: she has been driving forward the agenda of the group with great alacrity, for which she is to be admired. I am sorry that I could not join the visit to that part of the world.

The complex tribal and ethnicity issues are reflected in the violence, genocide and disturbance in the most densely populated region of Africa and hon. Members ably described the war and its consequences. We heard, too, about HIV and AIDS and of the large percentage of the population that is infected. How distressing it is to learn of women who survived the conflict and escaped with their families only to face a slow and protracted death from a disease contracted perhaps through rape and the ravages of war. No one could fail to be moved by such stories.

We did not hear about the outbreak of malaria in Burundi. I hope that the Minister will say what help the Government are giving to the area, as the disease is a spreading scourge, which often follows conflict and natural disaster.

We heard about human rights, but there is a vast amount of intimidation and wrongful imprisonment in Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where there are political prisoners. What does the Minister have in mind on the monitoring of human rights in the region? The arrival of Amnesty International in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was much vaunted when the Government came to power. Amnesty's involvement is welcomed by all hon. Members, who read its reports, take its advice and try to take action. What advice has Amnesty International given the Minister on the region and how does he intend to act on that advice?

We heard about the tribunal and the poor system of justice in the area. The Rwanda tribunal is an extremely expensive process. Millions of pounds go into the justice system, which is bringing only a small number of criminals to book. Does the Minister think that the arrangements for the Rwanda tribunal are effective? Does he have any suggestions or alternatives? Much of the money spent could be redirected—tens of thousands of people in Rwanda are still awaiting trial for horrific crimes. I am not sure that I have the answer, but I want to know what the Government intend to do about it. The latest news from the tribunal is that one of the lawyers, David Danielson, has backed down from defending his client, the former founder of the extremist radio Television Libre des Mille Collines because he has taken instruction from his client not to go forward. Once again, the tribunal cannot even get the lawyers to participate in the legal process. I should be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that development.

We have heard about health problems and genocide, and the problem of displaced persons continues. According to the latest reports on 7 November, 27,000 people have been displaced by fighting in Shabunda, near Bukabu in the DRC. Those people have descended on the town of Kalima, where they remain without humanitarian assistance. That report came from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Kinshasa. The frightening aspect of that recent development is that only religious workers operate in the area, which continues to act as a battleground. Will the Minister tell us the latest information about the displaced people? What is being done to deliver aid to the area? What is the latest update on the situation?

The hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned the control of arms. What is the Government's policy in that regard? Many of the small arms coming into the area are from the Ukraine and Bulgaria. Have our Government made any representations to those Governments with whom they have dialogue? What is the Minister's assessment of the success of his anti-blood diamond policy? It is one thing to discuss the size of the market, but by how much has it been reduced since the initiatives following the Sierra Leone debacle? Little evidence exists to show that the flow has stopped, including in

Sierra Leone. I have long called for European Union aid to Zimbabwe to be closely investigated and, indeed, stopped while Zimbabwe continues to give aid to that war region, helping to provide weapons, militia and men to cause mayhem and disaster.

Much of the criticism from the speakers in today's debate has come from Labour Members. In many ways, that is far more powerful than any criticism that I could lay at the Government's door. One of the great issues to emerge is the co-ordination between the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Minister must start to face the fact that co-ordination between the two Departments has, to say the least, been poor. In March, the Minister, in response to a written question, stated:

> Britain is playing an active and constructive role in international efforts to resolve the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our aim now is to: help all the parties, including Rwanda and Uganda...We are also providing practical support: British officers are deployed in the region.—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 275W.]

The region is therefore considered important enough for the United Kingdom to deploy British officers there. However, as recently as 9 November, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), who has visited the Great Lakes region and asked about DFID's policy on it, was greeted with the immortal reply,

> We have decided to undertake some analysis in the Department to deepen our understanding of the regional context. It would be an exaggeration to call this a regional policy.—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 372W.]

I am sure that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun is too much of a gentleman to question that reply. Given that the Foreign Office has been deploying British officers in the region, it is depressing that, on 9 November, another Department should decide to undertake some analysis. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us on what analysis will be undertaken by DFID, when it will begin and why it was not being conducted in the first place? After three years, we need an assurance that the UK's foreign policy will not fall foul of poor co-ordination between the Departments.

I am sure that the Minister will not be able to answer all of the questions off the top of this head. I therefore echo the hon. Member for Richmond Park in asking the Minister to prepare a written response, in conjunction with DFID, because the aid issues that have been raised are equally important. I trust that the Minister will accede to a reasonable request.

11.19 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Peter Hain): I welcome you to the Chair for the first time in this Chamber, Mr. Maxton, and I thank you for presiding over the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) on another first in securing it. He is well placed to talk about the issue, given his African ancestry, and I am pleased that he and other colleagues take such a close interest in Africa, particularly the Great Lakes region.

I shall give detailed replies to the detailed questions asked by hon. Members, including the enlightening ones asked by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), and I am sure that Ministers from the Department for International Development will do the same.

My hon. Friends' recent visit to Rwanda and Burundi with other members of the all-party parliamentary group on Rwanda and the prevention of genocide, which was facilitated by Christian Aid, resulted in the publication of this excellent report, which I commend to the House. In my time as a Foreign Minister, I do not recall reading such a perceptive analysis of the complex situation in the Great Lakes region. I hope that other parliamentary colleagues will take time to read the document about the many serious problems faced by countries in that region. Sadly, some of them have been long forgotten by many people in the outside world. I hope that the report and our debate will raise awareness in Parliament and encourage more people to take an interest in the region.

We fully support the recommendations in the all-party group's report and look forward to working closely with it, non-governmental organisations and the international community to ensure that they are fully implemented. I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham and for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) and others that the neighbouring countries—the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi—are crucial to resolving Rwanda's future. I also agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) about the need for an integrated foreign policy and development response to events in the Great Lakes region.

Notwithstanding the somewhat grudging comments by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, we are working closely with DFID. However, the time scale for implementation of our policy depends on the pace of the peace process in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow that I will raise her point with DFID. I will also mention the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester about psychological support for victims.

Access and security conditions on the ground, especially in the DRC and Burundi, will affect donors' plans to engage in post-conflict reconstruction in the Great Lakes region. Recent fighting in the Katanga province of the DRC highlights the difficulties that we face in trying to deliver urgently needed humanitarian assistance. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and others, we recognise the importance of developing that policy with our European Union colleagues and the wider international community to support progress towards long-term peace and stability in the region. We work closely with France, the Netherlands, Belgium and the EU special envoy in formulating our policy. I have had several meetings with my European and United States counterparts to discuss the issues and take matters forward. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester that we will follow up the report with the EU.

The conflict in the DRC dominates the lives of many people not only in that country, but in surrounding nations. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost, towns and villages have been destroyed and widespread abuses of human rights have been perpetrated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) asked about the deployment of the MONUC II force of 5,500 United Nations peacekeepers. I am extremely worried that the UN may

[Mr. Peter Hain]

decide to put it on hold, even though it has already been on hold for a year, because of the failure of parties to implement the Lusaka peace agreement. My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) asked what we were doing. We continue to work hard to encourage the peace process in the DRC. Properly implemented by all parties, the Lusaka ceasefire agreement and the Kampala disengagement plan could bring an end to the war. We have already provided: six British military liaison officers to the UN observer force in the DRC; £160,000 to help get the joint military commission, which is responsible for supervising the ceasefire and military disengagement, up and running; and £25,000 towards the national dialogue process by providing an expert to work with the talks facilitator, the former president of Botswana, Sir Ketumile Masire.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appointed a special representative, Douglas Scrafton, to the Great Lakes region and he is present today. He has travelled extensively in the region to discuss progress in implementing the Lusaka and Arusha agreements. One of his tasks is to co-ordinate closely with his EU, US and Belgian counterparts and key African and western colleagues on options for moving forward both peace processes.

We are also committed to doing more to stop wars before they start—not only in Africa but throughout the world. A joint pool of funds was established between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence to support common objectives in global conflict prevention. That is real joined-up government. The fund comes into operation in Africa next year and we hope to use it to further peace in the Great Lakes region.

I want to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, and the hon. Members for Richmond Park and for Chesham and Amersham, who spoke about tougher arms controls. We are committed to introducing tougher legislation to deal with arms brokers and end use. The legislation is in draft form and we shall introduce it as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows.

I note with interest the report's proposal for the introduction of an EU embargo on the importation of diamonds from the DRC—an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and the hon. Member for Richmond Park. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her acknowledgement of the Government's role and my own. We have led the way and the results can be seen.

To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, there is some intelligence that UNITA and the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone are finding it much more difficult to secure arms because of the difficulties of trading diamonds, but we have much further to go and we shall continue with our attempts.

We have not stood still on the countries in the Great Lakes region where we believe that we can make a difference. As has been acknowledged, on Rwanda, Britain has a clear lead in providing flexible funding and engaging in genuine and open dialogue on a range of complex political and social risks. We recognise the efforts that Rwanda has made in building an accountable and inclusive system. We have expressed our hope to the Rwandese that their commitment to an inclusive Government will remain strong. We have encouraged them to reflect the wishes and aspirations of all Rwandan people and to be committed to working honestly on their behalf.

Where problems are outstanding, we have tried to deal with them with the Rwandans. On detainees, Britain and the international community have expressed concern to the Government of Rwanda about the slow pace of trials and the number of prisoners being held. The Government of Rwanda told us that they plan to use participatory methods of justice to clear many of the cases. We have encouraged them to ensure that human rights standards are observed at all times. This year alone, the international community gave approximately $2 million to support that process.

We do not support the involvement of Rwanda or any of the parties in the DRC war, although we recognise that it has legitimate security concerns. The Lusaka agreement must be implemented in full by all parties. We continue to press all parties, including rebels, to adhere to the agreement that they signed. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun raised that matter. I agree that the BBC—with other local radio stations—has a vital role to play in the peace process.

On Burundi, we shall continue to provide funds to help implement the Arusha peace process. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, we will be part of the 11 December donors conference. I have worked closely with Nelson Mandela—travelling twice at his request to Arusha to give Britain's active backing to his peace facilitation efforts. We are not well placed to become a leading bilateral donor. My hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham asked for parity of aid, but we do not have close historic ties with Burundi, or any representation in Bujumbura. We are keen to contribute to post-conflict efforts–bilateral and multilateral–led by others who are better placed to take the lead and we will back them.

Ultimately we hope to support an international conference to address all the political, economic and social issues that have blighted the Great Lakes region. That will be of most value once the implementation of the Lusaka ceasefire agreement and the Arusha peace accord has begun. I thank you, Mr. Maxton, and hon. Members for their excellent contributions to the debate.

Bus Services (Mid Essex)

11.30 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am pleased to have the opportunity to mention the state of bus services in Essex in the Chamber. I am particularly pleased to see my neighbours the hon. Members for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) in their places. The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) wanted to be here but had Select Committee commitments.

In the past few years, there has been a growing demand to provide a public transport system that is fitted for the purpose and offers an addition or an alternative to private cars. I do not propose to discuss the environmental benefits of public transport or bus transport. That subject has been well debated and the argument is gaining general acceptance.

Until 1985, the guiding legislation was the Road Traffic Act 1930, which was enacted by the second Ramsay MacDonald Labour Government and sought to bring some order to a chaotic system. Until 1930, bus services could be described as a free for all. I remember my grandfather describing that there were two major companies in London, London General and Tilling, but also many private operators, some perhaps with only one vehicle. The private bus would habitually arrive just ahead of the London General or Tilling bus, just as now the buses of small operators occasionally arrive before those of Eastern National or Hedingham in certain parts of our county. That is not a helpful position. It may have been less damaging in the 1920s, when the demand for bus transport was so much greater and people did not have an alternative means of transport in many areas.

The present consequences are particularly harmful for rural areas. In the 1920s, most people would have worked close to where they lived. They would not have needed transport to get to work and therefore the need for the bus was not as great, notwithstanding the fact that there were more buses then than there are now. From 1930 onwards, with a degree of regulation the bus companies were increasingly in the hands either of local authorities or subsidiaries of the National Bus Company. Further legislation was introduced in 1968 and 1973, presumably on a bipartisan basis, which gave local authorities an increasing role in maintaining public transport through revenue support payments. Indeed, an obligation was placed upon them to provide effective public transport to meet the needs of their residents. There was a certain equality: profitable routes cross-subsidised unprofitable routes and there was a considerable public consultation.

In a previous existence, I served on Southend borough council and was a member of its public transport committee. I was lobbied by my residents and others to provide particular bus services at particular times. The decision was not entirely in the hands of that committee but the council ran its own undertaking with a joint service with Eastern National. As a consequence, the provision of public service was high on the agenda. The system was not perfect. One could be overeager to please local residents when there was little financial justification for a particular service, but the public generally felt that that system showed a responsiveness that is now absent.

The situation drastically changed with the Transport Act 1985. The licensing system of 1930 was brought to an end and registration came in its place, the crucial role of local authorities in consulting on the provision of bus services dropped away and the power generally to subsidise was brought to an end. That is not to say that there is no more power to subsidise.

Initially, when the legislation came into force, there was fierce competition between bus operators, but gradually one or another bus undertaker in an area has developed, if not a monopoly, a predominant market position. The consequence, which is hard for the public, is that the timetabling, the number of stops, the number of services and the routes are in the hands of the bus undertaking. The public are not actively involved to the degree that they were.

I accept that the enshrining of the free market in this context has been modified to an extent. That has come about through the degrees of subsidy and assistance that exist in the system. The fuel duty rebate scheme allows 70 per cent. of the fuel duty paid by operators to be reclaimed in defined circumstances. For a time, that placed community transport schemes at a disadvantage in that they did not qualify because they did not provide a service to everyone who wanted to ride on a bus. I am pleased that that difficulty is being brought to an end.

Particular routes can also be subsidised. In Essex, the Government have provided more than £1 million of rural subsidy. The hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford may be pleased about the considerable subsidy of, I believe, more than £800,000, for the Dengie peninsula. I too am pleased about that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Dengie was formerly part of my constituency and, as one of the lost territories, I regard it with affection.

There is certainly public subsidy for some rural services in Essex, but nevertheless, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are problems in towns and urban areas.

Mr. John Maxton (in the Chair): Order. I am Mr. Maxton, not Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hurst: Thank you, Mr. Maxton. Terminology changes so frequently in this place. I shall change the appellation as I continue.

The use of the term mid-Essex in the title of the debate is somewhat vague, because that is not a defined geographical area, but if anything is mid-Essex it is the town of Witham. It was originally a small market town and grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, as new estates were added and people came from London to seek a new life there. Consequently, the edge of the town is now further from the centre than it was and the ageing of the population has made the problem more acute. People who came to Witham in the 1960s are now retired and bus service provision is not as good as it was.

In September, the services were drastically reduced. Parts of the town that were served quite well, with services every 20 minutes, have had those reduced to one an hour. Routes in the town have been altered so that some of the outlying estates are not served as they once were. As a consequence, elderly people are deterred from travelling as much as they otherwise might. That fact has been brought to my attention by Mrs. Ivy Phillips of Forest road, a prodigious participant and

[Mr. Hurst]

activist in many organisations in the town. She sometimes has to take a taxi in the evening, at a cost of £5 to and from the town centre, as opposed to buying a return bus ticket for £1.40. Such examples show how the alteration and reduction of bus services affects some sections of the community more than others.

Young people are also harmed. It is difficult for them to travel around town after dark. Naturally, parents are concerned about young people walking the streets, not particularly in Witham, but in any town in the country. Other than through bus services to other towns, there are no evening bus services in Witham, nor are there bus services on Sundays. Such a lack of services constricts people's personal lives. It is unhelpful to them and it is certainly unhelpful to the promotion of public transport as an alternative to the motor car.

The problem concerns not only Witham, but the routes between towns. The hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford would have been as worried as I was when it was proposed to remove the bus service between Chelmsford, Hatfield Peverel, Nounsley, Ulting and Maldon. After much public protest, that service has now been reinstated—by public subsidy. Furthermore, I think that the service between Witham and Maldon has been reinstated this very day, again by way of public subsidy as opposed to commercial operation.

Private operators are willing to run public services, but I am worried, as I am sure are other hon. Members that, if those services are not profitable, they must fall back into the public domain to be paid for by money from the public exchequer. I applaud the fund for rural transport. I am encouraged that the village link scheme that runs through the north-west side of my constituency from Finchingfield to Wethersfield and eventually to Broomfield hospital is a great addition to the lives of people who live in the area, but it can never be perfect. The village of Great Saling is on the same route—one of my esteemed ministerial colleagues is speaking at an agricultural breakfast there this morning. He would not have travelled there by bus, because there is not a bus that would drop him off in that village. Although the bus takes the route up to Wethersfield and Finchingfield, it does not stop at Great Saling.

I accept that not all villages and hamlets can be served each hour by buses. The Government are making strides to assist rural transport, but there is such a long way to go and a great number of people need to be served. I would be encouraged, however, if the concept that everything could be left to the free market could be modified. It does not make good business sense that we, the public, take all of the losses.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): Many of the services to which the hon. Gentleman referred start in his constituency and end up in mine, so I entirely share his concern about the matter. Essex county council is spending £2.4 million on subsidising rural transport, but it will overspend by £400,000 this year because of the steady withdrawal of non-profitable services. The real answer to the problem is that we need to give more money to counties such as Essex that have large rural areas, where such problems cause great distress and inconvenience to constituents. Is that not another reason why we should reconsider the formula that allocates money to local authorities, as rural authorities have steadily lost out in recent years?

Mr. Hurst: In some ways, the hon. Gentleman has understated the position. County council expenditure is £2.8 million, but that excludes the rural fund of £1,050,000. It also excludes the Dengie payment of £800,000. Therefore, approximately £2 million is coming into the county for rural services from Government sources alone. I accept that there may be a good case for additional funds to come in, but it will be a bottomless pit.

Unless private operators take some share of the responsibility and respond to the population in the county, the problem will not be solved. Every time that a route is less than profitable, it will drop out of the private sector and into the public sector. That is an invitation to concentrate private resources entirely on self-evidently profitable routes. The situation is different from what it was when there was cross-subsidy within a bus undertaking. I hope that the Government can move some way towards greater regulation of bus undertakings, so that the operators bear part of the social cost when a route is not self-evidently profitable.

11.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) on securing the debate. He raised many issues about bus transport and the impact that it can have, especially on people in rural communities. He also graphically outlined the historical perspective that we need to consider in relation to the current situation in counties such as Essex, and the impact of the fragmented market that has developed—especially under the previous Government.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for acknowledging that our Government have attempted to give a high priority to transport and the needs of those in rural areas. Earlier this year, we announced our 10-year transport plan, which set out our ambitious further targets and investment plans for transport in the next decade. We have clearly recognised, as he recognises, the crucial importance of public transport to meet the needs of modern, sustainable communities, and the special needs of rural communities.

My hon. Friend indirectly pointed to the fact that the increasing ownership and use of the car in the past 30 to 40 years has brought new pressures and problems, although it has also brought benefits. That, combined with the structure for local transport that has been created in the past 20 years, has led to urgent problems in some parts of the country. Buses are by far the main form of travel for local journeys on public transport, so we want to ensure that bus services can be improved. I shall say more about the matter later.

My hon. Friend outlined some details of the situation in Essex. He will know that, in line with the position in the country generally, the vast majority—about 90 per cent.—of bus services in Essex are provided by commercial operators without any subsidy from the local authority. They are not contracted services but are provided by the operators in response to consumer

demand, so they have to be profitable. I understand that a reasonable peak-time service is generally provided in urban areas and on routes into urban areas but, as we have heard, there are some problems with the adequacy of the service, especially to rural areas. In talking about young people and the elderly, my hon. Friend highlighted the impact that a poor service can have on certain groups in such communities.

In common with the rest of the country, rural areas in Essex are most likely to rely on contracted services that are subsidised by the local authority. Essex county council acknowledges that there have been several service cuts and frequency reductions, which have resulted from commercial decisions made by the operators. An additional £450,000 has been allocated to the county's local bus subsidy budget for this financial year and the next. That enables some of the gaps created by the commercial service withdrawals to be filled. My hon. Friend mentioned service 90 from Maldon to Witham and service 73 from Maldon to Chelmsford as two of the most important routes.

I recognise that local authority budgets are frequently under pressure and that difficult decisions need to be made concerning competing priorities. Quality partnerships offer one of the first opportunities for service improvements. They relate to one of my hon. Friend's main questions, which is how we are to persuade commercial operators to take on some of the social responsibility for sustaining services in communities where demand is low. That is a good question and the answer—as I think he is implying—is not simply to allow operators to reduce those services and then lob in more public money to sustain the operators. We should get them to the table to talk about how they can sustain and, if possible, develop demand for bus services, and quality partnerships provide opportunities for that. They recognise the fundamental role of local authorities in improving public transport—something to which he subscribes—in particular, their traffic management responsibilities.

There are now about 150 different quality partnership schemes in towns and cities throughout the country and they show that getting the operators to sit down with other stakeholders and community representatives can improve the quality of the service, thereby sustaining and in some instances increasing demand. That has a knock-on effect in sustaining the profitability, or at least the financial viability, of a particular route.

For example, bus operators can be persuaded to think about the standard of their vehicle, or its size. It may not be commercially viable for a single-decker bus with 30 seats to trundle around a country lane, but using a smaller vehicle could make the route viable. Operators are not incentivised to think about such issues on their own, but through the quality partnership mechanism such measures have been introduced in other parts of the country. Essex county council is seeking to establish a bus quality partnership with the operators in the area. An example is route 42 in Chelmsford, which serves major housing areas, two hospitals and the town centre. Through quality partnerships, I hope that we can persuade the operators to think about those issues.

On the possibility of service frequency enhancements, we want local authorities to be able to buy in additional frequency on bus routes that they are not already securing. That could be an effective way of pump priming particular routes, perhaps to influence modal shift or meet other local objectives. Our experience suggests that although such measures were supposed to be possible under existing powers, in practice there have been problems and local authorities may have been deterred by legal restraints on doing anything to inhibit competition. The Transport Bill will clarify that position and also help integration.

My hon. Friend mentioned the additional funding that the Government have introduced in several ways to support rural services. It amounts to £175 million in three years, to next April, and it has been specifically targeted to guarantee the protection of transport in rural communities.

We will build on the success of the introduction of the rural bus subsidy grant. Nationally, there are more than 1,800 new or improved services, and Essex's share of that grant is £1.05 million per annum. I understand that following extensive consultations with local c :munities, the funding is providing new countywide links for work, shopping and school journeys, and about 250,000 passenger journeys were made on those services in Essex last year. There will be another £100 million to enable that grant to continue at present levels for three years from next April.

As my hon. Friend says, under the rural bus challenge Essex county council received more than £800,000 for the innovative Dengie peninsula village scheme using accessible seven-seater vehicles connecting with a regular conventional service operating to the main towns in the area. My hon. Friend may be aware that Ministers do not often receive letters of thanks from the public; such was the impact of that service, however, that Ministers received such letters. Calls are already being made for vehicles to be increased in size so that more passengers can avail themselves of the service. We should aim to replicate elsewhere the impact of that rural bus challenge scheme.

My hon. Friend referred to services in urban areas, which is an important issue in some Essex towns. The urban bus challenge will issue guidance and invite areas to make their bids as soon as possible, with the aim of starting the first rounds of new projects next year. That opportunity should be considered in Braintree and other parts of Essex.

Local authorities play a most important role in respect of bus services. Local authorities and bus operators must work constructively together to meet bus travellers' needs—that necessity cannot be overstated. The introduction of local transport plans means that authorities must now have clear strategies for buses in their areas. The 10-year plan includes the investment of £19 billion of public money to modernise transport in every region, which will provide a major incentive for local authorities to develop the priorities for their areas. The local transport plans that the Department is assessing contain many forward-looking proposals.

Last December, we increased by 25 per cent. Essex county council's allocation for integrated transport in its provisional local transport plan and we are now assessing its first full local transport plan. To enable local authorities to build upon initiatives proposed in their provisional plans, we have increased by 35 per cent.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

the resources available nationally for those first plans. That should enable local authorities such as Essex to progress with their strategies.

I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that buses are a key element of Essex county council's road passenger transport policy—that is reflected in its local transport plan. However, we expect bus operators to rise to the challenges ahead—a point that my hon. Friend stressed. We hope to build on the best that we have, ensuring that we provide bus services that meet the demands of rural and urban areas.

I cannot comment on the quality of the plan submitted by Essex or any other authority because decisions on the local transport plan settlements are not due until December. However, I have noted that the county is working closely with the bus operators to increase bus use and that that is a priority in its plan. The county's proposals include several important schemes to aid bus services.

More work needs to be done and difficulties must be overcome for us to reach the standards that we want in all areas, including rural areas. However, I believe that the industry, local authorities and all others involved are motivated by the resources provided, which enable them to get together as partners to deal with the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

I hope that my hon. Friend will accept my acknowledgement of the difficulties faced by the communities to which he referred, which he outlined clearly. However, I hope that he will acknowledge—as he has before—that the Government have put in place measures for development and resources that will allow people on the ground to bring bus operators to the table, through the local authorities. As a result of our provisions, those parties can work together in partnership to tackle the problems that people in his community face.

Incinerator Proposals (Surrey)

12 noon

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I am delighted to be debating this important subject today. It is the first opportunity that any hon. Member has had to put Ministers on the spot over their proposals for incineration plants since the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs launched its inquiry in the summer. On 23 October 2000, the Environment Sub-Committee published "Delivering Sustainable Waste Management", a valuable body of evidence showing that the Government have adopted the wrong strategy for taking waste management forward in this country.

I raise the subject in respect of Surrey, where there are some outstanding planning applications. The process will continue for months, but decisions will start to be taken soon. There has been a lack of proper guidance, and questions are being raised about the way in which the Government are planning waste management. Those issues are being raised at every level, and we need clear answers now because we cannot afford to wait any longer.

Almost 10,000 letters have been written to Surrey county council about a proposed incinerator plant in Guildford and 7,000 letters have been received by the Environment Agency on the same proposal. There is a very high level of public concern in the constituency that I represent and in other parts of Surrey, such as Capel and Redhill, where similar incinerators have been proposed by other operators. The Government's plans have generated a lot of heat, but today the heat is on the Minister and we want him to give some clear answers.

Incineration is a flawed policy. For many years in this country we enjoyed the luxury of landfill and we are almost the largest users of landfill strategy among the advanced countries. A major advantage of that has been that the cost of dealing with waste in this country has been low. However, a huge disadvantage is that it is not a sustainable policy as landfill sites are used up.

At this point, the Government could respond in two ways. They could look forward to see what other countries are planning for the next 10 or 20 years and examine their strategies for dealing with waste, or they could copy what other countries have done when they have moved beyond landfill. It is increasingly clear that the Government have decided to follow the next stage in the historic progression from landfill sites to incineration. The public relations benefit is that incineration with an energy content has a green tinge but, unfortunately, it also has a health warning attached and the implications for the places where the plants are built have generated much local concern.

It is worth recalling some of the evidence that the Select Committee has received during the few months in which it has been considering the matter. As Friends of the Earth said in its submission:

> High recycling rates in other countries show that we could easily meet EU targets for diverting biodegradable municipal waste through recycling and composting, and citizens are angry at our failure to match these achievements.

From the other end of the spectrum, the Road Haulage Association said:

> We consider the current average size of energy-from-waste plant as inimical to both waste reduction and to the development of a sustainable market for recyclables. Plants of a throughput of 200,000 tonnes per annum or above--

the size that is being considered in Guildford—

> require long-term contracts guaranteeing the

amount of waste going through. It also said:

> As such they limit, and possibly preclude, the development of alternatives, particularly when new opportunities appear.

Therefore, not only is the Government's strategy a tired failure as far as other countries are concerned—in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, no new incinerator plants have been built during the last five years—but incinerators may pre-empt our advance to the more positive strategies of recycling waste and, equally importantly, increasing the pressure on producers to limit the amount of waste that their products generate by cutting down on packaging and rethinking the way in which they bring their products to the market.

Today, I seek a general statement of principles from the Minister. I understand that he cannot deal with specific planning applications such as the one in Guildford, but in the light of my experience as a constituency Member of Parliament and the points raised by the example of my constituency, many of the flaws in the Government's policy will become apparent.

One problem is the Government's announcement of the principle of proximity. The Government would not propose to build a giant smokestack in the middle of a historic county town such as Guildford, which today depends on high-technology and service businesses, were it not for the single argument—which is repeated time and again—that that would deal with the waste where it is produced. That is the proximity principle.

However, the plant that has been proposed for Guildford and other such sites would require six times the waste that is generated locally. Building on the proximity principle would mean drawing in a great deal of waste from other areas, which would be contrary to the proximity principle.

What is the proximity principle? I have received a letter from the chief executive of Guildford borough council, which has lodged serious objections to the local proposal. It says:

> Planning Policy Guidance No. 10, issued by the Government in 1999, deals with the proximity principle in one line as follows:-
>
> "Waste should generally be managed as near as possible to its place of production because transporting waste itself has an environmental impact."

It is vital to both planning authorities and local people that the Government define the proximity principle more precisely. For example, is the proximity principle so important to the Government that building incinerators in urban areas overrides other normal planning considerations? Does it make sense to build a plant that will dominate the skyline of our county town with a chimney that is higher than Guildford cathedral? Should we permit the building of a plant that is the same height as the Clock Tower that houses Big Ben, given that, according to the planning criteria for any other development of the site, such an intrusion would be unacceptable in any terms to any right-thinking planning authority? I therefore hope that we receive clearer guidance on the proximity principle from the Government.

It is noticeable that the evidence that the Department gave to the inquiry did not include a single paragraph on the proximity principle. The Department dealt with its waste strategy, but not with that principle. As the local pressure group, Guildford anti-incinerator network, pointed out, we in Surrey import a great deal of waste to landfill sites, so the proximity principle is being applied inequitably. It does not apply to landfill, where we suffer, but apparently it will be applied to incineration, where we might have other alternatives on our doorstep.

Another problem with the proximity principle is that it is unenforceable. Once the plant is built, it is not planning but commercial pressures that will dictate where the waste comes from. Energy-from-waste plants need a continuous feed of waste. If the plant had to warm up and cool down between the periods when it is dealing with waste, the efficiency and commercial viability of the plant would be immediately drawn into question. I hope that the Minister will frame his answer on the proximity principle in the context of the damage that those plants could do to the local environment and the local economy.

The Energy from Waste Association, which represents those who build and run the incinerators, has pointed out that the Government's plan for 75 incinerators throughout the country is a hopeless over-estimate. According to the association, the figures for growth in incineration

> demonstrate that claims...that the strategy will lead to a flood of new EFW plants in the UK, are misplaced. Over the next 10 years, the industry predicts that some 15 new plants will be needed--very much in line with the numbers planned by developer companies before the strategy was published.

Therefore, before the Government announced their plan for 75 incinerator plants throughout the country, the industry was planning to build only 15 plants. It is time for the Government to take another look at those projections, and recognise that an incineration strategy that establishes a few plants in places where they will do least damage is better than the proliferation of speculative developments that we are witnessing in Surrey and other parts of the country.

Will the Minister please make it clear whether his Department intends to stick by the principle that each county should deal with its own waste? Surrey is one of the smallest counties, and over half our area is covered by the green belt. It is proving impossible to find a site for an incineration plant that is acceptable to the local community and makes commercial sense. Local people—be they in Guildford, Capel or Redhill—are up in arms, and rightly so. On the other hand, just a few miles across the Surrey border in Colnbrook, which is near Heathrow airport, permission has already been granted for a new, far bigger incineration plant that can process 400,000 tonnes a year. Grundon, the project developer and owner of the site, has made it clear that it is keen to take Surrey's residual incineration requirement. Would that be acceptable to the Minister? If we were to decide to transfer part of the operation to

[Mr. Nick St. Aubyn]

an incineration plant located a few miles outside our county, would our new waste strategy grant, which is worth £100 million, remain secure?

I should not leave this issue without raising the health concerns that, in many ways, have sparked the most resistance in the country as a whole. It is quite something for Labour Back Benchers such as the hon. Member for Castle Point (Mrs. Butler), who is a member of the Environment Sub-Committee, to accuse Whitehall of secretive behaviour and a cover-up in respect of the health risk. It is worrying to note that departmental officials did not disclose correspondence with the Environment Agency that suggested that the risk from cancer-causing dioxins may be far greater than was first thought. In June, when I raised that issue in the House with the Minister for the Environment, I was assured that there was no health risk. However, evidence that has since been submitted to his Department suggests that there are very real concerns. That is why the Conservative party has made it clear that we would impose a moratorium on new incinerators until all the health concerns have been investigated thoroughly and openly.

Only a couple of weeks ago, a headline in *The Observer* said that "Toxic fumes from refuse ovens could kill 9,000". The accompanying report pointed out that, based on the Government's own figures, the proposed new incinerators could produce 17,000 tonnes of nitrous oxides each year. Moreover, according to a recent report by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 50 tonnes of nitrous oxides would, on average, lead to one death. Over a period of 25 years, that would amount to nearly 9,000 deaths.

I do not know whether those estimates are true, but they are causing my constituents immense concern. So is the revelation that, according to the latest evidence, existing incinerator plants double the risk of cancer in children who live within three miles of sites that were built and operated in the past 25 years. There is a democratic deficiency, because the Environment Agency, not the local authority, judges the health issue. The local authority, within its planning remit, cannot take that into account.

It is time for a new approach, placing more emphasis on recycling. There should be a recycling target of more than 50 per cent.—it has been achieved by many American states and by many countries in Europe—rather than 25 per cent. That would completely remove the need to build new plants. It is time for the Government to rethink and to restore the confidence of my constituents and people throughout the country who believe that speculative developments, sponsored by the Government's programme and subsidies, threaten their local community.

12.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) has raised an important issue. We still have a long way to go before the public take recycling as seriously as they should. The hon. Gentleman and I probably agree that we cannot keep digging deep holes in the ground and filling them up because, apart from the environmental effects of landfill, we are running out of holes.

Guildford in particular and Surrey in general have a relatively good record of recycling, but even there, there is a long way to go. There are some problems with the public perception of the issue, and it is the job of responsible politicians not to whip up misunderstanding or to seek cheap votes but to help to confront the public with stark choices.

I was told a while ago about a survey conducted in Guildford, in which several options for the disposal of waste were suggested on a questionnaire that was put through people's doors. One suggestion was to export more waste—it did not say to where, but presumably it was to anywhere but Guildford. That option, unsurprisingly, attracted the highest response. That is not realistic and the hon. Gentleman is not proposing that option, but, as I said, it is the job of responsible politicians to help to confront such issues responsibly.

No one is forcing Guildford to build an incinerator in the town centre or anywhere else; how waste is disposed of is a matter for local decision. The Government have set out targets, which we insist must be met. If, as the hon. Gentleman said, there are alternatives, it is for the local authority to adopt them and for people like the hon. Gentleman to make the relevant suggestions, which we would welcome. There should be a serious debate on the issue, but much of what the hon. Gentleman said should be said to his local authority, not to the Government.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: I will in a moment.

The hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the Government have plans for 75 incinerators is false; we have set no figure on the number of incinerators that will be necessary. As I shall explain if I have time, we recognise that incineration has a part to play in waste strategy, but it is utterly false to suggest that we have a big programme for incinerators.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether it was the Government's policy that waste should not be transported across boundaries. That is not our policy; we recognise that waste can be transported across boundaries, but we aim for regional self-sufficiency.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister confirm that the grant of £100 million to help Surrey to develop a new strategy would not be jeopardised because, regarding our incineration plans, we came up with an alternative solution to burning within the county boundaries?

Mr. Mullin: As the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, I cannot talk about particular applications in Surrey because they may eventually be referred to my Department, so I cannot get too involved in the detail of particular schemes. I can repeat that we are not forcing any authority to set up lots of incinerators. There are alternatives and we are anxious that they are pursued; the Government will provide incentives to ensure that they are.

The tone of the hon. Gentleman's speech and his mock indignation come ill from a member of a party which, when in government for many years, was—to put

it mildly—lethargic in its approach to recycling. The present Government are considerably more energetic in that respect. We recognise the difficult issues that must be faced: they cannot be dodged and we shall not dodge them.

As you are aware, Mr. Maxton, in May this year we published the national waste strategy, setting out the Government's policy for sustainable waste management in the next 20 years. The strategy identifies the need for a giant change in the way that we think about and manage our waste. It will mean curbing the growth in waste and learning to recognise waste as a resource. The Government are committed to dramatic increases in recycling and composting. We shall also need to recover energy from waste where doing so represents the best practical environmental option. Care must, however, be taken to ensure that any plans for incineration do not crowd out recycling. That was the hon. Gentleman's argument.

For the first time ever, the Government are setting statutory targets for household waste recycling and composting. They will require councils, on average, to double recycling by 2003-04 and triple it by 2005-06. We have set even higher targets for 2010 and 2015 and we shall keep them under review, raising them if practicable.

A key driver behind these goals is the European landfill directive, which will require substantial changes to the way in which we manage our waste. At present, the United Kingdom landfills more than 80 per cent. of its biodegradable municipal waste. The directive will require substantial reductions in the amount of waste sent to landfill. If waste continues to grow at the current rate, by 2020 we would need to divert 33 million tonnes of waste from landfill each year. Recycling and composting alone will not deliver the rates of diversion necessary to meet the targets in the landfill directive. We must all face up to that reality.

Any increase in incineration should be part of an integrated, sustainable system of waste management. Authorities in the incineration industry need to plan to ensure that expansion in securing energy from waste does not crowd out recycling. Contracts should allow flexibility and ensure that incineration does not compete with recycling. Incinerator operators should always maximise the environmental benefits of their facilities by including combined heat and power.

Other European countries are already achieving recycling rates far in advance of our own, largely because they make widespread use of energy from waste. The problems mentioned by the hon. Gentleman have not materialised. The Netherlands and Switzerland both have an extremely good record, which we would be wise to emulate. They both incinerate to far greater levels than we do.

We are aware that plans by local authorities to increase recycling and composting rates and divert waste from landfill will place an extra burden on their finances. We announced in the spending review that major new funding would be made available to local authorities.

It is to Surrey's credit that, faced with a lack of local landfill capacity, it sought more sustainable waste management options instead of looking towards more distant landfill—with all the environmental impacts, particularly increased traffic movements, that that would entail. Increased traffic movements are an important factor. Under the statutory targets, Surrey will have to increase its recycling rate from 13 per cent. to 26 per cent. by 2003-04.

I fully understand local people's concerns about the proposed development of an energy-from-waste plant in Surrey. However, emissions from such plants are strictly regulated and we are confident that the current environmental protection standards are sufficient to protect the environment and public health. We also strongly support a forthcoming European directive on incineration, which will set even tighter emission standards.

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Gentleman wants me to get to the proximity principle. There is a chance that I will, but it diminishes if he intervenes on me.

The provisions of the European directive on incineration will update the environmental standards of existing directives in respect of advances in technology, and introduce water discharge controls for the first time. The hon. Gentleman quoted an article in *The Observer*. It is probably based on a report by environmental consultants called Entec, who suggested that the environmental benefits of new tighter standards would be that 51 deaths and 97 hospitalisations of people with an existing respiratory illness would be avoided. The hon. Gentleman should be aware, however, that Entec subsequently found a mathematical error in its calculations and the figures should not be 51 and 97, but six and seven respectively—a difference by a factor of about 12. Entec has corrected its mistake and we look forward to Greenpeace, *The Observer*, *The Guardian* and anyone else who printed the story acknowledging that mistake. I am not holding my breath on that.

The proximity principle advises that waste should generally be managed as near as possible to its place of production. That is because transporting waste has an environmental impact. Dealing with waste in this way is generally preferable to exporting it elsewhere although for certain waste, especially hazardous or toxic waste, transporting to specially designed facilities may be the best practical option. The proximity principle will apply to Surrey in the way that it applies to any other waste planning authority. PPG10, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, advises that the proximity principle is one of the principles–not the only one–of waste management that needs to be taken into account in identifying the combination of facilities and other waste management options that give the best balance between environmental, social and economic needs.

The proximity principle is not a statutory requirement and would not overrule other planning rules, but it would be a material planning consideration to be taken into account by a waste planning authority in deciding any planning applications for waste management facilities. Planning permission for a waste facility would not specify any distance from the facility within which all waste would have to be managed. Account would have to be taken of existing waste disposal authority contracts and the proximity of alternative waste facilities.

[Mr. Mullin]

I suppose that if I could put the proximity principle in layman's terms that would be readily understandable both to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents, it is that *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* readers cannot expect that their waste will be disposed of in the back yards of *Sun* and *Mirror* readers. We expect the people who produce the waste to take some responsibility for its disposal.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Would the Minister not acknowledge that higher-earning groups have the best track record of recycling waste? That has been shown across Europe and America. Would he not also acknowledge that in Surrey in particular we have imported a great deal of waste for landfill from London and other areas? Far from relying on others to deal with our waste, we have been dealing with theirs for years.

Mr. Mullin: I certainly will acknowledge that last point. The track record of councils across the country is variable. Some local authorities in relatively prosperous areas have a good track record, and some in areas that are not so prosperous have a bad track record. Nevertheless, I believe that my layman's approach to the proximity principle still holds.

I hope that my comments today will be of some use to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. Many of the points that he made are arguments that he needs to have with his local authority. He should not go round whipping up spurious indignation against the Government when his party, when in government, did little on this issue. I used the word "lethargic" a while ago. That is the gentlest way to put it.

Mr. John Maxton (in the Chair): It may be for the convenience of hon. Members to remind them that because I am a temporary occupant of the Chair, I am addressed not as Mr. Deputy Speaker, but as Mr. Maxton.

Organ Donation

12.29 pm

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): My interest in the subject of organ donation—I am glad to have the opportunity to raise it in debate—stems principally from the presence of the Leeds general infirmary and St. James's hospital in my constituency. I also want to express the appreciation that I am sure all hon. Members feel for the work done by the all-party kidney group. The debate today is about organ donation in general, not just kidneys, but I shall refer to kidneys in particular.

Leeds is the fifth largest of 30 centres nationally providing kidney transplants, and the third largest of seven national centres for liver transplants. The first transplant in the city of Leeds was done in 1967, 13 years after the world's first, in Boston. Interestingly, that was a living donation—one twin gave a kidney to the other. About 100 kidney transplants a year are carried out in Leeds, but about 350 people are waiting and the number is growing, as is the number of people on dialysis, by about 12 per cent. a year. Cadaveric donation remains the main source of kidneys, although in recent years live donation has come to play an increasingly important role.

The figures from Leeds reflect what is happening nationally. Although the number of kidney transplants in the United Kingdom has risen from just over 1,000 20 years ago to just under 6,000 last year, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of people waiting for a transplant—about 6,500 men, women and children. We know that the number of patients with end-stage renal failure who start dialysis is predicted to grow by a further 30 per cent. in the next few years. If we cannot do something to increase the rates of organ donation we shall have an even more serious problem than we have now.

The reasons for the gap are well understood. First, there has been a welcome decline in the number of people killed on the roads. Secondly, better treatment is now available in hospital for people with brain injuries. Thirdly, the development of surgical skill and immuno-suppressive drugs has greatly increased the success rates, and therefore demand, for transplantation. In addition, we are all living a little longer. The result is a shortage of organs. That means that every year people die while waiting for an organ to become available.

That point was made forcefully to me last year when I met Mr. Padgett and Mr. Liddell, the representatives of the kidney patients associations at the Leeds general infirmary and St. James's hospital in my constituency. That conversation was directly responsible for the scheme that was launched on 1 November, which will allow bank and credit card customers to carry the organ donor symbol on their card.

The idea is simple. Although about 8.5 million people are on the organ donor register, we do not always carry our organ donor card with us. We may leave it at home in a drawer; it could be in the house that we moved from some years ago; we may lose it. However, there is one card that we always carry with us when we leave home in the morning and that we take great care of—our bank or credit card. I am sure that all hon. Members in Westminster Hall this morning could immediately point to the place where they keep their bank or credit card.

If we could make that bit of plastic another means of carrying a donor card, with 45 million credit cards in the country and between 35 million and 45 million bank debit cards, there is the potential to add to the 8.5 million people already on the organ donor register, and therefore the potential to make a big difference to the number of organ donors. To do that, we need as many banks and credit card companies as possible to take part. I pay tribute to the response to the initiative from Goldfish, the first credit card company to take it up. Having heard about the idea, the company expressed interest. Having shown that it could be made to work, it demonstrated commitment to it.

That commitment is crucial, because it has shown the rest of the industry that the proposition is practical. From January, Goldfish will ask new customers or existing customers whose card is to be renewed: "Do you want to be an organ donor or are you one already?" If the answer to either of those questions is yes, Goldfish will issue its ordinary credit card, but with the organ donor symbol on it, and pass the customer's name and address to the organ donor register. That is the essence of the scheme.

Apart from allowing a new way to register and therefore a method of maximising the chance that the donor card will be carried, the scheme has an added advantage: it may help to keep the organ donor register more up-to-date. When we move home, the chances are that we do not tell the register that we have moved, although we do tell our bank and credit card company. If the scheme takes off, the banks will be able to help United Kingdom Transplant to keep a more accurate register of donors' addresses by passing on data.

There has been considerable support for the scheme from Visa and Europay—responsible for Mastercard—whose symbols feature prominently on our pieces of plastic. Nationwide and MBNA are sending leaflets to their customers to encourage organ donation. The Department of Health has given unstinting support not only at ministerial level, but among officials, who have got their teeth into the idea and shown government at its best by working in partnership with others to make something happen. That has included giving participant companies the flexibility to ask their customers just one question—"Do you want to become an organ donor?"—to get people on the register, rather than going through each organ individually, as happens with the donor card. United Kingdom Transplant has also given support and help in enabling companies easily to transfer information about customers who want to be organ donors on to their systems. While I am in a generous mood, I thank hon. Members who have signed early-day motion 1107 in support of the initiative.

I simply hope that, where Goldfish has chosen to lead, the rest of the industry will follow. We have had two meetings with representatives from several banks and credit card companies, and I have corresponded with the British Bankers Association. A lot of interest has been shown and the response has been positive. However, to get the critical mass that we want and need, we must turn that interest and good will into action. The hopes of many people concerned with organ donation and transplantation will now be with those companies that, because they produce a valuable piece of plastic, hold one key to increasing the number of organ donors.

If the scheme takes off, asking millions of customers about organ donation will be a valuable way of raising awareness and encouraging us to discuss with our nearest and dearest our wishes in the event that something happens to us. All the evidence shows that such a conversation is absolutely vital because it is practice—rightly—always to ask relatives for their consent. In addition, organ transplant co-ordinators say that it is rare for relatives, knowing that someone wanted to donate organs in the event of his death, to withhold permission. The more companies that participate, the more people who are asked and the more conversations that take place, the greater the chance that we will increase the number of organ donors and of relatives who give permission.

This scheme is one approach, but there are many others. In 1998, the Department launched a national publicity campaign, which has been widely welcomed, and other initiatives are in operation. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency asks people applying for driving licences whether they want to take part. Boots launched its Advantage card and allowed the organ donor symbol to go on it. In my part of the world, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* is running a carry-the-card campaign. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) hopes to say a few words about another campaign with which he is involved. They are all ways of raising the profile of organ donation as we move towards the target, set by the Royal College of Surgeons, of 10 million organ donors.

The donor card is, however, just one aspect of the supply of organs. Another is the practice in hospitals in dealing with potential donors. I was interested to read the Royal College of Surgeons' working party report on transplantation, which was published in January last year, not least because it made some interesting points about organ identification and recovery in hospitals. Could my hon. Friend the Minister tell us what work is being done to support the development of non-heart-beating donor programmes in respect of kidneys? According to the report, Newcastle has the highest kidney donation rate in the country because it has such a programme. I am not medically qualified or especially technically gifted, but the report drew attention to the need to obtain what is called pre-arranged consent from the coroner to allow in situ perfusion of the kidneys following cardiac arrest, prior to asking relatives' consent. I understand that such permission must be negotiated on an area-by-area basis. Could that issue be taken up nationally?

Another issue that I should like to identify is the practice of hospitals in identifying potential donors and checking the register to establish whether they have expressed a wish to become a donor. It would be helpful if my hon. Friend the Minister would say what work is being done to ensure that good practice in particular hospitals becomes best practice throughout the national health service. I should also be grateful if she would comment on the impact of the number of intensive therapy beds on the possibility of keeping patients ventilated while they are considered for their suitability for organ donation.

I am aware that there has been considerable debate about a proposed change in the law to require people to opt out if they do not want their organs to be used, which is referred to as "presumed consent". I do not

[Mr. Hilary Benn]

support that approach. If hon. Members will pardon the pun, it would be presumptuous to presume on a matter that must be one of personal choice. In any event, the recent controversy about post mortems and the retention of body parts in hospitals throughout the country demonstrates, if such demonstration were necessary, how sensitive the matter is. Better information is the key to enlightened consent.

We must recognise that people have strong feelings about what they want done with their body when the time comes for the spirit, wherever it goes, to shake off our mortal remains. At the risk of denying worms and grubs further sustenance, I am happy for my organs to be used, but we must recognise that many people feel differently. Interestingly, a National Kidney Research Fund poll found that whereas 77 per cent. of those who said that they were willing to become organ donors would be willing to donate a kidney, only 11 per cent. said that they wanted to donate their liver—I do not understand the distinction—and only 6 per cent. their cornea. That shows that people have different feelings, in particular about their eyes.

As everyone has different views, and because there are different cultures and religious standpoints, earlier this year Professor Sandy Davison from Leeds organised a conference on the issue in Bradford. I read the report, and although it seems that the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faiths all have no difficulty with organ donation as a matter of principle, that is not always reflected in the decisions of family members from those faiths. That in part accounts for the lower rate of donation from ethnic minority communities even though their rates of kidney failure are some three to four times that of the population as a whole. Does my hon. Friend the Minister believe that there might be some benefit in taking the good initiative of West Yorkshire and examining whether it would be worth doing something at national level to raise awareness so that people know about the attitude of their faith community and so that that position can be publicised?

Organ donation is of course the best and only route available at present, although we have great hopes about possibilities for the future, such as xenotransplantation and the product of stem-cell research. Such developments may become available as we understand more about how we are made and made up. A book that I read yesterday expressed the hope that

> some day it may be possible to patch up an injured kidney with a cluster of kidney cells grown in a test tube from a tissue culture.

That book was written 35 years ago, and we are still waiting. For the time being, those 6,500 people who are still waiting for the gift of life need a donor organ. While we await further scientific and medical progress, the best and most practical contribution that we can make today is to ensure that we do everything that we can, leaving no stone unturned and no initiative untried, to increase the number of organs available for donation. As Professor Davison from Leeds said to me yesterday, "We have got to keep at it." I could not agree more.

12.45 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) for securing the debate and allowing me to speak briefly. I also pay tribute to my constituents Mr. M. Bewick, a consultant renal transplant surgeon at St. George's hospital in south-west London, and Jane Cooper, who led the Donor 2001 scheme. Mr. Bewick pointed out that every survey carried out has found that a minimum of 65 per cent. of the population want to donate their organs, but less than 1 per cent. are able to do so because the relevant card and information are not available. Miss Cooper has been pushing for a question to be included in the census, and although it is obviously too late for the coming census, there should be a debate on how that might be achieved for the following one.

I support an extension of one of my hon. Friend's many ideas that was pursued by Mr. Bewick and Miss Cooper, having pursued it with my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary. The idea is to ensure that the electoral registration forms distributed each year by local authorities include a donor registration form in the same envelope. Both forms could, if the elector so wishes, be returned to the local authority, which could pass any donor registration forms to the national organ donor register. Of almost 500 local authorities in the United Kingdom, some 28 currently do so.

The key is to find a way to extend the scheme. In a written answer that I received on 6 November, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary supported the extension of such a scheme on a voluntary basis. Will my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health find out whether it might be possible to survey all councils in the UK to determine which of them already have such a scheme and whether donor registration forms are sent annually? Will she ask the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to mention including donor registration forms with electoral registration forms in the best practice documentation that it issues to every local authority?

12.47 pm

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) for raising this important issue, on which he has done a lot of work. I join him in paying tribute to the work that is being done in his Leeds constituency, at St. James's hospital. Much of that work obviously makes a difference to my constituents in Pontefract and Castleford, too. I should also like to place on the record my thanks to him for the time and effort that he has put into the issue, especially in promoting the Goldfish scheme to join the national health service organ donor register and other innovative programmes, to which I shall return later.

My hon. Friend is right. We face serious challenges in transplantation services due to the shortage of organs. Until 10 November 2000, 2,164 people had received life-saving operations. Each year, organs from about 900 donors give a new lease of life to nearly 3,000 people throughout the United Kingdom, and a further 3,000 have their sight restored as a result of organ donation. Transplants are now so successful that many more patients can be considered for such treatment. More are being added to waiting lists every week, and that is faster than organs are becoming available. There are now 6,733 people on the waiting list for transplantation in the UK. The vast majority are waiting for kidney transplants, and will have a reduced quality of life on

dialysis. For those waiting for heart and liver transplants there is no alternative, and some will, sadly, die while they are waiting.

My hon. Friend is right that one of the reasons for the shortage of organs is success in other areas of policy, including safety on the roads and better treatment. Potential donors are usually those who have had unexpected, traumatic and untimely deaths. Many families find solace in the thought that their relatives' organs will be used to give life to others. I pay tribute to those who agree to donate organs for the impact that those decisions can have on huge numbers of families across the country.

Three out of four families who are asked about relatives' organ donations agree to the request. However, potential donors can be lost when families are not asked in the first place, when they are not aware of all the issues involved and, most important, when families are not aware of the wishes of the deceased. My hon. Friend is right that when a family knows that a relative wanted to donate organs, it is rare for that family to refuse the donation. I also agree that consent is vital and a fundamental principle. The views of relatives are critical, and underlie the principles of organ donation. Much work is under way to improve organ donation and increase the supply of organs for transplantation. However, much more work remains to be done. We need to be imaginative along the lines described by my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds, Central and for Putney (Mr. Colman), in order to raise awareness and communicate people's wishes to their relatives and to the national health service.

Last year, we welcomed the reports of the Royal College of Surgeons and the British Medical Association on the future development of transplantation services. In February, following the review of the United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority, we announced an extensive package of measures to increase the availability of organs for transplantation, along the lines of the recommendations set out in the reports. Those measures include the development of United Kingdom Transplant to promote organ procurement throughout the NHS; ensuring that best practice in organ procurement is shared; expanding and supporting the network of transplant co-ordinators; mounting publicity campaigns with a wide range of commercial organisations; increasing the provision of intensive treatment unit beds, and working with the Royal College of Surgeons and other professional bodies to ensure that all transplant units are staffed to deliver a high quality of service.

Three key issues exist: first, increasing people's awareness and willingness to donate organs; secondly, increasing access to those patients and changing the number of questions asked by the NHS when a potential donor is found; and, thirdly, increasing the quality of care to make the best possible use of organs when they are donated and to maximise the impact on patients' lives. I shall take each of those in turn.

It is important that people sign up to the organ donor register and communicate their wishes to their relatives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central said, that can be an extremely sensitive and difficult issue for families to confront. In October 1998, we launched the organ donation publicity campaign. The aims of the campaign are to raise public awareness of the shortage of organs for transplantation, and to attract new potential donors by persuading people to express their wish now to be an organ or tissue donor in the event of their death—ideally, by registering on the NHS organ donor register and by carrying a donor card, or by making their wishes known to family and friends. More than 8 million people are now registered—about 14 per cent. of the population—but we need to reach many more people.

The NHS organ donor register was set up six years ago to give people the opportunity to register their willingness to be a donor and to ensure that a record of donor wishes is available 24 hours a day. Clearly, we also need new and innovative ways to raise awareness and communicate those wishes to relatives. I therefore pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on using bank and credit cards as a way of raising awareness and signing people up to the organ donor register. The work of Goldfish is very welcome and I am delighted that other companies are now interested in it. It has huge potential, particularly among commercial ventures, to encourage people to support the organ donor register.

I also welcome the proposals by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney to encourage local authorities to issue invitations to join the organ donor register. We are aware that several local authorities issued invitations to join the register as part of their electoral canvass. I am advised that United Kingdom Transplant could supply information about the outcome of that activity and I shall ask my officials to supply the information to my hon. Friend also.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central referred to the importance of reaching different faiths and different communities. He was absolutely right to do so, and the shortage of donor organs is more acute among members of some ethnic minority communities because of the relatively high rate of diabetes, coronary heart disease, hypertension and kidney disease.

Although about 3 per cent. of the United Kingdom population are of Asian origin, about 15 per cent. of those on the United Kingdom kidney transplant waiting list are of Asian origin. We are also aware that there is a higher rate of family objections among that community. That can cause problems with kidneys in particular, because it is important to match the tissue type of the donor to the recipient and tissue types vary according to ethnic group, so some people from one ethnic group will reject organs from some other ethnic groups. That is why it is so important to promote organ donation sensitively throughout every community. For that reason we launched the South Asian Community Campaign in February 1999 to recruit more donors from that community. We are currently developing a similar campaign aimed at the African and Afro-Caribbean communities.

The Department was happy to support the multi-faith conference in Bradford last year, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central referred. I am advised that all the speakers at that event emphasised the value of transplantation and offered their support for organ donation as a worthwhile activity compatible with their faith. We must build on that work and we have maintained links with the leaders of the faith communities who spoke on that occasion and, through them, with their communities.

[Yvette Cooper]

Other innovative schemes to promote organ donation include that of Boots the chemist, which promotes organ donation through its in-store loyalty card. HTV West and Meridian adopted the NHS organ donor register in their Year of the Promise campaign and *The Sun* has run a campaign urging readers to join the register. We must work throughout the community to ensure that willing and suitable donors are identified, and that an approach is made to their families. That requires a whole-hospital approach.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central asked what we could do in the NHS to ensure best practice. We must adopt a whole-hospital approach to promote the value of organ donation throughout the organisation. In one example in the west midlands, all trust chief executives have agreed to do so. First, they will inform their staff of the trust's positive view on donation. Secondly, they will support staff when approaching relatives for donation. Thirdly, they will have further discussions with staff who are reluctant to approach families about donation. Fourthly, they will support transplant co-ordinators in their aim to promote general hospital-wide consciousness of issues concerning organ and tissue donation. We must work to ensure that such best practice exists throughout the NHS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central referred to coroners. I shall raise that matter further because we shall be discussing the matter with the Home Office. My hon. Friend also mentioned intensive treatment unit beds, and he is correct to say that we must ensure that the quality of care is available to make the most of all potential organ donation. Expansion in the number of critical care and intensive care beds is part of the picture.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter and increasing awareness of it. Anything that encourages more people to join the organ register and to be willing to donate organs can make a huge difference to families' lives.

It being One o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 November 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Developed and Developing Countries

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Like any other Member of Parliament, I know many men and women who work hard, behave responsibly and look after their families as best they can. They rate their success in life by how much they earn and, perhaps, by how much better off financially they are than their parents were at the same stage of life. Occasionally they pause for a moment, often while waiting for their commuter train or as they interrupt their Sunday evening to take yet another overseas call, and wonder whether that is all that there is to life. It is not a thought that many of them feel that they can indulge for long, and soon they are back in routine, wishing that they had a little more time to spend with their children or to care for their ageing relatives. They would be horrified to be thought selfish or greedy. Indeed, most of them feel that they are much less well off than many of their contemporaries or colleagues, and wish that they could earn a little more.

What is true of so many individuals is, in an important sense, true of countries as well. In the developed world, the industrialised countries compete furiously among themselves to win a higher national income year on year. They squabble and negotiate to ensure that they do not lose out in trade deals, or that they are not outsmarted by one of their competitors. Their politicians solemnly recite figures showing more income, higher debt repayments, more exports, more imports, more exam passes, and life expectancy being extended beyond the imaginings of earlier generations, even if the prolongation is often miserably beyond any conviviality as well.

For nearly all hon. Members, the parameters of debate are given. Our job is to see how capable our opponents are to deliver those things and to try to show that we would deliver them better. I do not believe that that is enough. The time has come for our nation to pause and ask itself where it is going and whether its current destination will bring us satisfaction. The time has also come for us to ask ourselves whether our pursuit of goals and the way in which we pursue them is justifiable in this world, almost every corner of which is better known to us than, for example, Cornwall would have been to someone growing up in Newcastle or Glasgow 100 years ago.

I have chosen only one small part of that big, philosophical debate for today. Within the scope of my title, I intend to concentrate on children. They are not only our future, but the most vulnerable part of the world's population. In many parts of the world, they are also the most numerous sector of the population. It is also appropriate, as there is to be a world summit for children in New York in September 2001.

It is not as though all is well with children in the United Kingdom. I shall take a few figures at random, and point out that 900,000 children live with parents who have problems with alcohol, and that 11,000 are in penal institutions, more than anywhere else in western Europe except Portugal. We also have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. On the Townsend measure of relative poverty, 4 million children are deemed poor.

Those statistics shame us in Britain, but they almost pale into insignificance against those on children elsewhere. UNICEF reckons that, worldwide, no fewer than 1.2 billion children—one in five—live in poverty. That is a larger number than 10 years ago. I shall provide two more statistics. Every day, 8,500 children and young people become infected with HIV-AIDS. That is a quarter of a million a month. In 1996-97, donor countries gave $350 million to the fight against the epidemic. UNICEF suggests that in that same year they gave $60 billion to keep South Korea afloat financially. What is our contribution, apart from our share of the $350 million? It is to send teams to the worst hit countries to recruit the best of their doctors and nurses because we have signally failed to predict our national needs for such staff.

It is estimated that in 10 years more than 8 million children have been killed or disabled by war. What is Britain's contribution? It is to be the world's second largest arms dealer, in a business in which everyone agrees that it is almost impossible to control the end use of arms, no matter how carefully the first user is vetted.

In the UK, there has been sporadic debate about the propriety of children delivering newspapers before they go to school. For at least 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 elsewhere in the world, the debate is a little different. For them the issue is not pocket money to spend on CDs and fast food, but rather whether, at great risk to their health and their schooling, they can turn out enough work to keep their brothers and sisters from starving to death. The fact that for most of them such toil means that they are never in school is a tragedy both now and for the rest of their lives. The future for an adult with no education looks increasingly bleak.

Listen for a moment to the voices of some Zimbabwe's farm children, living on some of the most prosperous enterprises in that country. One of them wrote:

> The houses of the farm are very small. You cannot even turn the other side. You have to wake up and go out and then come back facing the side that you want to face. The toilets are very dirty.

Another wrote:

> My father died in 1997. My mother does not work and I don't have anyone who can buy clothes for me. At this time I am little happy. There are many things which make me unhappy. If I see others wearing nice clothes, I will just look.

A third said:

> When I have finished grade seven I am going to secondary school in Mvurwi. But maybe I will not go because my father has very little wages and the money will not be enough. He will be buying mealie-meal and clothing.

I am not trying to say that the UK is doing nothing about such disparities. Indeed, the Department for International Development is working hard to improve both the scale and the effectiveness of UK development

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

aid. The Department needs to become more transparent, readier to learn from other organisations and readier to welcome and learn from complaints. However, as a new Department, it deserves to be congratulated on its progress so far. This is not a partisan occasion. A bipartisan approach is needed if we are to secure our objective. This debate is an appeal for the nation to look seriously at its own goals and ambitions and to ask itself whether they are sufficient in a world so full of human misery.

It is tempting to say that if we go on getting richer, we shall be able to do more for the poor. However, experience disproves that. Between 1992 and 1997, overseas development aid declined among the leading industrialised countries by 30 per cent., at a time when most of them were doing better than they ever had done in their history. The Government have done well to arrest the decline in overseas aid, but the truth is that, even after their welcome increase in generosity, we are spending only approximately 0.3 per cent. of our national income on aid. Yet we boast that we have the fourth largest economy in the world. What destroyed the World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle? Primarily, it was the reluctance of the richest countries on earth to make their markets available to the pathetically small output of the least developed countries. Trickledown? Pull the other one. The truth is that the rich nations, just like the rich individuals who make their policies, are spending more on preserving what they already have than on sharing it with those who have less.

We need to do a lot more, not merely to increase the sums available, but to change our perception of ourselves, our place in the world and the rights and hopes of our fellow world citizens. The insularity and triviality of so much of our media coverage of the world must change. What a Spice Girl wears, or rather does not wear, drives off the front pages anything other than the most lurid kind of disaster, and those images of disaster do not help to increase understanding and real sympathy. A change is needed in the perception of every family in the land.

If we are to secure that change, we must start with our children. I welcome the extra resources being spent by DFID on development education, but we can and should do much more. Young children have an inherent sense of justice. If they are given the information about how much more they have than other children they will want to do something about it, but only if they are given real opportunities to make a difference. That is where political leadership comes in. If they sat down and worked out how to do it, the Government could help schools and families to develop effective partnerships across the world for changing the lives of children elsewhere.

After all, if Nigeria, with all its troubles, can run an effective youth corps to serve its poor and, by sending young people to provinces other than their native province, is breaking down the tribal concentrations, we could surely do the same to serve the children of the Commonwealth. I have a friend who goes every year with his wife to a country in sub-Saharan Africa. They are part of a small group of British teachers who spend part of their precious summer holidays raising the standards of teachers in other parts of the world. That could be extended by Government assistance. They would not have to be current teachers who exhaust themselves during the term: I am sure that newly retired teachers would be of equal value.

At the primary school end of the age range, it should be possible to spark the latent sense of justice in small children by telling them that, as UNICEF believes, the goal of universal primary school education could be reached by 2010 if we spent $7 billion a year. How much? Oh, just what the United States of America spends annually on cosmetics or what the countries of the European Union spend on ice cream. How many school children in Africa could be assisted if every school in the United Kingdom went without ice cream for a week?

I know this all sounds idealistic, but it is also self-interested. If we do only the little that we do now for the poor of the world, and if we continue to believe that we can make a difference without it costing us anything from our own pampered life styles, our children will inherit the whirlwind. Already in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Rwanda and countless other countries, orphaned or abandoned children are learning that the only way to survive is to rob others, preferably with a gun. The instability of the middle east is fuelled by the poverty and frustration of children and young people who have nothing more to lose. The same is true in a growing proportion of the world. Just as in the UK we are seeing the first purpose-built estates with high walls and electronic fences to keep out those who have less, so across the world increasing riches are being spent to protect those riches, rather than to enhance the dignity and profit that could come from the talents of millions of children who need our love, not our police, and our generosity rather than our greed.

9.44 am

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) on introducing the debate with a moving speech, which I am sure we all heartily support. He has identified a need for us all to acknowledge the facts of a world in which there is such poverty and such high child mortality, and the question arises how we should respond. Will people be inspired simply by an appeal to their morality and idealism? Sadly, the answer is yes, but no. More than one approach is needed. The question is one of mutual interest.

We should set the goals that the Department for International Development has championed, of halving poverty by 2015 and thereafter repeatedly halving it until we eliminate it. We should continue to pursue that aim for the benefit not only of young children but of young adults and middle-aged and older men and women in the countries concerned, whose lives are ruined by poverty and ill health. In some parts of the world, as the Select Committee on International Development has seen, particularly in southern Africa where HIV-AIDS is becoming such a scourge, life expectancy has dropped by more than 20 years in the past 10 years.

We must address that problem and help to manage it, but we cannot do that sitting in Westminster or in DFID's office in Victoria street. We cannot do it for the

people concerned. They must be enabled to do it for themselves. I ask myself how we could inspire the British people—and not just the British people but all those with the good fortune to live in comparative wealth in developed countries—to help the poor of the world. As my hon. Friend said, it really depends on the children and young people of the world experiencing the poverty that exists in some of the countries concerned.

To speak personally for a moment, the poverty of Pakistan struck me when I was travelling from London to Singapore in an ancient Hermes aircraft, which broke down at Karachi. I spent a week in Karachi in 1955, eight years after the partition of India. There were the refugees of partition, still living on the banks of the Sutlej river. Those who know that river will know that it is covered in filthy, dirty, slimy mud. On those muddy and infirm banks, the refugees had used any kind of material from Kellogg's cornflake packets to driftwood to build some kind of shelter.

Karachi was full of beggars and young children, many of them mutilated so as to beg more successfully from richer people like me. My first experience of their difficulties came when I gave one of the beggars a few coins, only to find that the news spread fast. Among the beggar children in Karachi, it became an objective to extract from me still more coins or other gifts that I might wish to make, or some, perhaps, that I did not wish to make. I was chased into a doorway. I was extremely frightened and had to be rescued by two policemen who took me back safely to my hotel.

Such poverty was created by the stupidity of man: first, in the partition of India and, secondly, because, in eight years, no one had taken into account how a better shelter could be provided. It sunk into my soul that that creation of man could and should be put right by man: people, especially younger people, must be given the experience to help them to understand what life is like for human beings who suffer poverty and degradation throughout the third world, and in pockets in this country.

We must emulate the Kennedy Administration, which challenged the world with its peace corps, and create a corps of people who are willing to go to villages, slums, refugee camps and even brothels, as the International Development Committee did, to see and feel the conditions, to make human contact with people suffering those conditions, and to admire their resilience, their determination and their cheerfulness in the face of such terrible adversity.

I shall never forget being part of the International Development Committee's visit to the slum children living in Dhaka, where some effort had been made to give them schooling. The schools did not have a regular 9.30 am to 3.30 pm regime. They met in rudimentary conditions and the children were taught by volunteers—mainly women—after dusk, when they could no longer scavenge the rubbish tips. To see the enthusiasm, the bright determination and the exhilaration of a 10-year-old in those conditions showing us that he could read was the reward of that visit. Understanding begins to develop if people can visit those places.

We must encourage the twinning of schools and communities in the developing world with those in this country, so that people can go with a team from their neighbourhood to help people in the third world to build schools, pumping stations and houses, showing them the techniques necessary to construct what is needed in a manner that the area can afford. It is not only money that is needed.

Those contacts must be built up over the years so that children from Dhaka and from the slums and rubbish heaps outside other great cities in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Africa can be brought here for a fortnight, as my hon. Friend suggested, to learn from us not only about material things but about the friendships that can, and do, exist between races, religions and cultures. That is why they must come here, even though it sounds impossible. We would probably have to raise the money to enable them to travel, but nowadays, with cheap air travel, that would be feasible. If we manage to do that, it will develop the determination necessary to provide the rudiments of life, the education and the technological developments to enable the people living in slums in those countries to demand their rights and to work to build their own communities. That is how to defeat poverty. With the help and kindness of the human race, and the energy that will be generated by the visits that I have described, we can enable people, young and old alike, to help themselves. However, it will happen only when that coalition of circumstances takes place.

We saw, in Malaysia and Singapore in 1955, what can happen to the poorest countries when they become richer. Those two countries had been fighting the Japanese during the second world war and then the communist Chinese. They had suffered the conditions of war for between 15 and 18 years, and they had only one export, rubber, and that trade was severely disrupted by conflict. Conflict is the poverty maker. We must find a way to settle conflicts without destroying the infrastructure necessary to allow human beings to plant crops and sell the surplus to keep themselves alive. During conflict, all those things are destroyed and development cannot take place.

In the peaceful conditions that came about once the communist infiltration had been stopped, Malaysia set about working the rubber plantations and introducing new crops such as palm oil. New villages were developed, which part-owned the factories. People became shareholders, and they had land to grow their own crops and sell the surplus. They therefore needed roads to take their produce to market. Malaysia's economy is now one of the most powerful in Asia, and it is starting to produce manufactured goods such as motor cars.

The standard of living in Malaysia has risen immensely. However, that is the result not only of aid but of huge investment. If such countries are not in conflict, private sector investment can give them the confidence to employ people. Such investment is profitable not only to the nation but to the people, who can save and invest capital in their own right. That cycle has helped to bring Malaysia out of the serious poverty that it was suffering.

Mr. Rowe: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Those nations can derive encouragement from our country's record. My grandfather was born in about 1850, and I was reading in one of the DFID publications that the average expectation of life in Liverpool in 1847 was only 25.

Mr. Wells: Yes, the developed and the developing world have made huge strides. I mentioned Malaysia because I wanted to show that we should not be downhearted or dejected. Changes can be brought about, but only if we enable people to do it for themselves. Life expectancy in Liverpool changed from 25 years to 75 for men and 80 for women because, through the co-operation of good Governments and investment, much more hygienic conditions were brought about. Better public health resulted from proper drainage, and water being piped into homes made bathing possible for everyone. It was the ability to earn a living and to produce a surplus that brought Liverpool and the United Kingdom to the present state of comparative prosperity.

We have somehow to get the idealism back into our efforts to stimulate curiosity in the people of the third world, so that they are inspired to go out and work with their compatriots. We must help them to help themselves so that they develop the friendships, co-operation and co-ordination that will attract the investment and employment that those countries desperately need.

Another serious point that we must bear in mind involves the important report of the International Development Committee on women and development. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) was a part of that effort, as was my hon. Friend. That report revealed the appalling conditions in which many women live, particularly in the sub-continent of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. We have to work to change the culture that keeps women in desperately poor conditions and enable them to understand their rights—even if they cannot read or write. We have seen that it is possible to teach them the law.

Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani laws pass any international legal test, but they are not implemented. Not until women are enabled to live a life of self-respect and believe themselves that they can contribute to their family in a way that they cannot at present will we solve their problems, such as those that result from serious overpopulation, for example in India. When women can take control of their own fertility and their lives, with the help and support of their menfolk, we will begin to get real development and relieve the conditions in India, with its high percentage of the abjectly poor—India, Bangladesh and Pakistan together contain a large percentage of the abjectly poor. We must assist and encourage women in those countries to begin to live a life with their husbands and children that has hope and the capacity for growth, so that they can contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of their countries. That means changing Indian culture. We cannot do that, but we can assist people to do it.

We can also encourage the many Indian people who want to change their culture. My hon. Friend took the International Development Committee to a suburb of Delhi where truly inspirational work is being done in helping slum dwellers to build their own houses and install drainage on land that they initially did not own. Most of the people doing that work were women. Some of the children of that settlement now attend university in India and are likely later to have a leadership role so that they can change the conditions for the slum dwellers of India, not just in Delhi but elsewhere.

That project was made possible because the land that they were living on was eventually transferred into their ownership so that they had control over it. Governments must provide the means of ownership of land and assets for slum dwellers to develop. Such a programme should inspire us all to believe that we can make a difference. It is a challenge of enormous importance to bring about a world in which people have self-respect and better living standards and can make a contribution. I am sure that the Minister's Department is making a great contribution in work that is idealistic but essential if we are to improve life in those desperately poor countries.

10.4 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) on an inspiring speech. To me, Andrew, that is the sort of cut out and keep speech—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. I realise that this Chamber is informal, but that goes a bit beyond the intention of the Committee that created the Chamber, and the House's subsequent decision.

Dr. Tonge: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was getting carried away, as I was by the speech of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent.

The hon. Gentleman's speech was for me a cut out and keep speech. I still do not download easily; I cut out and keep. That speech will certainly have that treatment, and I suspect that I shall refer to it many times over the next few years. It was important because, in such an emotional way, he made the links that I am always asking people to make. Recently, when we—not me personally, but many people in this country—were shouting and screaming, protesting about fuel tax and complaining that petrol was slightly more expensive here and that we should do something about it so that we can drive our gas guzzlers wherever we want, I kept asking my constituents, "Can you not make the link? A few months ago you were screaming and shouting at me about helicopters to Mozambique and deploring the fact that a baby was born up a tree. You are now telling me that one of the very elements that created that disaster should be made cheaper. Make the link. That is the important thing." However, people never do so. We as parliamentarians, and especially those of us who are interested in development, must keep saying that.

Another link was made for me yesterday. My husband brought to the House a colleague, a doctor from Nepal, who is at St. Thomas' hospital for a few months. He was excited that the consultant whom he had happened to be placed with had a wife in Parliament. He came here and was completely overawed by the place, as people are. When I gave him his ticket to the Gallery to watch questions, he asked whether he might talk to me for 15 minutes, and he poured out his heart about wanting desperately to do something for the people of Nepal while he was over here. He recognised how privileged he was to have had a medical education and to be able to come over here, and—it was the first time that he had been to the west—he still could not get used to our way of life. He was on another planet, and he wanted desperately to lobby me to do something about Nepal and to help the poor people in his country.

We must constantly make the link between the high technology about which we are all screaming, such as stem cell research and how it should be made available in this country, and the fact that, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) said, women are dying because of a lack of basic health care, and AIDS is rampant all over the third world. We must make the link.

I intend to be fairly pragmatic, because we can do many things here that can make a difference over there. Last night, at dinner, a colleague asked whether I could list a few factors that were important in development. I jotted down debt relief, corruption, capacity building, education, mortality, maternal and child health, health generally, clean water, HIV-AIDS, arms and arms brokers, trade and trade issues, the environment and human rights, which links them all. He said, "I didn't want anything like that. I just wanted a few pointers." I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but there they are."

The Government are beginning to understand that we need to link not only the third world and ourselves but the various Departments. Joined-up government is essential in development issues, because all the factors that I mentioned are dealt with by different Departments. Without co-ordination, our efforts are pointless: we are throwing money away.

Will the Minister explain, either in this debate or in writing, why there is no signature from the Secretary of State for International Development on annual arms exports? She scrutinises them and is supposed to play a part in saying where it would be dangerous to send arms, so why is her signature not there? Symbolic it may be, but symbols are important, and it should be there.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): I may be able to help by pointing out that our Department and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State are consulted on only a percentage of arms export licences—only those destined for developing countries in which we have a particular interest—whereas the other three Departments are involved in consultations on all the licences.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Minister for his response, but without wishing to offend him, I suspect that it is a little inadequate. Nevertheless, it is very important that DFID be consulted wherever arms are to be sent, because there are many countries that, if they are not in dire poverty now, would be after a civil war, which might be caused by our sending them arms. The Department should have more input into the report and, likewise, the human rights annual report. There can be no Department more concerned with human rights than DFID, yet there is no signature from the Secretary of State on the report.

As a Parliament, we should demand a greater input and influence from DFID on those issues. It seems to me that the Department of Trade and Industry strides across the world destroying much of what has been achieved. Although there has been no decision yet on the Ilusu dam, if we are not careful, huge numbers of people are likely to suffer from one Department's decision, and DFID will have to pick up the pieces. The key is to make the link among the various Departments and with the third world.

Mr. Wells: As I understand it, the Foreign Office is responsible for human rights in all countries, and the Department of Trade and Industry must take its advice. Is it not extraordinary that the Minister responsible for the Ilusu dam is not prepared to let us see the advice that he gave the DTI on human rights in Turkey connected with the Ilusu dam?

Dr. Tonge: I entirely agree. It makes one think that there is something to hide. The decision has not yet been made, however, so we must live in hope. What we do know is that if current trends continue we will not achieve the 2015 poverty reduction targets that were published in the White Paper. The World Bank and Oxfam tell us that 70 million more people are in absolute poverty now than 40 years ago.

Although we are making strides in some directions, things are not getting better. They are getting worse. I shall not go through my list in detail because that would take several weeks, but there are some issues that I would like to highlight. The first is trade. I remember the former Member for Tottenham, the late Mr. Bernie Grant, who was a member of our Select Committee and a very dear friend of us all, saying that African countries want trade, not aid. He used to shout from the rooftops about their vital aim: fair trade. They want free trade, but it must be fair. We still are not achieving that.

The actions of the west in trade agreements are damaging the third world and causing it constantly to fall back. We all know the examples, such as the large amount of dumping of agricultural products in third world countries, which affects the ability of their farmers to sell produce. Everyone knows the famous example of the bananas and the World Trade Organisation. I shall not go into details of the case, which anyone can look up. It is iniquitous that the world can hold to a decision that might force Caribbean small banana growers into growing drug crops because they no longer have a decent market for their produce. As I keep telling people, that produce is far better than the stuff that we get from the big banana growers.

When the multinational agreement on investment was being negotiated a year or 18 months ago, we heard a great deal about multinational guidelines for the way in which big companies operate abroad. I repeat that the onus for good behaviour and codes of conduct must be on the multinationals and must be legally binding. It must not be for poor, third-world countries to operate the guidelines. They will never do so, because they want the trade and investment so much that they will cut corners.

I understand from the non-governmental organisations that mail me—they do so three or four times a day, it seems—that an agreement called GATS, or the general agreement on trade and services, will soon be established. If we are not careful, public services in developing countries will also be at risk from the multinationals. We must consider the matter carefully to ensure that public services are not exploited and that facilities such as water supply are not made more expensive for people living in developing countries. It is terribly important that we consider that matter, and I hope that the Minister will speak about it.

[Dr. Tonge]

When I took over the brief for international development after the general election, one of the things that had never occurred to me as an innocent in the field, before I had participated in Select Committee visits, was the lack of capacity and the amount of corruption in many developing countries. Lack of capacity often means that even if countries have the money, they may not be able to spend it properly because they do not have the right people to make the right plans. I am sure that the members of the Select Committee who are present would agree that we saw evidence of corruption wherever we went. We saw it from the very lowest level to the highest levels of government. I know that the Department for International Development has addressed that problem. It is important to do so. We all shout for a much higher proportion of our gross national product to go as aid to developing countries, but that is no good unless they have the capacity and the good governance to absorb it.

Mr. Rowe: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. In addition, she may have been as astonished, as other Select Committee colleagues were, to discover that the UK has the feeblest legislation on corruption of all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. The Home Office claims that it does not need to do anything because the system is working perfectly. As far as I can see, there has not been a single prosecution for money laundering in this country, despite its being well known that, as one of the largest financial centres in the world, the City of London is bound to have a significant amount of laundered money.

Dr. Tonge: I do not have the experience to comment on what is going on in the finance houses or the exchanges of this country, but, if the hon. Gentleman is right, I hope that the Minister will address that problem also.

We all agree on education, education, education. I should like to add one more statistic to those given by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent. Sub-Saharan African countries spent $11 billion on arms in 1998. Universal primary education for all the children in developing countries would cost $8 billion, yet sub-Saharan Africa alone spent $3 billion more than that on arms in one year.

Of course, that brings me—the Minister and the civil servants will groan at this point—to my favourite hobby horse: when will we have legislation to control the activities of arms brokers? Yesterday, I acknowledged that that is difficult, and I do so again today, but so is controlling the drugs trade. We spend billions of dollars a year trying to control the activities of drug pushers and barons, so that we can protect a few people in the western world. What could that money achieve if it were used to chase arms brokers? If we could control their activities, how many hundreds of thousands of lives in developing countries would be saved? We must take this issue seriously, and I hope that the Minister will put pressure on other Departments to introduce legislation as soon as possible.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Despite many debates with the Minister in which hon. Members pressed for EU aid to be suspended to those African countries that are known to supply the arms and soldiers that feed the wars, there is still no mechanism by which EU aid can be suspended. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is depressing? EU aid continues to drip-feed into those countries, fuelling the very conflict that she is discussing.

Dr. Tonge: To be totally honest, I am not clear what the hon. Lady is referring to. Is she suggesting that EU aid is used to buy and send arms to those countries? If so, that is appalling and it should be investigated. However, it is difficult to argue that we should suspend humanitarian or development aid on the ground that that country is selling or laundering arms. That happens in every country in the world.

Mrs. Gillan: I was thinking in particular of Zimbabwe, where $250,000 a day was used to feed the war in the Congo. There was no mechanism to stop that direct aid going to the Government. The difficult area is EU to Government aid, rather than the aid that goes directly into projects and reaches the people for whom it was originally destined.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification, and I agree with her. I knew that she would want to mention Zimbabwe, as she often does.

The AIDS epidemic is raging throughout developing countries. Some of those countries, such as Uganda, have admitted to the problem and are taking action. This huge problem will, I suspect, decimate the economically active portion of an entire generation of people in Africa and Asia. In fact, I am depressed about AIDS and I think that it will take time to control it.

I thank the Government for putting progressively larger sums of money into AIDS vaccine research—future generations in developing countries will be eternally grateful for that. As an ex-medic, I know that, as with smallpox many years ago, a vaccine is the ultimate hope for controlling the AIDS virus. The Government began the process with modest sums, but last year they increased funding to £25 million. The Chancellor's latest spending review makes it clear that more money—we have not received the precise details yet—will be provided to foster AIDS vaccine research. I thank the Government for that from the bottom of my heart, because it will make a huge difference to third world development.

Last Saturday night in Kingston and Richmond, I joined my local Bahai community in celebrating the birthday of their founder. The Bahais are concerned about development issues and poverty in the third world, and at the celebration the children performed a dance in which a little boy named Iqan—I promised to mention his name—dressed in a black bin bag and bare feet to represent the poor of the world, while the other children dressed in their smart sweatshirts and jeans. Every time Iqan appealed to them, they swatted him to one side. The more he appealed, the more they swatted him, and they carried on having a great time, enjoying life and demanding more and more goodies.

The dance concluded with a great catastrophe, and Iqan fell to the ground. He was prostrate before the children and obviously dying, and they gathered round

with huge concern. They offered help, caressed his body and carried him from the room in a great gesture of sympathy. I thought, "How appropriate—isn't that what we do all the time?" Every time there is a famine, flood or other catastrophe in third world, we fill the collecting boxes, set up our standing orders at the bank, and say how terrible it all is. Then we get back into our cars and drive to our security-gated estates and forget all about it, having done our bit for the third world by giving money.

As a doctor, this is a hard thing for me to say, but although such actions make us feel good and charitable and absolutely wonderful, they will in fact condemn children in developing countries to a much slower and more painful death, unless we take all the steps to which I have referred to bridge the gap between developed and developing countries.

10.27 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): In the light of the previous three contributions to this debate, I rise with some trepidation. Like the two hon. Members who spoke after my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), I congratulate him on securing this debate and on the sensitive way in which he introduced it. It is clear that he feels deeply about this subject, which he has pursued consistently throughout his parliamentary career. Before this debate, I looked up his entry in Roth's and there was something rather nice about it. It described him as a socially sensitive and caring Christian, and he lives up to that apt description, of which he should be proud. I agree with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) that his was a cut out and keep speech.

I could never emulate the eloquence of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on this subject. He has served in Parliament for many years, and his speech enabled us to benefit from his great knowledge, wisdom and guidance. He chairs the International Development Committee in an exemplary fashion, and all hon. Members, regardless of their political persuasion, appreciate its work under his leadership.

I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if this is beginning to sound like a mutual admiration society, and I shall deal with the Minister in a minute. The hon. Member for Richmond Park gave us a canter around the fields. Her long-standing interest in the subject of development has been well catalogued. She and I have spent many a lonely hour in Westminster Hall debating subjects of that ilk. Only yesterday in this Chamber, we were discussing the Great Lakes and Rwanda and the Government's policy on that area. A Labour Member mentioned that during the recent all-party parliamentary visit to the Great Lakes region she had observed that the eyes of the children were dead. That is a poignant description of the product of conflict, wars and man's inhumanity to man.

We have only to read some of the reports of the child soldiers that are deployed by warring factions in various parts of Africa to be appalled that children are so used and abused. We do not have to go to Africa to see such abuse. We can nip down the road to the other end of Europe and see the results of ethnic cleansing and hatred between communities in Kosovo. I was in Kosovo a few weeks ago and went to a small village in the hills above Pristina where some brave Serbs had finally had the courage to return to their village, which was in ruins. Some of our British soldiers were helping to reconstruct their houses. I saw an old woman and three young children with a mother who was obviously traumatised and could not function properly. A 10-year-old girl had undertaken the care of the two younger children and seemed happy to do that, but one could not help looking into her face, which was the face not of a 10-year-old child but of a 90-year-old woman.

There is a fabulous charity in my constituency called the Toy Box, which was started by Duncan and Jenni Dyason. They provide help to children on the other side of the world—the street children in Guatemala city. They started the charity in 1992 and do sterling work. It is appalling that there are still almost 40 million street children in Latin America alone. Charities such as the Toy Box offer a window of hope. Its young student workers, helpers, members of the Dyasons' church and even a well-known company called The Entertainer, which sells children's toys in this country, all support the Toy Box charity.

I received a letter from one of the student workers who has just spent three months working in Guatemala City as part of a project. She said that she had come to love the children, one

> of whom, Danny, I will never forget. He is 6 years old and when he was 2
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> he
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> and his mother came to live in our girls home. Although memories from his somewhat abusive past resurface occasionally, he is generally a very happy boy who loves to colour, do maths, play sports and read—he is still learning. Each morning he would wake us up to teach him to play the recorder.

There is some hope. I do not know whether that was the particular child about whom I was told a few years ago, but when I first came across Toy Box, I was stunned by a story that Duncan told me. A young girl, aged 12, came into the refuge with her baby, aged about 18 months. They started treating the mother because she was obviously traumatised and then realised that the baby had also been sexually abused.

I admire the people who work with children in areas such as Guatemala. I do not have the opportunity to do that, but they deserve our support and I hope that the Toy Box will continue. We should also pay tribute to the many charities that do sterling work in that respect throughout the world.

The Conservatives share other parties' objectives in seeking to alleviate poverty. I applaud the Department for International Development for recently producing its strategies for achieving the international targets on halving world poverty by 2015. Although we sometimes differ with the Department on the policies that it deploys, we share its aims.

The World Bank recently updated to 1998 its estimates of the number of people living in poverty. The new figures reveal that both the share of the population and the number of people living on less than $1 a day and on less than $2 a day declined substantially in the mid-1990s after increasing in the early 1990s. Sadly, the number of poor people rose again in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The decline was due almost exclusively to the reduction in east Asia, most notably in China, but progress was partly reversed—and stalled in China—by the crisis.

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

In south Asia, the incidence of poverty declined moderately throughout the 1990s, but not sufficiently to reduce the absolute number of poor people, which has risen steadily since 1987. In Africa, the share of poor people has declined but the number has increased. The new estimates indicate that Africa is now the region with the largest share of people living on less than $1 a day. In the countries of the former Soviet bloc poverty has, unfortunately, risen both by share and by number. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the share of poor people has remained roughly constant over the period covered by the World Bank, but the number has increased dramatically.

That brings me to a specific aspect of the Government's policy that I want to raise. There is little point in aiming to bring the poorest in the world out of poverty if the policies that we adopt may work to lower the standards in countries that are above that level already. In other words, we want not a levelling down but a levelling up. I am worried about a proposal that is being considered by the European Commission, and I hope that the Minister can address that in his response.

In September, Pascal Lamy, the European Commissioner for trade, announced that the Commission had agreed to a proposal that will result in the world's 48 least and less developed countries—the LLDCs—being offered, in 2001, duty-free and quota-free access into the European Union for all their products except arms. When Europe's decision to support the poorest nations through trade measures was announced, it was hailed as a forward-looking—and more than required—response, which offers an end to the marginalisation of the world's poorest countries and may, it is hoped, be matched by the United States and Japan.

However, it is now becoming clear that if the proposal—which is described either as the Lamy initiative or the everything but arms initiative—is implemented without significant amendment it may seriously harm every commodity-dependent Caribbean economy, destroying much of the sugar and rice industries and damaging the rum industry's last remaining chance to compete in the EU market. It will certainly diminish further the prospects for Caribbean bananas in Europe.

The EC proposal, which remains subject to consultations and eventual agreement between European Ministers, is politically sensitive and difficult for the Caribbean region to address, and places the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries in a dilemma. The region is committed to supporting any initiative aimed at helping the world's poorest nations, as we all are, but it may not be able to accept the EC's proposals because to do so could be at the expense of the special arrangements agreed for commodities in the just-completed Kotonu partnership agreement.

Apart from threatening the future of the sugar beet and banana protocols, the Lamy initiative may also damage, perhaps terminally, the creative ideas being developed on commodity issues by the Caribbean regional negotiating machinery. To complicate matters further, the EC proposes to proceed by means of an amendment to an existing regulation, which will not require a joint decision with the European Parliament.

Mr. Wells: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Jamaican Trade Minister recently discussed the question of everything but arms with the Germans in Berlin? He told them that the Kotonu agreement, although not fully ratified by European Governments, none the less has legal effect. If the Ministers agreed to admit all goods from the least developed countries without tariff or quota, that would be illegal under the terms of the agreement. The European Union would, therefore, contravene its own agreement with the ACP if it were to go ahead.

Mrs. Gillan: My hon. Friend's point stands alone, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to it.

I tabled some questions earlier that were transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and the Minister of State there replied that the Government believe that there is a potential inconsistency between the proposals and the regime. I hope that this matter will be pursued by all Departments involved.

While applauding whatever we can do for the least developed countries and the world's poor, we must ensure that we do not destroy the economies of other countries. It is easy for progress to be reversed. Evidence for that exists in the recently updated World Bank report, in which China has slipped backwards and the number of poor people has increased, even though, statistically, the percentage remains the same. It is so easy to fall beneath the line and return to abject poverty. I hope that the Minister will assure us that the proposals for the Caribbean would not endanger the standards of living in those small, fragile island economies.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): I join all other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) on securing this debate. I am not allowed to call him my hon. Friend, although that is what he is. In this Chamber, I am not allowed to call him Andrew—although I do outside—and if I were a Member of the Scottish Parliament, with its modern, updated procedures, I would.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent made a thoughtful, philosophical, moving and wonderfully non-partisan speech. I am not sure that I can live up to it. As Opposition Members know, I tend to be a bit of a partisan bruiser from time to time. However, I shall do my best, especially as this is an appropriate time for a debate in which the main topic is concern for children. This is the week of Children in Need—my wife has given me a special tie to wear—but I hope that we shall remember children in need not only for one week, but throughout the 52 weeks of the year, as the hon. Gentleman said.

As well as being a cut out and keep speech, as others have called it, the hon. Gentleman's speech should be titled, following a phrase that he used, "Pause for Thought". That phrase is now used as a title for what is rather cheekily called the God slot on the radio. It is

right that those of us involved in the hurly-burly of politics, especially in matters such as international development, should occasionally leave the day-to-day and week-to-week routine to pause and consider what we are doing. In our Department, we have tried to do so during the past three and a half years, first with White Paper 1, which dealt with all our work but concentrated on poverty eradication, and now with White Paper 2, which considers the potentially huge threat from globalisation, which is the main topic of concern in developing countries now. Hon. Members kindly acknowledged that we are working hard.

As the hon. Gentleman and others said, we have been concerned about poverty, not only because it is morally right to be worried about poverty in Britain and the deeper and more abject poverty in developing countries, but because it is in our long-term interest. Could we have a more graphic example than the floods of how climate change affects us? I do not mean only in places such as Mozambique, but more modestly but nevertheless dramatically in the United Kingdom. If people who struggle to survive have to cut down trees in the tropical rain forests, there is an immediate and direct effect. That is why we published a White Paper on poverty eradication and why we do everything that we can to help in the context of our development programme.

I shall try to cover most of the points that have been raised. If I cannot do so today, no doubt we shall have the opportunity to return to the subject in this excellent parallel Chamber. As the hon. Gentleman said, the biggest inequalities are between the vast majority of relatively well-off people living in developed countries, and the 1.2 billion living on the margins of existence in abject poverty. I do not want to diminish poverty in Britain, but those people are without adequate food, clean water, sanitation, health care and education. That is why poverty eradication is our top priority.

As hon. Members have acknowledged, Britain has been at the forefront of development agencies, giving an unambiguous commitment to poverty eradication. Since the publication of the report, we have twisted the arms of other organisations—we are members of almost all of them—such as the World Bank, the European Union and the regional development banks, encouraging them to commit themselves to the principal target of poverty eradication and the subsidiary targets. We have been relatively successful in doing that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, officials of the Department and I have worked in all the forums in which we have representation.

People have said that the targets are ambitious, but we think that they are achievable if we have the right policies in the developed and developing countries, and if we have the political will to push them through. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, it is important that we push forward not only development assistance, but other matters that affect developing countries such as trade, investment, agriculture and environment. We are committed to playing our part.

Nearly 7 million children die each year before their first birthday, and 12 million before their fifth, as the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent said. About 120 million children are without even five years of schooling. Those are shocking facts that we must always remember. To break the cycle of deprivation, we must support all the aspects of the full development of children that enable them to realise their rights and to become productive citizens. That means ensuring their survival, protecting them from abuse and conflict and meeting their development needs, especially in health and education. It also means allowing them to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Let me give an example of what we are doing. In Andhra Pradesh in India, we are helping to get more children out of marginalised communities and into school. That is linked to funding an International Labour Organisation programme, which involves co-operation with Government institutions, the private sector—which plays a vital role—and civil society to develop a state-based approach to tackling child labour. I have a list of all the work that we are doing to support the attack on child labour. I should be happy to provide it to hon. Members, who will have seen the document entitled "Helping not Hurting Children: An Alternative Approach to Child Labour". We have taken the issue firmly on board.

As has been pointed out, the convention on the rights of the child provides the yardstick that we use to measure how the world is treating children. Next September, the international community will meet in New York at a special session of the General Assembly and review how far we have gone over the past 10 years. I remind the hon. Member for Richmond Park that progress is being made, as she was being a bit negative. We must recognise that progress has been made in a number of areas, including, for example, the mortality rate among children under five. In Bangladesh, that rate has dropped from 205 to 106 per thousand. In Uganda, it has fallen from 185 to 134, and in Bolivia from 195 to 85. I am not trumpeting those figures, as a great deal remains to be done, but we will become too disheartened if we do not recognise that some progress has been made. We must acknowledge that we are at least beginning to move in the right direction.

As several hon. Members mentioned, it is not only our policies that must be right, but those of the developing countries. We are sometimes coy about saying that developing countries need to get their policies right. If they are to maximise the benefits of globalisation, they must first create effective systems of government, and we are helping them to do so. They must also take action against corruption, with which we are helping. They must ensure respect for human rights. We are also helping with that. They must promote security, safety and justice for all. Again, we are helping on that area. They must prevent violent conflict, in respect of which the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) spoke about Zimbabwe. We are raising the issue of conflict in developing countries and pointing out how it inhibits our debt cancellation and development assistance programmes. Also, developing countries need to make markets work better for poor people and to invest sufficient resources to develop a healthy and skilled work force. Without those elements, the effectiveness of our policies is severely restrained.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister confirm that the amount of EU aid going into Zimbabwe is still at the same level that it was, say, two years ago? I think that

[Mrs. Gillan]

that is when we had our initial discussion about reducing the aid, when $250,000 a day was going into the war effort.

Mr. Foulkes: I shall write to the hon. Lady specifically about that, as I want to deal with some of the points made earlier.

Of course, concerns were expressed about conflict and arms controls. We have tightened control over the export of arms and have helped to establish similar controls throughout the rest of the European Union. We have stated our commitment to introduce a licensing system to regulate the activities of arms brokers and traffickers. I remind the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that that could have been done a long time ago if the previous Government had taken on board the need for such a system. We are also working internationally to stem the trade in illicit drugs and minerals, which fuels so many conflicts.

We have helped to raise international awareness of the importance of an accountable security sector that is responsible to an elected Government and does not see itself as an alternative Government. Arms brokerage legislation has been drafted, and I assure the hon. Member for Richmond Park that we will continue to press for early legislation.

A number of hon. Members spoke about corruption and I was asked what we are doing in Britain. We recognise that we need to improve our own controls. The Home Office has published proposals for updating British laws on corruption. The Treasury is currently reviewing financial regulation systems in UK overseas territories to encourage compliance with international standards of financial regulation. The Department for International Development is supporting work by Transparency International to develop integrity guidelines. The Export Credits Guarantee Department has set up several measures to prevent UK companies from using its support for corrupt purposes. Bit by bit and area by area, we are taking the matter on board.

We shall never be able to put an end to all corruption in developing countries. Successive Governments have tried to achieve that in this country. To use an isolated incident of mismanagement, as the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) did recently, to undermine the development effort in Malawi, where we are trying to help the poorest, is downright mischievous. I hope that he will recognise that it was the work that was done on corruption, and not his intervention, that had an effect on the Government of Malawi.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham asked about the European Union's everything but arms initiative. I am sure that she will understand the purpose behind it. It was to provide duty-free access to the European Union for the poorest countries in the world. I hope that she approves of that and accepts that those countries, with the largest number of poor people, are the ones that we should help. To give them duty-free access is useful, but I recognise the problems that that creates, particularly in the Caribbean. We have received several representations on the matter.

As the hon. Lady knows, the Lamy initiative includes a transitional period for goods such as sugar and bananas, to help the Latin Americans and Caribbeans to adjust. It is Britain that has taken the initiative in trying to help the Caribbean countries. That is why the carousel activity has resulted in threats to British trade, including in particular the cashmere trade in the Borders. I assure her that we are taking on board the representations, mentioned by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), from Tony Hylton, the Jamaican Trade Minister, and others.

Mr. Rowe: I realise that the Minister has a huge brief and a short time in which to speak, but I should be grateful if he could make some response to the proposition that the Government could play a real role in creating exchange programmes, youth corps or whatever.

Mr. Foulkes: Like the hon. Gentleman, I wish that I had much more time. I have a great deal to say and will no doubt find another opportunity to say it. However, by wonderful coincidence, I was just about to come to the matter that he raises.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford also raised the question of a British peace corps. We already spend about £30 million a year on supporting volunteer programmes that help to send more than 2,000 volunteers to 80 countries. We have moved away from the kind of scheme that existed when he and I were boys, which meant taking a year out after school or university to go to developing countries. Those activities were good for character building for people such as him, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent and me, but they were not necessarily the best thing for developing countries. Now we want to concentrate on what assistance is best for developing countries. That is what Voluntary Service Overseas, British Executive Service Overseas, Skillshare Africa and others are doing. We support those bodies in their activities and are considering how to support them further. If any ideas are forthcoming, I shall certainly consider them.

As to global citizenship, which the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent mentioned, I am pleased that we have now published guidance to help teachers in schools to incorporate global issues into the curriculum. We have published that for England, we are doing so for Scotland, and next will come Wales and Northern Ireland. We are sending teachers to developing countries and we are including some aspects of development in teacher training. The number of schools twinned with schools in developing countries has doubled in the past year. A great deal is being done—so much that I should like to speak all morning, but I suspect that other hon. Members want to discuss other matters.

I again thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent for securing the debate. It is a pity that we did not have more time, but I assure him that the Government are committed to everything that he said, and I thank him for the kind way in which he and others said it. Progress is often slower than we would hope or expect, but I hope that he agrees that, in the matters I have dealt with, the Department for International Development is making its mark in the world.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I congratulate all hon. Members who participated in the debate, which was of the highest quality.

Climate Change

11 am

Mr Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I take pleasure in speaking in the debate, which concerns the most important international conference this year: the COP6 conference of the parties to discuss the implementation of the 1997 Kyoto agreement.

My predecessor as Member of Parliament for Ceredigion, Cynog Dafis—now the Member of the Welsh Assembly for Mid and West Wales—secured an Adjournment debate on the subject of climate change in 1995. He told me that he was one of the first Members to secure such a debate; the record will show whether that is true. He also told me that, at the time, another Member commiserated with him, saying, "Never mind, perhaps next time you will have an Adjournment debate that will be of interest to your constituents." Following the flooding caused by the recent severe weather, there can be few hon. Members who do not now have a constituency interest in climate change.

I shall give a thumbnail sketch of some of the evidence for climate change, which is the background to the COP6 negotiations that the Minister will attend next week. In August, a Russian icebreaker—a cruise ship taking tourists on what was probably a non-sustainable tourism venture to the north pole—broke through the ice, only to find when it reached its destination that there was no ice, only a mile of open water. In September, at the height of the fuel crisis, there was a little-reported paper from scientists who had been studying ice samples from the Himalayas, which showed that the past decade was the warmest for 1,000 years.

There seems to be a disaster in the making: the thickness of the ice sheet over Greenland has shrunk by 42 per cent. in the past four decades and the area itself has shrunk by 6 per cent., and the annual flow of melted ice from Greenland into the sea is equal to the annual flow of the Nile. If the whole of that ice pack were to melt, the sea level would rise by an amazing 7 m.

In 1850, the Glacier national park in Montana contained 150 glaciers; it now has fewer than 50. In 30 years' time, that national park will no longer justify the name "Glacier" because there will be no glaciers left.

The best prediction is that by the end of the century, sea levels will have risen by 1 m. I shall illustrate that by using a local example. Last week, a blue runner was caught in Swansea bay. A blue runner is not that rare breed, a Welsh Tory MP, although they have certainly left Wales for warmer climes—[*Interruption.*] No, it was not the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) either, but a Mediterranean fish that has never before been seen in Welsh waters.

Global warming is not in question; the Swedish scientist, Svante Arrhenius, warned at the beginning of the last century that burning fossil fuels could raise atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide and create a greenhouse effect. This has been known about by scientists for at least a century. Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, estimated to have been at about 280 parts per million before the industrial revolution, had climbed to 317 parts per million in 1960, and 368 parts per million last year. That is a gain of 16 per cent. in four decades. I am pleased to say that even the Prime Minister now seems to be convinced about global warming. Referring in the press to the recent British weather, he said:

> The increasing frequency of such extreme weather does lend support to those who say that global warming is no longer theory, but is a fact of life.

I suspect that the Minister would put it more strongly, and I think that the Prime Minister needs to spend even more late nights with his son slowly learning about environmental change.

There is some debate about whether global warming leads to climate change, and it is important that we lay to rest any such disputes. The planet has warmed by 1.5 deg C since the 1970s, and the 1990s was the warmest decade on record. CO_2 emissions are estimated to contribute around 64 per cent. of the greenhouse effect of global warming. Europe and the USA are responsible for 85 per cent. of the man-made CO_2—there is, of course, a great deal of natural CO_2—in the environment. Some argue that we are living in a period of normal climate fluctuation, and that we are just emerging from a little ice age when the Thames froze over and the state of the Scottish economy forced that unfortunate union between Scotland and England. However, even those who hold such views would tend to agree that industrial emissions exacerbate such climate variations. Dr. Mike Hulme of the Tyndall centre for climate change research at the university of East Anglia—I think that the Minister opened that centre last week—put it very succinctly. He said:

> Only the input of greenhouse gases can account for things that we have experienced recently.

He was talking about the recent weather in the UK, but we must also remember the recent, horrific flooding in Mozambique and in south-east Asia. That is the reason for the Kyoto agreement.

In Kyoto we agreed at a national and European level to reduce our emissions of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases by 5.2 per cent. from the 1990 levels by 2012. However, since the agreement was entered into in December 1997, emissions have risen by more than 1 per cent. per year. They are projected to be roughly 8 per cent. greater than 1990 levels by 2010. The Kyoto targets, which we discussed at the COP6 conference, may not be strong enough. The royal commission on environmental pollution reports that cuts of 60 per cent. are needed in the next 50 years. I am pleased to say that in a parliamentary answer to me on 6 November, the Minister confirmed that that was the long-term objective of the Government's climate change programme. However, those cuts represent a huge change, and if COP6 is not to be a cop-out, the Government must set the pace for the developed countries, as well as having due regard for the needs of the south.

The Minister called COP6 a make-or-break conference, and I would like to discuss some of the issues to be resolved there. I hope that the Government will look beyond initial compliance and find long-term solutions. It is vital to ensure that domestic policy—our part of the global picture—is the basis for action taken. It would not be acceptable for us to rely on flexible mechanisms in the agreement, such as the USA wants to see imposed, to pass our responsibilities to the developing countries. I hope that the Minister will be able to address my concerns about those mechanisms.

[Mr Simon Thomas]

I want to talk about carbon sequestration through the use of carbon sinks, which are not the latest household accessory, but use organic growth to remove CO_2 from the atmosphere and lock it up. Other Members may wish to comment on that, but I want to raise one problem with it. Carbon sinks lock in industrial greenhouse gas emissions temporarily—50 years is temporarily in terms of the history of the world. Once that organic growth, be it forest, grass or whatever, is burnt or logged or in some way comes to its natural end, the CO_2 and other greenhouse gases locked into it are once more released into the atmosphere. Therefore, carbon sinks do nothing to alleviate our industrial emissions.

Indeed, it could be said that we are moving along the lines of carbon colonisation. Equity Watch has drawn attention to at least two Norwegian companies that have already acquired several thousand hectares of land in east Africa to use to plant fast-growing trees such as eucalyptus and pine that will not bring any benefits to the local economy, but will be sold off and traded as a carbon sink.

Equity Watch calls that the application of cheap development mechanism–CDM–which COP6 prefers to call clean development mechanism. Developed countries earn carbon credits by investing in clean technology in developing countries. That is good in principle and I assume that most hon. Members would support it, but its practical implications could be unfortunate. The new technologies may be less dirty, but that does not equate to clean. Surely at one level at least, CDM should exclude new nuclear energy and that is one point that I want to stress this morning.

I was surprised to learn through a parliamentary answer that the UK's use of nuclear energy has increased from 21 per cent. of electricity generation in 1990 to 28 per cent. last year. Like many others, I simply assumed that nuclear energy was declining. In fact, it has assumed a greater proportion of our energy generation. Nuclear energy may be less dangerous in terms of long-term greenhouse warming, but its potential for sudden catastrophe, particularly in developing countries, surely disqualifies it as a clean development. The early indications from the COP6 talks, which started among officials this Monday, are not encouraging. Mohammed Barkindo of Nigeria, speaking for the negotiating block of the G77 and the China group, said that it was proving impossible to get the developed countries to talk to them about it. He said that they were frustrated and distressed.

My final point on this aspect of the COP6 talks is to remind us of what was left out of Kyoto—particularly air fuel. A recent report, "Collision Course", published over the weekend by the New Economics Foundation pointed out that the projected 70 per cent. growth of international freight traffic by 2004 will wipe out any gains likely to be made at The Hague. That makes a mockery of the exclusion of such traffic from the current negotiations. Facts can often speak volumes. For each kilo of kiwi fruit imported from New Zealand by air freight, 5 kg of carbon dioxide is pumped into the atmosphere. Clearly, that is not a sustainable way forward.

The Tyndall centre recently carried out research that matched the countries most and least vulnerable to the effects of climate change to their capacity under their gross domestic product to deal with its effects. The four most vulnerable countries were Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Tanzania. They have just $100 of GDP for each citizen to spend on coping with every degree of warming. By contrast, the least vulnerable country is Luxembourg, which can spend $8,800 per head. It is worth remembering that it is the poorest countries that will suffer most from climate change. We have a moral obligation as heavy as that to rescind third world debt or to dedicate to the UN threshold of our GDP aid to developing countries to act against climate change in the COP6 negotiations.

I should now like to say a little about a country not represented at the COP6 talks but which has a vital role to play in their implementation—my own country, Wales. It is important to emphasise that the UK's obligations will be met in great part by the devolved Administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, the National Assembly for Wales has a unique role to play, as it is one of only two legislatures in the world that has sustainable development as a statutory duty. It is written into the Government of Wales Act 1998, and we therefore expect a contribution from Wales.

Wales produces some 7 per cent. of UK emissions for just 5 per cent. of population. That is mainly due to coal fire generation, steel production and so on. Anglesey Aluminium produces a ninth of the Welsh total. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) will welcome the agreement for combined heat and power at Anglesey Aluminium, which will no doubt help greatly. However, 5 per cent. of Welsh electricity is produced by renewables. The UK total is only 3 per cent. Perhaps I can look forward to Wales banking carbon credits with the Exchequer in return for full European funding. In 20 years' time, perhaps we shall have a carbon-based formula rather than the Barnett formula to decide funding issues for Wales and Scotland.

Whatever the future, my constituency of Ceredigion currently has 40 per cent. of its energy needs met by wind farms. If one adds the Rheidiol hydroelectric scheme in my constituency—the largest in England and Wales—more than 50 per cent. of our energy needs are now met by renewables. That is good news, but it is also bad news for the Government in terms of getting their message across. Despite having only 5 per cent. of the UK's population, Wales has more than 350 of the 800 wind turbines in the UK. The sort of political difficulties experienced over petrol and fuel prices could be stored up in the renewable sectors in parts of the UK and Wales. Using the same justification, we need to take action for environmental reasons. Rural areas will be disproportionately affected, and the same seemingly weak case will apply; air freight growth alone would wipe out any contribution from renewables. There is also the same potential for a public backlash.

It is proposed that the largest wind farm development in the UK will be in my constituency—58 MW at Cefn Croes, which will produce 1 per cent. of Wales's total electricity needs. It would make Ceredigion the first county in the UK to run on totally renewable energy.

However, many people do not understand the case. The Government should show a greater commitment to developing renewable technologies.

It was disappointing to receive a parliamentary answer on Monday from the Department of Trade and Industry that showed that Government investment in renewable research, technology transfer and development has been slashed by this and the previous Administration. In 1995-96, nearly £9 million was spent on the renewable development sector. By 1997-98, that figure had dropped to £4.36 million. In other words, it had halved in two years. In the last financial year, it was down to £3.14 million. Those are disgraceful figures in terms of moving towards meeting our Kyoto targets and implementing the COP6 agreements. A tidal generator has been suggested for the Rhyl flats off the coast of north Wales, which could produce 50 per cent. of Welsh electricity needs. However, the entire research budget for tidal wave energy last year was only £150,000.

I will finish with a parable, which is the best way to understand complex issues. It is the story of the French Foreign Minister and his ducks, his herons, his foxes and his fish. I hope that hon. Members will be able to follow it. The tale begins last year, when the French Foreign Minister decided that it would be nice to refill the dried-up lake at the bottom of the landscaped gardens at his official residence outside Paris. Several months later, the lake was restored to its former glory but, subsequently, the first problem occurred. The clear waters were invaded by a particularly potent algae. An environmentally friendly solution was decided on and the Minister imported several dozen algae-eating carp, at considerable expense; perhaps not as much as the fig trees, but still considerable.

The second problem was that the carp attracted a heron, which started to eat them. Despite the French love of shooting small birds, the heron is a protected species in France. The Foreign Minister encouraged—I do not know how—a pair of foxes to take up residence in his official garden; to scare off the heron, mind, not to eat it. As so often happens in matters of the environment, a symbiotic relationship developed between the foxes and the heron, and instead of dealing with the heron, the foxes started eating the mallards that had moved in.

The foxes had to be got rid of, but they produced a pair of cubs and the Minister's family persuaded him to stay their destruction. Therefore, the Minister decided to ship the depleted colony of ducks from his official residence to the pond outside his office at the Quai d'Orsay. That brought about problem number five; the mallards started to mess up a statue of one of his illustrious predecessors—I am sure that the hon. Member for Brent East (Mr. Livingstone) would have something to say about that. "Well, its simple," he thought and had the statue moved back to his residency, where it joined the heron, but not the foxes, which he had moved, and unfortunately not the carp. Why not the carp? Because the lake had drained dry.

We meddle with the natural balance of nature at our peril. The COP6 negotiations provide a crucial opportunity to restore that balance. The hopes and expectations of people in the United Kingdom and many in the developing world rest on the leadership that the Government must and can show.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I cannot think of an appropriate parable, but I plead with those who wish to participate in the debate to be brief. If Members speak for less than eight minutes, all who wish to can speak, but I must allow the winding-up speeches to start at 12 o'clock.

11.20 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on securing this debate. I welcome his reference to his predecessor, who deserves credit for being instrumental in alerting hon. Members to the dangers of climate change at an early stage. I endorse everything that he said about the seriousness of the problem and the issues facing us at the conference in The Hague next week.

I note the promotion that he gave to his constituency and the extent to which sustainable technologies are already operating in Ceredigion and in Wales as a whole, but he conveniently overlooked the fact that Wales contains some of those who are most aggressive and militant in their determination to pollute the planet. An educational role exists for him with some Welsh farmers and hauliers. Our debate this morning is appropriate not only because of the COP6 conference next week, but following yesterday's fuel protest, which showed that a considerable body of opinion in the United Kingdom remains unaware of the significance and danger of burning excessive fossil fuels. It is a timely reminder for all of us that work must be done to improve the flow of public information and the level of public understanding.

The Government deserve enormous credit for the lead that they have shown internationally. My right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment have been instrumental in moving the political agenda at an international level and I welcome what the Government have done. I particularly welcome the speech by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the CBI Green Alliance conference two or three weeks ago, in which he gave an important commitment to put the environment on the political agenda and to promote policies of sustainable development, and in which he put money behind important new concepts, particularly by increasing the amount for renewable technologies and establishing the Carbon Trust.

The policies outlined in that speech were reflected in the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement last week, in which the word "environment" was heard more often than in any other Budget speech in the history of this country. We all have reservations about what he did not say, and we all know that there is much more to do on transport taxation in particular, but the pre-Budget statement was an important step forward in the consolidation of environmental and fiscal policy in the United Kingdom.

Earlier this year, the Government published their draft climate change strategy on which there was a period of consultation. We expected the strategy to be published and it would have been logical to publish it before the COP6 conference. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister will tell us when we shall see it. At

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business questions last week, I asked whether, if it is not published before the end of this week, we can have a full statement on the Deputy Prime Minister's return from The Hague and an announcement of when the final strategy will be published.

I turn to the clean development mechanism to which the hon. Member for Ceredigion referred, and the inclusion or otherwise of nuclear energy. I welcome the fact that the European Union's position is not explicitly to include nuclear energy within the CDM, but to compile a positive list of clean and renewable technologies that contribute to sustainable development. Our Government's position is not quite so clear as that of the European Union, in that they believe that it should be left to the individual host country to determine for itself what constitutes a sustainable energy policy. The United States, the G77, Australia and China are in favour of including nuclear energy in the CDM.

It is indisputable that burning uranium in nuclear reactors does not directly increase carbon dioxide emissions, or, as far as I am aware, those of other greenhouse gasses. However, if we consider the whole nuclear cycle and all the associated activities related to the burning of uranium, nuclear energy as an industry produces considerable quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses.

One could argue that the carbon dioxide emissions from nuclear energy were lower when compared, like for like, with gas or coal. However, it has one insuperable problem that other forms of energy do not have: a propensity to sudden, inexplicable lapses in safety, with all the appalling dangers that can result. Well-documented disasters in recent years include Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and, on a smaller scale, the case of the Sellafield radioactive pigeons flying round the Lake district.

The continuing, serious problem with safety was well documented earlier this year by the nuclear installations inspectorate report into the processes at Sellafield. Although the operation by BNFL has improved significantly over recent years, the NII report continued to condemn lapses in safety practices in the nuclear operations at Sellafield. Additionally, no one knows the solution, at present, to the more serious long-term problems of the disposal of radioactive waste and the treatment of plutonium.

The Government will produce their own policy for radioactive waste management in the next few weeks, which may make some reference to what is to be done with the 60 tonnes of plutonium that are to be stockpiled in the United Kingdom—a stockpile that will increase to 120 tonnes between 2010 and 2015. It is difficult to argue that nuclear energy should be seen as a clean development mechanism when there is the propensity for breakdowns in nuclear power plants that can have such catastrophic effects, and when no one on the planet knows how to dispose of nuclear waste or immobilise plutonium safely.

The clean development mechanism is an important strand of the Kyoto protocol. I hope that the Government will stiffen their resolve and support for the European Union's position to exclude nuclear energy from the CDM. I also hope that they will continue to argue the case, as they have done strongly in the past, for genuine renewable technologies. The future for energy policy and the solution to climate change lies in the exploitation of new technologies. We may not yet be aware of some of those technologies. Those that are at an early stage of market development and hold remarkable potential include photovoltaics and solar hydrogen, as well as the wind and wave power already mentioned.

Although the nuclear industry in the northern industrial countries is keen to export its products to the southern countries, it is the latter that have the greatest potential for the development of genuine clean sustainable energy. I hope that Ministers will urge those points at The Hague next week.

11.29 am

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on securing this Adjournment debate on the third day of the crucial meeting in The Hague, which we all hope will reach agreement on setting the global rules for implementing the Kyoto protocol on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. If ever there was a time for a united front by the world community on any environmental issue, that time is now, and the issue is that of tackling global warming.

One of the Kyoto mechanisms by which emission reductions can be achieved is the innocuous-sounding clean development mechanism—at the heart of which, from the perspective of the USA and its allies, is the ability to invest in projects in developing countries that are claimed to reduce emissions and to count them as a credit against their own targets.

The most controversial aspect of CDMs is the inclusion of so-called carbon sinks to absorb the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide. In essence, the protocol states that parties must account for carbon emissions and take-up from afforestation, reforestation and deforestation. That creates perverse incentives for removing old growth forests and creating new plantations, as has been seen in Australia and elsewhere. For example, Japan and Canada are trying to secure rules that would allow them not to count emissions from cutting down forests, but to count the carbon stored when plantations are grown back on the land. That is, to put it candidly, barmy.

The USA, Japan and Canada also claim that they can use all kinds of additional activities—such as agroforestry, urban greening and cropland management—to meet their targets. The EU opposes any crediting of those activities. That is right. Many such activities would happen anyway and therefore count as business as usual. Some countries want to claim credit for what would happen without human action, such as increased vegetation through nitrogen or carbon dioxide fertilisation. That is logically and environmentally unsustainable, and would blow a hole right through the Kyoto protocol. Allowing forest activities in the CDM is a distortion. It offers cheap and temporary credits to industrialised countries—hundreds of millions of tonnes of carbon a year, with a likely estimate of about 300 million tonnes—while still allowing them to increase their fossil fuel output.

To allow carbon sink projects in the CDM would be to sanction cheating by industrial countries. Every tonne of carbon supposedly retained in such a project is

one more tonne that the developed nation can pump into the atmosphere. It lets the north off the hook; totally undermines the impetus for domestic action on greenhouse gas emissions, which are so damaging in their impact on climate change; and removes the incentives to invest in energy conservation, to develop renewable energies—as the hon. Member for Ceredigion illustrated—and to achieve energy efficiency. Those are the only real hopes, in the medium and long term, for combating climate change.

A number of other fundamental problems are linked to the use of biological systems to absorb and retain atmospheric carbon dioxide. On impermanence, the fact that carbon storage in biological systems is reversible—for instance, through forest fires—means that reliable monitoring is required over long periods.

Another difficulty concerns who is responsible if carbon losses from sinks occur in future. Such losses could arise, if recent findings are correct, when ageing forests become net carbon generators midway through the next century. Just days ago, the Hadley centre published research in which its computer climate model predicts that, as soils warm and forests decay, land sources will switch from being net absorbers of carbon to net emitters by 2050. That, as my hon. Friend the Minister said, would be a mind-blowing result.

Other uncertainties about biological systems include the worry that carbon sinks could damage biodiversity. Forests that are good carbon sinks are not optimum areas for biodiversity. Carbon sinks are also often people's homes, and ascribing their environment a carbon value would increase the threat to indigenous peoples' land rights. More generally, there may be a loss of sovereignty for developing countries that are associated with sink projects. To count as a carbon offset, a plantation would have to remain intact for a specified period. In effect, the host country would surrender control of the land, which would then be subject to international surveillance and verification. Where does that leave future Governments who may wish or need to develop another economic role for that land, and find themselves prevented from doing so? Sustainability must be not only environmental but economic and political.

Greenpeace, of which I am happy to be a member, says that, in essence, sink projects are a way of dumping responsibility. It is right: at the best, carbon sinks are a partial and highly uncertain answer to the climatic changes that may result from global warming. The planet's soils, forests and seas do not have the capacity to absorb our ever-increasing emissions. The real answer—the only answer—is for the developed nations to reduce their emissions. It is we in the north, with our use of fossil fuels for more than a century and a half, who have caused the global climate change, which seems to be gathering speed with such damaging effect. It is we who have the prime responsibility for tackling the crisis by reducing our carbon emissions.

Sinks are merely a tree-lined window dressing, behind which we are pressuring developing nations to accept environmental responsibility for our industrial past and present. It is little more than third millennium colonialism for the wealth-creating, pollution-generating nations of the north to try to coerce our southern neighbours into cleaning up after us through low-value or no-value schemes—schemes that transfer no positive technology and produce little prosperity.

Uncaring United Kingdom Governments—but not the present Government—have routinely allowed unwanted people to be dumped in sink communities. Negligent nations meeting at The Hague must not get away with dumping their unwanted economic side-effects on sink countries. Our priority must instead be to reduce our fossil fuel emissions. We must target transport emissions in order to improve air quality—and the quality of life—for the cities of the north and south alike. We must reduce our reliance on coal and oil in order to drive down mercury contamination and reduce acid rain. We must invest also in renewable energy projects to transfer state-of-the-art technology to the countries of the south, thereby speeding their economic growth and development.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to seek agreement at the COP6 talks this week and next on excluding sinks from the CDM. If sanctioned, the sinks will increase the real prospect of us suffering a damaging climate change. Kyoto raised the hope that the 6 billion people on planet earth could work together to confront the grave environmental problems that face us all. Let not those hopes be dashed. The political dinosaurs must not have their way, or our descendants could share the fate of those earlier dinosaurs. Global warming is that important.

11.37 am

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I congratulate my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on initiating this important and timely debate, once again proving himself to be an excellent successor to Cynog Dafis, who was highly regarded on this matter.

I am sorry to say that there is considerable inconsistency in the Government's environmental policies. In a recent speech, the Prime Minister committed the Government to following green policies. The recent climate change programme set out the ambitious target of reducing our greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent. The Minister for the Environment intends to take the lead in the discussion at The Hague in support of a narrow definition of carbon sinks. And the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement introduced a 3p cut in low sulphur petrol, although that fuel is available from only 10 outlets in Wales and does not lower carbon dioxide emissions. By cutting duty on that fuel, the Chancellor is sidestepping the climatic effect of traffic to ensure short-term popularity.

No mention has been made of the more environmentally friendly alternative of liquid petroleum gas. Only 16,000 LPG vehicles have been sold this year, but the manufacturers believe that, given the right incentives, as many as 250,000 could be on the road within a few years. The Government are not acting on that.

Dissatisfaction with the Chancellor's statement has been expressed by many sectors. In a strange alliance, Greenpeace and the RAC are demanding that the Government should use a portion of fuel tax to start what they call a green fuel fund, to be used to protect the climate and human health by promoting alternatives to

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oil. That is one alternative to the Chancellor's short-term fix to the fuel protests. He could use his next Budget to offer a way out of the high environmental and financial costs of using oil.

The Chancellor should also have targeted his fuel tax cuts towards rural areas. Prices in rural petrol stations are considerably higher than they are in London or Cardiff. By bringing rural prices into line through subsidy, the Government could have eased the considerable burden on rural drivers. In many rural areas there are no public transport alternatives. Further investment in public transport—as I have said, a serious problem in rural areas—was notably absent from the Chancellor's statement, as was any reference to the thorny issue of possible congestion charges. No one is addressing that politically unacceptable question. Cutting tax for cars with 1500 cc engines is a step in the right direction, but means that there is no incentive for people to have cars with smaller engines. Why not have a graduated scheme across the board? Why should the measure apply only to new cars as opposed to the range of older cars on the road?

My hon. Friend has drawn attention to the fact that research into renewable energy sources has been steadily decreasing since 1995. I would like to add to that by reference to the recent 19th round of oil licensing. In a recent question, one of the Minister's colleagues confirmed that carbon energy would be at the centre of the Government's energy policy. One cannot square that with trying to decrease carbon emissions by 20 per cent. The Minister for the Environment stated recently in a reply to a written question that although carbon dioxide emissions were reduced by 7.5 per cent. between 1990 and 1997, the figure has not decreased further since 1997. There is a danger of stagnation in that important area.

My hon. Friend referred to the clean development mechanism, as did the hon. Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), and I will not refer more to it other than to say that I agree with what all three said. Evidence suggests that we will have simply to put up with the hardships caused by the recent extreme weather throughout the country. We will have to deal with such problems again and again in the coming years.

About 3,000 homes throughout the UK were flooded and the transport infrastructure paralysed. The storms have cost the insurance industry an estimated £500 million and the Association of British Insurers says that if, as is likely, recent weather patterns continue, insurance premiums will increase substantially. Meanwhile, the costs of building properties that are able to cope with flood alleviation are rising. Ten per cent. of the population of Britain live in flood-risk areas, accounting for about £200 billion of property. Damage from flooding could eventually reach £1.8 billion a year and the value of properties on flood plains or near rivers could plunge by as much as a third. There is also the problem of rising sea levels, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion eloquently said.

On Monday, I visited the constituency of Clwyd, West to look at the flooding in the town of Ruthin. The town was severely hit, with many properties under water and businesses brought to a standstill. Unfortunately, the Government's response has not been good enough. They have offered Wales an additional resource of £3 million to deal with the damage. An estimated £5.5 million is needed in Ruthin and the county of Denbighshire alone—just one unitary authority out of 22—to alleviate the problems. I know the credentials of the Minister for the Environment and respect him greatly, but I ask how committed his Government are to reducing emissions, encouraging more renewable energy, decreasing traffic and countering the effects of global warming that have sadly become apparent. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is sincere, but I question the Government's determination to tackle that serious problem.

11.44 am

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I congratulate warmly the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). To refer to the work of his predecessor and the contribution made by my right hon. Friend the Minister in this debate, Ceredigion, climate change, Kyoto and COP6 are all synonymous with getting the environment at the heart of public policy. I welcome this brief debate and I hope that when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions returns from The Hague we will have an opportunity to debate this important matter in the House.

Climate change should be a mainstream issue. The general public should regard it as one of the most pressing issues currently facing us. Our efforts this morning will help to ensure that there is a general understanding of the importance of climate change and the effect that it could have on future generations. We must find a way to make it a key issue to be debated by the British public. That is especially important in light of the third assessment of atmospheric warming by the United Nations' official research body—the intergovernmental panel on climate change—which, I understand, is likely to find that the rate of warming is twice the initial estimate. That is a pressing problem that we all face and that we as parliamentarians have a responsibility to do something about.

I cannot help thinking about a previous debate that took place in this Chamber, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) discussed global citizenship and the work that has been done by the Department for Education and Employment to promote that in schools. A tremendous amount could be done in schools and through twinning to move that issue up the agenda.

I wish to stress to my right hon. Friend the Minister that, more than ever, we need joined-up government thinking so that he can take the lead in negotiations in The Hague. When he returns, we should use joined-up government to implement what will, hopefully, have been agreed. In addition, I hope that, through the green Ministers' committee, he will provide more support for renewables, in order to build on the Prime Minister's speech last week in the City. The money that is now available from the climate change levy can be used to invest in renewables throughout the country.

As we will have a centre for renewables in every part of the country, I would like to make a bid for the west midlands centre to be located at Chatterly Whitfield in

my constituency, which is a grade 2 scheduled monument currently being worked on by English Heritage. Chatterly Whitfield was a powerhouse of the past, and it could become a powerhouse for the future promotion of renewables. That would create work and jobs in communities that have been abandoned since the closure of the colliery. It would also allow us to link the local with the global.

I would like my right hon. Friend the Minister to consider the work of the CBI and to find a way to ensure that there is no resistance from the business community to the imposition of a climate change levy. We need sustainable technology for the long term, so I want business to take a clear lead.

In the brief time available, I would like to flag up the issue of refrigeration. I remember much of the debate in the House about 10 years ago on the importance of the Montreal treaty and phasing out CFCs, which were responsible for ozone depletion. I am conscious that HFCs, which have come to be regarded one of the substitutes for CFCs, themselves contribute to global warming. Therefore, I ask my right hon. Friend to do everything that he can in The Hague to ensure that we support the work of Denmark by committing ourselves to an early phase-out of HFCs. It is possible that HFCs could comprise 4 per cent. of our greenhouse gas emissions by 2010, which would be almost a third of the UK target. We need an early phase-out of the products concerned, and I want the UK to lead the way on that.

I am mindful of last week's prestigious launch at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the new environmental policy unit. In pursuance of joined-up government, that unit, with its input from business and from various Departments, will become a player on the world stage that could help us to make progress on this issue, so that we can tackle the vulnerability of developing countries.

I want to pick up on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor). He talked about the importance of not going down the route of carbon sinks, and I want to refer to developing countries in that context. According to the Red Cross, 96 per cent. of deaths from "natural disasters"—in fact, we are talking about unnatural disasters—occur in developing countries. UN figures show that, by 2025, 80 per cent. of the world's population will live in developing countries, and many will be at risk from cyclones or flooding.

According to Christian Aid's information on unnatural disasters, 12 of the 14 disasters to which it has responded since 1997 were caused by extreme weather conditions. The cyclone that hit south-east Bangladesh in 1997 left 1.5 million people homeless, and the floods that began in September 1998 affected three quarters of the country. In 1998, Hurricane Georgia caused extensive damage in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, El Nino-related floods brought disaster to Peru and there was a drought in Sudan. In 1999, there were mudslides in Venezuela. Those events should create major headlines and be the cause for great concern. We should properly take on board the precautionary principle, so that we can prevent such disasters rather than dealing with them after the event.

There are concerns that the proposed flexible mechanisms that are under discussion in The Hague fail to fulfil the principles that should underpin the UN framework convention on climate change. They fall short of the precautionary principle, and ignore equal rights. When my right hon. Friend the Minister visits The Hague, I want him to feel secure in the knowledge—as was my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on his visit to Kyoto—that the UK can play a leading part. I recognise the contribution of Wales, and I applaud its sustainable policies. I want to ensure that we ratify the 5.2 per cent. cuts, but that should be only the first step. I want work on a new agreement that is effective and fair, but it is important for industrial countries to provide aid and investment to developing countries, so that they can avoid future dependency on the fossil fuel economy. We do not need to keep reinventing the wheel.

During last week's severe weather debate, I urged my right hon. Friend the Minister to take the lead in initiating public debate, and I hope that today's debate will take us one step forward in that respect.

11.53 am

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on securing today's extremely important and timely debate. Perhaps the only positive outcome of the recent floods is the change in public understanding, which is critically important. Environmental awareness in this country had fallen off, but it is now very much on the increase. Research undertaken on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund and the Energy Saving Trust suggests that 83 per cent. of people reject the belief that climate change is good for the UK. People had begun to buy the stories of how they would be able to make red wine in their back gardens, but they now understand that climate change poses a very real threat. Four out of five respondents said that climate change causes freak weather conditions such as storms and floods, and women expressed more concern—as they so often do—than men. That is important, because behavioural change will be the responsibility of individuals.

Most people have not acted, however, and there is an important message in that for the Government. We have failed to explain adequately what our eco-taxes were designed to do, which is part of the reason for the fuel tax crisis. Much more work remains to be done. I realise that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has always been active, but on that front it is for the Government as a whole to increase public awareness of the issues involved.

Most hon. Members who have spoken today have begun by acknowledging information from scientists in recent reports from the Hadley centre and in the draft report from the international group that reports on such matters. Clearly, the debate is now not between the majority of the 3,000 international scientists and the few who do not agree that global warming is a reality. It is between the majority and those who are saying that global warming is much worse than predicted. We must all take that on board.

The debate has three elements—the international community's responsibility, our domestic responsibilities as a nation and our responsibilities as individuals. At every level, we shall have to act even more seriously and rapidly than we have to date.

The Government cannot be faulted on their approach to the international community. My right hon. Friends the Minister for the Environment and the Deputy Prime

[Joan Ruddock]

Minister have been an example not only in how they have developed our domestic programmes and held them up as an example in the international community but in how they have worked tirelessly to encourage and cajole others to follow in similar ways. We can rely on them in the COP6 talks to press strongly the principle of supplementarity, that domestic measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should form the basis of the action taken by every nation, and especially industrialised ones. We can expect them to shame the United States, in particular, for its selfish adherence to the so-called flexible mechanisms as a way of avoiding making domestic cuts.

I agree with what other hon. Members said about nuclear power in the CDM. I believe that our Government will argue that emissions trading is not a substitute for taking domestic action. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment is convinced—I am glad that we have all shared in that conviction—that carbon sinks are a small part of the equation and that there are real risks in countries adopting them as a way forward.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will raise the issue of taxation of aircraft fuel, because there is no doubt that that is the biggest single issue that the international community has failed to tackle. It must do so, for the reasons set out in the report on global transport growth and climate disaster, to which the hon. Member for Ceredigion referred.

COP6 also gives us an opportunity to consider our domestic responsibilities. I speak as someone who was active in our party's development in opposition of the targets to which the Government now adhere—a 20 per cent. reduction on 1990 levels of carbon dioxide, and 10 per cent. of electricity to be produced from renewables, by 2010. Those two targets are vital. I believe that the United Kingdom will easily meet the Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction, and I am sure that we shall have confirmation of that when the report on the Government's climate change programme is published.

We should go further. Aiming for 20 per cent. is something that we owe to ourselves and the world community. I am not convinced, and nor are others, such as SERA—the Socialist Environmental Resources Association—and Friends of the Earth, that the draft programme provides a secure basis for achieving the 20 per cent. target as opposed to the obvious 12.5 per cent.

Why should we do so much more when other nations are often doing so little? Because it is our duty to the international community and because we can. We have the resources to do it, and it is in the public interest. The Environment Sub-Committee has already given its professional and expert view that a greater increase in the use of renewable energy in Britain is possible.

When I was in opposition, shadowing the position now occupied by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, I proposed the target of 10 per cent. electricity production from renewables by 2010, and it looked exceedingly ambitious. Today, it looks exceedingly modest. I believe that it will be possible to double that target, so I hope that he will press my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to build on what he has done this year when he forms next year's Budget, to give more incentives to other forms of renewables, to consider solar again, to encourage increased use of wind power and to think about biomass.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister comment on the inclusion of legally binding targets for renewable generation in the EU renewables directive? I understand that our Government may be ambivalent or may even oppose that, so I would be interested to know the reasons why.

I have not time to talk about many other aspects of Government policy, so I will concentrate on the issue of energy efficiency improvements to buildings. It would be *helpful if* the energy industry published energy consumption figures by postcode. We need to know much more of what goes on in our communities, and we must be able to create new incentives for the average owner to improve energy efficiency in the home.

We can all contribute through individual behaviour. If hon. Members did not see Monday's edition of *The Guardian*, I refer them to Ros Coward's excellent 10-point plan for how we can all contribute, in our own small ways, to the reduction of greenhouse gases and, consequentially, global warming. I urge my right hon. Friends the Minister and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to do their utmost to ensure that agreement is reached at COP6. That agreement should be designed to produce emissions reductions in industrialised countries and, critically, be a first step towards the equity-based allocation of emission rights.

12.1 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). I especially liked his parable, which reminded me of Carshalton ponds in my constituency. We need to introduce congestion charges on the ponds for the Canada geese, which live quite happily alongside a suburban fox population. I should like to focus on the Government's pre-Budget statement and the assessment of its impact on climate change, the role of the United States, and the need for a long-term strategy.

It would be churlish not to recognise that the Government have a greater awareness of environmental issues than the previous Administration. That is largely down to the influence of the Minister, and of the small band of environmentally friendly Labour Members who are present. The Government believe, rightly, that the environment should be at the heart of their decision-making process, so I hope that the Minister can confirm what discussions he, or perhaps the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, had with the Chancellor about the environmental implications of the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement. If any such discussions took place, it would seem as though the team at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions was outmanoeuvred.

Steven Twindale is the policy director of Greenpeace, of which I am a member. He said that the pre-Budget statement

> hasn't cut taxes on alternative fuels such as bio diesel and compressed natural gas...Although the statement did introduce reduced tax on Ultra Low Sulphur petrol, sulphur isn't such a big

problem with petrol anyway, and therefore is just a gesture...There are other new technologies round the corner that the government should be giving far more support to, such as fuel cell vehicles...These could reduce emissions by 50 per cent. immediately, and in the long run by 100 per cent. with renewable energies.

Finally, he makes a point that other hon. Members have made, which is that renewable energy and the Government's investment in it have not been successful so far. A total of £89 million has been spent on biomass and offshore renewable energies compared with £100 million on coalfields, apparently.

It is therefore clear that from the environmentalists' point of view, that the pre-Budget statement has not done what was required. I should think that it has also failed to accord with the Government's draft climate change strategy, which stated:

Alternative fuels...can offer both greenhouse gas and air quality benefits...It is necessary...to stimulate the take-up

of those fuels.

Perhaps we should consider the Government's own assessment of the pre-Budget statement. According to table 6.2 on page 139, relating to road fuel duty differentials, ultra-low sulphur petrol price reduction will reduce nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds. However, there is no mention of CO_2 reductions because, as other hon. Members have said, there will be none as a result of the differential in question. Have the Government failed to refer to that because, according to page 86 of the 10-year transport plan,

increases in fuel duty reduce the general level of traffic growth and CO_2 emissions

and therefore, presumably, decreases in fuel duty must increase the level of CO_2 emissions? If that is the case, and I am sure that it is, I should expect some bad news in table 6.2 as well as some good news. The Government have been quite candid in setting out the table, for example highlighting the fact that a reduced rate of VAT on domestic fuel and power will increase carbon dioxide emissions.

My second topic is the impact that the United States has on climate change. Developed countries such as the United Kingdom are the villains with respect to CO_2 emissions, but the biggest villain of all has to be the USA. Does the Minister agree that much more hangs on the spoiled ballot papers in America than the outcome of the US elections? The election of Al Gore might mean a successful outcome to the climate change negotiations, but the election of George "Dubya" Bush would be a disaster. No one can doubt that.

The attitude that the US adopts in The Hague will make or break the negotiations. If it was right to impose sanctions on South Africa over apartheid, and on Iraq for its treatment of its own people, surely it is right to impose sanctions on the world's most powerful nation, the last super-power, if it chooses to pursue an anti-environment agenda that threatens the long-term survival of the planet. What sanctions would the Government support? Those would of course apply equally to the United Kingdom if it failed to meet its target. Perhaps sanctions are too radical and financial penalties are what would be required. Will the Minister seek to block proposals by the United States to rely on carbon sinks as a means of meeting targets? I am sure that he accepts that carbon sinks are not for eternity. At best they will buy a little time, but they will become carbon generators later.

I want to press the Minister on the extent of the cuts in CO_2 emissions that he thinks will be required to stabilise climate change. He has already said in response to a parliamentary question that he thinks that a 60 per cent. reduction in CO_2 is needed. If that is so, what national and international measures will the Government implement to achieve that significant cut, and over what time scales? If he is short of ideas, I commend to him "A Strategy for Sustainability", a Liberal Democrat policy paper, which I launched at our party conference in September. It outlines how emissions could be reduced by 50 per cent. from 1990 levels in the next 40 years. It is available free on our website if the Minister or his assistants want to print it.

The outcome of the COP6 conference will either secure or destroy our global future. The Minister will have the support of all hon. Members who are present today, and many others, I am sure, if he goes to The Hague and argues for the toughest possible action to be taken on climate change. We expect nothing less of him.

12.9 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I join hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Thomas) on securing the debate. I, too, wish the Minister well in the Hague, as it is in the interests of people in this country and around the world that that important conference continues the momentum of Rio and Kyoto and comes to a successful conclusion. The conferences are not less important because they continue a process.

I am happy to agree that the Minister represents Wales as much as any other part of the United Kingdom. Wales should not feel unrepresented, because it is represented by the UK Government.

I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley), who said that she wished that the environment was a more mainstream part of political debate; I assume that she meant that it should have as much political salience as debates on issues such as health, education and transport. A peculiar, but beneficial, side effect of the horrors visited on many people by the recent floods is that the environment and how best to combat climate change will be higher on the political agenda.

A relatively small band of enthusiasts turns up to debates on the environment. Discussing the issue means debating big, long-term politics and complex and controversial scientific matters. Those who want the environment to be higher up the political agenda do not serve that cause if the debate is conducted in simplistic, black-and-white terms.

It was alarming that some contributions to the debate verged on straightforward anti-growth rhetoric; they were not just attacks on the west, the north or the United States but on economic growth itself, which was deemed a bad thing. That is a foolish proposition; it is unarguable that if there was a world agreement to reduce growth, poor people in poor countries would be

[Mr. Damian Green]

affected first, and most severely. Turning the argument in favour of the environment into an argument against economic growth is unhelpful.

Mr. David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Green: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman; I would usually give way, but we are under pressure of time this morning.

I shall speak briefly about the key issues before the conference and about the Government's tactics and their performance in respect of Britain's contribution to climate change. Hon. Members spoke about the important issue of carbon sinks and I confess that I thought that the debate was moving into rather simplistic territory on that subject.

The Minister for the Environment is not sure whether carbon sequestration can make a significant contribution to the CDM and I ask him to clarify his thinking on the matter. I am aware that he will not want to give away every detail of a negotiating stance, but it would be helpful if he could give us some details on that issue and on other technologies that he believes should be included within the CDM. Nuclear power does not contribute to carbon emissions but there are other serious questions to be asked about its future. What will be the Government's position on that issue in the conference?

Another area that has not been covered this morning but that I suspect will feature quite largely at The Hague is that of emissions trading. Many of those who are most sceptical, for instance about carbon sinks, believe that emissions trading is a way for developed countries to evade some of their responsibilities. If the Government are tempted to go down that route, I urge them not to do so because there is clearly a serious need for precautions and for limits on how much can be put under the banner of emissions trading. All those who wish to participate in an emissions trading system should be required to meet certain prerequisites in their domestic actions before being allowed to participate.

Having said that, a proper, well-run emissions trading system would offer a powerful, market-based method of driving down carbon and other emissions. We should not let the caveats that we would all wish to issue outweigh the virtues that can come from a decent emissions trading system. If the Government are to play the leading role that they claim for themselves, their own record must bear examination. I do not share the unquestioning praise that many hon. Members have expressed during the debate for the Government's record on emissions reduction. They have set themselves an ambitious target on that, on top of the Kyoto commitments, but while they may not admit it publicly, everyone privately knows that the principal reason that they will be able to meet the Kyoto targets and possibly the more ambitious targets is our reduction in the use of coal, which largely took place from the 1980s.

I do not wish to make partisan points, so I turn to the report of the royal commission on pollution, a body with impeccable and impartial credentials, which states that it is extremely doubtful that the measures in the Government's draft strategy will achieve their targets. Indeed, the Government do not think that they will hit the 20 per cent. target for reduction from 1990 usage. The royal commission itself says that there is therefore something of a hole in the government's climate change programme.

I agree with that. I suspect that the Minister will take the opportunity to tell us when he will unveil the policy in its full glory. If he does, perhaps he could, for the convenience of the many hon. Members who will wish to attend, say whether he will make a parliamentary statement this Friday—otherwise, many hon. Members who would be interested may not be here. The underlying point is that the Government's great claims to virtue in regard to Britain's performance on carbon emissions do not stand up to the detailed scrutiny to which the royal commission subjected them, and that will weaken their ambition to play a leading role in the matter.

My final point is on tactics and on whether the Government can continue to play a leading role. If the Minister is to act as a kind of bridge between the EU and US positions, I urge him to resist the temptation to lapse into anti-American rhetoric. There has already been a report this week of his attacking the US stance on emissions. He should avoid going down the route that the Liberal Democrats apparently favour, comparing the US Government to Saddam Hussein's Iraq and apartheid-era South Africa, which was not a helpful or sensible contribution to the debate. He should resist that cheap anti-Americanism and retain Britain's credentials to act as an honest broker, as I suspect that honest broking will be needed over the next week or so.

I hope that the Minister has a successful week, that the conference succeeds and that the UK plays a significant role, because this is vital, not just for the people of this country, but for people all over the planet.

12.20 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I would like to respond immediately to the good wishes that the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) has just expressed, which I think were echoed throughout the Chamber, for the Government's success at this important conference. I should like to commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) as a worthy successor to a tremendous advocate of the green cause. His speech today focused on a lot of the key issues and I will try to deal with as many of the points as I can.

I regard sinks as one of the make-and-break issues in these negotiations. I have always supported a narrow definition. I will come on to what I mean by that in a moment, if I get that far. However, because there are questions of scientific uncertainty and impermanence—forests burn, die back and are corrupted by pests— and there are problems with base lines and the degree of additionality that one can fairly attribute to sinks, I am extremely cautious.

The EU's position on the CDM is quite clear. We had a long debate on this at the June Council. We agreed that there should be a positive and exclusive list. By that the EU means that it excludes nuclear, which it does not regard as a clean, sustainable technology. The question of air travel and whether there should be a tax on aviation fuel was indeed omitted from the Kyoto

protocol. Off the top of my head, I believe that aircraft fuel accounts for 3 to 5 per cent. of nitrous oxide, which is one of the main greenhouse gases. If airline travel doubles over the next 10 to 20 years that can be expected to increase. There are problems, because the US is resisting action on this. I will say a little more about how we may be able to tackle the issue.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion also mentioned renewables. Of course we have our 10 per cent. obligation. Ceredigion should be congratulated on its 40 per cent. of energy from wind farms. It is an excellent precedent for many other parts of the country. I agree that the great moral of the fuel crisis, whatever one thinks about cuts in fuel duty, is the need to switch from over-dependence on oil towards renewable sources of energy, particularly wind power, but also biomass and solar power.

The figures that the hon. Gentleman quoted for expenditure on renewables are correct, but that is now being turned around through new investment that has been announced over the past few weeks and through the portion of funds recycled from the climate change levy and other new funding. There is a focus on important newer technologies: £89 million is now committed for offshore wind and energy crops, and there is also £12 million for planting grants for energy crops. I would be the first to say that that is not enough, but there is a definite momentum in that direction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said that some people had not made the connection between the fuel crisis and climate change impacts. I liked the newspaper cartoon of someone proudly rowing down the high street with his coracle full of petrol canisters. That made the point very nicely. The climate change strategy will be published this week, before COP6.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the CDM and said that he did not regard the technology as clean and sustainable. I think that that view is widely shared in the EU. A lack of clear policies for immobilising plutonium or for long-term—one uses the phrase with a view to geological time—disposal of radioactive waste, occasional flaws in safety procedures and lack of managerial rigour and capacity building in some developing countries mean that there can be no ultimate and total guarantee against potentially catastrophic accidents. That is the background against which the EU debate was held.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) asked about carbon sinks and the Hadley centre conclusion about the switch from net absorption to net release, which is serious. He also mentioned the social consequences of loss of sovereignty by native peoples who are displaced by widespread planting, which I recognise. My point about sinks is that the Kyoto target of 5.2 per cent. would save about 250 million tonnes of carbon. With the increase that occurs in the interim, before it falls back—it is to be hoped—below 1990 levels, the figure might be 1 billion tonnes. A loose or unrestricted definition of carbon sinks could give scope for an increase in the allowed emission of carbon of about 2 billion tonnes. In other words, it could wipe away all the benefits to be gained from Kyoto by strict action from other countries. My hon. Friend asked for sinks to be excluded from the protocol. They cannot be, as they are dealt with directly in articles 3.3 and 3.4; it is simply a question of how they are regarded.

I shared extremely enjoyable discussions with the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) in Committee during consideration of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. However, I think that he is being less than fair on this occasion. He referred to the 3p cut in ultra-low sulphur petrol. First, half the gain for hauliers—£560 million this year and next year—comes from a reduction in vehicle excise duty. For motorists, raising the threshold for the £55 cut in vehicle excise duty from 1000 cc to 1500 cc means that the advantage is available in respect of 4 million cars. Secondly, the cut is not a general price cut in conventional duty but is concentrated on ultra-low sulphur petrol, which is currently used by only about 35 per cent. of motorists. No doubt such use will increase because of the incentive. If so, the environmental gain in the reduction of nitrogen oxides and particulates will be considerable.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the suggestion by non-governmental organisations that a green fuel fund be established. Fine. We have set up a fund, whose exact title I forget—it may be the green challenge transport fund. It asks industry to develop alternative fuels and says that we—or, rather, the Treasury—will offer major or substantial reductions in duty. We are moving in that direction and are keen to make progress.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned rural areas—of course, his own constituency is one—and appealed to us to reduce prices. A moment before, however, he was telling us not to do so. The ultra-low sulphur petrol cut of 3p will especially benefit people in rural areas. He said that we had not referred to transport investment. That is because we have mentioned on other occasions payments such as £170 million on buses in rural areas and the 1,800 new or enhanced services. Over the next 10 years, there will be an investment of £180 billion in transport.

The hon. Gentleman said that carbon reductions have stagnated. Indeed, they have not fallen significantly over the past two or three years. However, we have not yet published, let alone implemented, our climate change strategy. As to flood defences expenditure, we are spending about £400 million over the current three years. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned an extra £51 million, and we are considering what can further be achieved with local authority leaders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) mentioned more support for renewables. I listened to what she said about her constituency projects; it is a nice idea. On the Montreal protocol and ozone depletion, we have given a clear signal that we need to phase out hydrofluorocarbons in the next investment round. In some ways, of course, there is no alternative to HFCs, but have given a clear signal to industry that it needs to come forward with new technologies.

I realise that I am running out of time, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I promise to respond to all the points made during the debate, but I shall continue speaking until 12.30 pm—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Time is up.

Lymington Community Hospital

12.30 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The Lymington hospital has 112 beds, 60 of which are located in an infirmary and are primarily intended to provide rehabilitation for elderly patients. In addition, the infirmary provides 20 hospital day places. The hospital provides beds for medical, surgical and maternity treatment and has theatre sessions for general surgery, urology, oral surgery, ear-nose-and-throat surgery and gynaecology. The best measure of the hospital's importance, however, is the hole that it would leave if it no longer existed.

Dr. David Balfour is the chairman of the New Forest primary care group, which is to become the primary care trust that will take over responsibility for the hospital. He wrote to me on 14 November, saying:

> The local health economy could not absorb the amount of work being done at Lymington if the present hospital were to close. Southampton already has significant problems around lack of space...bed shortages, lack of theatre space...as Southampton increasingly develops as a regional specialist and cancer centre, waiting lists for standard secondary care services are increasing. It is worth noting that one third of all endoscopies done in Southampton and South West Hampshire are done at Lymington. Also if the local Health Economy then had to absorb some 7,000 admissions, 20,000 outpatients, 4,000 day cases, and 17,000 casualty attendances a year, chaos would ensue.

Those 20,000 out-patients, 17,000 casualty cases, 4,000 day cases and 7,000 admissions are a measure of Lymington's contribution to local health care. However, there is a problem.

The infirmary buildings date from 1836 and the hospital dates from 1913. They are dilapidated and unsuited to modern health care. Transport is required between the two hospital sites. For instance, the X-ray and casualty facilities are separated by hundreds of yards of corridor.

Despite the dedication and the overwhelming efforts of the staff, leaving things as they are will result in an unacceptable decline in services, and ultimately to the hospital's demise. Even with a £3 million major refurbishment and remodelling, the hospital would achieve only the minimum acceptable standards.

I believe that the development of public policy will give community hospitals an even more important role, given the increase in elderly patients and the winter crises to which we have been subjected in recent years. In a written answer last Thursday, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), said:

> The National Health Service Plan announced a major programme of investment in intermediate care and related services to promote independence and improved quality of care for older people. As part of this investment, there will be 5,000 extra intermediate care beds by 2004, and the Plan makes it clear that some of these will be in community hospitals.—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2000; Vol. 356, c. 378-79W.]

I submit that many more than "some" of them will have to be in community hospitals. In fact most, if not all, will have to be so, because those beds will not be found in residential homes and nursing homes. All over the south-east of England developers are queueing up to buy such homes and build residential properties on the plot. That is certainly the case with Farnley house in Lymington and Kivernell house in Milford-on-Sea. Therefore, the role of community hospitals is increasingly important.

We believe that the efficiencies achieved by a level transfer of the existing beds and facilities at Lymington to a designed, purpose-built modern environment will allow the treatment of more patients and provide a wider range of services. That is an exciting vision. We aim to develop a radical intermediate care facility that will make a significant contribution to the health needs of the people of Lymington and the New Forest, and to the local health economy. We want to develop an efficient unit dealing with diagnostic services, day cases, short-stay surgery and rehabilitation. To realise that vision, fundraising began in 1980 and the PFI initiative was published in the *Official Journal* of the European Communities in 1995. A full business case was presented, which was praised by the private finance unit, and much of the credit for that is due to the chief executive of the Southampton Community Health Services NHS trust, Mike Lager. The site for the new hospital has been purchased and is already under preparation as a result of more than £1.5 million in funding raised by the League of Friends of Lymington hospital. That is a tremendous credit to them. How many hospitals begin with such a signal of good will from their local community? I take my hat off to the fundraising efforts of the League of Friends over many years.

However, there is a fundamental problem. On 2 November, the NHS executive called off negotiations with the Rotch-Schroder consortium, which was bidding to build the £23 million private finance initiative scheme for the new Lymington and New Forest community hospital. Where do we go from here? We expected the new hospital to open at the beginning of 2003, and that itself represented a considerable delay compared with initial expectations. Any further delay will stretch our ability to maintain the services to the required standards in the existing buildings. If we had to start another private finance initiative, the time frame would be such that we would have to invest significant amounts in the existing hospital in the meantime, which would be completely wasted when we rebuilt. Equally, what enthusiasm would there be for a renewed private finance initiative after the investment of so much money, time, effort and good will in the previous bid? There would be no guarantee that it would be any more successful a second time around.

Perhaps I should put my doubts about private finance initiatives on the record. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I have always thought that they had rather more to do with the Maastricht convergence criteria than with sound principles of public finance. [*Interruption.*] The one thing that I have always accepted, despite my scepticism about the role of the state in many aspects of our lives, is that the Government can raise capital more effectively and cheaply than the private sector.

Setting aside my scepticism about the private finance initiative, I understand the reluctance of the NHS executive to tie itself into a 25-year contract with a private consortium when Government policy on intermediate care is even now under development in the 10-year national plan for the NHS. Indeed, its relationship with the private sector is also dynamic and under development.

The most obvious and expedient course is to build a hospital with public funds, as the project is already so advanced. Will the Minister play her part in ensuring the survival of this vital asset to the health care economy of south-west Hampshire by showing the Government's willingness to consider with an open mind the case for funding the new hospital with £23 million of public capital? It is a pleasure to share this campaign for a new hospital with my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), and I am keen to hear how he will support the case.

12.40 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It is typically generous of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) to give me the last portion of his allotted time, and I endorse everything that he has said.

Westminster Hall is rightly regarded as an arena in which confrontation should be kept to a minimum, and there is no confrontation on this issue. We have even had a meeting of minds, to judge by the Minister's reaction to my hon. Friend's doubts about the role of the private sector in raising capital for such a project. Westminster Hall is working its magic.

The Lymington hospital is sited in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West, but the new Ampress site—just south of Boldre in my constituency and just north of Lymington in his—is virtually on the border between the two. More importantly, the Lymington hospital, in both its present and future incarnations, has a wide catchment area covering the residents of the New Forest, the Waterside and even further afield.

My involvement in this matter goes back to spring 1995. I was minding my own business at my desk in the research department of Conservative central office, when the telephone rang. It was a wonderful lady, whom I later came to know well, called Pamela Combes, who was concerned even then that the Lymington hospital was becoming a political football, and wanted my help in investigating the matter. That led to a chain of events culminating in my accession to the position of prospective Conservative candidate for one of the New Forest seats, to which I was subsequently elected. I am sure that the Minister will not hold the fact that the hospital was indirectly responsible for my becoming a Member of Parliament against it, and that it will not prejudice the prospects for its future.

The problem, even in 1995, was that there was great community concern about where the hospital should be, what the money raised with great effort by the local community should be used for, and how the partnership arrangements should be drawn up. Even the press release from the NHS executive, when it announced that it was pulling the plug on the private finance initiative, acknowledged that the two NHS trusts to which it referred—one on the isle of Sheppey and one at Lymington—had worked hard with their private sector partners under the PFI. Mike Lager and his team have made every possible effort to get this project off the ground and to make a go of the PFI approach. That has not worked. Even the Southampton Community Health Services NHS trust accepts that. It thought that it had a deal ready in June, but, as its press release states:

> We were all but ready to sign. Since then the Rotch consortium's financial figures have changed—they're now no longer affordable nor good value.

There is no dispute between the NHS executive and the community health services trust that the scheme has not worked, but it is more than five years since I was drawn into the matter and one can imagine the effect on the morale of all concerned—those trying to build a new hospital and those manning the existing one—if the clock were turned back to the beginning and they have to start again.

This is not a matter of doctrine or ideology, nor of freeloading because, as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West said, the community has raised enough money to buy the freehold of the land. Many people have made an emotional, professional and financial investment in the project. The PFI approach has been tried but has failed, so please do not make us return to that approach with all the time constraints involved. We need the NHS fully to fund the hospital.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I, too, am delighted with Westminster Hall and its non-confrontational atmosphere, but the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) mistook my response to his hon. Friend's views on the private finance initiative. I was merely surprised that he agreed with his party, which was committed to the PFI but never made it work. I am also surprised, and delighted, that the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) managed to bring Maastricht into the debate. We could not have had such a debate without a mention of Europe.

I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, West on raising the matter, and the hon. Member for New Forest, East on joining him. I know that it causes great concern in their constituencies. I shall set out the steps that will ensure that the hon. Gentlemen's constituents continue to have access to the best possible health care services, but I want to start by making a few points about the main principles behind the private finance initiative.

The failure of the Rotch consortium deal should not be seen as a failure of the PFI process, but as a sign of success, showing that rigorous methods of testing are continuously applied. In a press release, Alan Meekings said:

> It is very disappointing that the Trusts involved have had to stop work on the PFI options, but they will simply not deliver viable value for money solutions. The trusts have therefore been unable to complete the business cases for the schemes and they must now be abandoned.

He also said:

> Now that the PFI options have been discontinued, the important thing is to move forward as quickly as possible with alternative arrangements to ensure that the healthcare needs of local people are met.

I want to assure the House that the bottom line is to ensure continued good health care for local people.

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

The PFI provides extra resources for the NHS building programme, and transfers many capital investment risks to the private sector. Ultimately, we hope to achieve better care for patients and best value for money for taxpayers. The process was designed to allow the NHS and the private sector to work together effectively. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the announcement earlier this week of our proposal to build at least 18 new hospitals around the country at a cost of more than £2.3 billion. We also confirmed our approval for 16 additional schemes worth more than £350 million. Those schemes endorse our commitment to the expansion of the NHS and to improving facilities nationwide. I was delighted to be able to announce schemes involving ambulatory care centres. We have heard about PFI contributing to a loss of beds. In any PFI project, the assessment of beds is made well before the financial decisions are made, so the two issues should never be connected.

Before approval is given to PFI schemes, a number of key factors must be carefully considered. First, we must ensure that key local stakeholders in health economies consider that the scheme will meet the health care needs of the area and fit in with the strategy. Secondly, we must ensure that all PFI proposals represent best value, and decide whether a scheme would be better value for the NHS and the taxpayer under PFI than under the equivalent publicly funded alternative. Thirdly, we must ensure that local health authorities and those that commission services will be able to afford the overall cost of the proposed scheme.

The Government have a major responsibility to support the NHS in managing PFI as well as it can. That is why, last December, we published guidance entitled "PFI in the NHS", which clearly sets out the process for testing the PFI market and negotiating a PFI contract. The guidance was based on the experience of the public sector in negotiating such deals, including the wealth of experience gathered from the first wave of major PFI schemes. One outcome of the review was that standard form contracts are now mandatory for the schemes.

We have seen several successes among the PFI schemes, probably the most striking of which is the new Cumberland infirmary in Carlisle, which had a completion timetable of 25½ months, compared with the 54 months that was envisaged under the conventional public capital route. It is now open, and was the first major PFI hospital to become operational.

One can sometimes make a virtue out of disaster. I visited the Worcester hospital which had to be evacuated because of the flooding of the River Severn. When I went to the site to which some patients were being transferred, I could see the progress that had been made on the PFI hospital there—it was the first to be started after 1997 and is well on the way to completion. We should not run away with the notion that, because we unfortunately had to withdraw from some negotiations because the project was not viable, the PFI-funded process is more lengthy than the public sector option.

I take this opportunity to reassure hon. Members about the Government's commitment to making appropriate and effective use of community hospitals, and to confirm their important role in the delivery of local health care and the future development of intermediate care.

I was struck by the introduction given by the hon. Member for New Forest, West, in which he outlined the huge local support that the hospital has received. It is important to place on the record that it was never suggested that the hospital should simply disappear without being replaced by alternative facilities. He referred to the mechanics of working on split sites—I am familiar with that problem. We agree that we need to move forward constructively.

In the NHS plan, we pledged that by 2004 there will be 5,000 extra intermediate care beds, some of which will be in community hospitals, some in existing facilities and some in new developments. That will provide an opportunity to breathe new life into community hospitals.

I turn now to the events in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and the proposed PFI scheme to rebuild Lymington community hospital. I acknowledge that the decision to terminate negotiations must have been extremely disappointing. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that PFI schemes will only proceed when they represent value for money. It is now important for all parties concerned to move forward as quickly as possible with alternative arrangements. I heard the pleas from the hon. Members for New Forest, West and for New Forest, East about the speed with which the next steps should be taken.

A review process has been initiated to appraise the options to meet the needs of the local health economy. That will engage the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority, the local primary care groups and Southampton Community Health Services NHS trust. By requesting the debate, the local Members of Parliament have had their chance to contribute to that process, and I am sure that they will continue to do so.

The review will take place over a six-week period and will be fully supported by the south-east regional office of the NHS executive. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to speculate on its outcome. It is important that, while proposals are being discussed at local level, the local population are confident that effective community services are in place to help the health economy over this coming winter. All health economies will face surges in demand, and we must ensure that we have measures in place.

I am advised that considerable work has already been undertaken to support this vital area of work. Some £2 million has been identified to support the whole of the Southampton health economy over the winter—£1.9 million to support critical care, and £572,000 for improved access to primary care services. In addition, £525,000 has been allocated to primary care groups and trusts, which will be managed as pooled budgets with local authorities. A number of schemes using these funds have already been agreed, including the establishment of rapid response teams across the health authority, and that covers the constituency of New Forest, West.

The emphasis will be to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions. It is important to recognise that, although hospital buildings with extra beds are seen as a real improvement to services, rapid response teams, who react quickly and prevent hospital admissions—which is what most people want—play an important part in rebuilding a fundamental structure that enables us to give better primary care.

Additional residential care has been purchased for those people awaiting discharge from hospital. Again, it is important that the flow of patients through hospitals is well managed. The development of an emergency home care service that will operate seven days a week is planned. Again that will cover the New Forest. I fully appreciate the concerns the hon. Gentleman has raised, and it is only right that he and his constituents question how local health services will be provided. I have been reassured by my own discussions with representatives from the regional office and by all the key players who have to participate in that review that they are aware of the sense of urgency.

There is considerable disappointment, as much among the private providers as in the health authority, that the scheme could not go ahead, but it simply would not have been right. We had to recognise at some stage that it did not provide value for money. Part of the consortium had to withdraw four of the five bids that it submitted: one of them was well advanced and looked all right, but the other four had to go back to the drawing board. This is not a delaying tactic and it is not a sign from the regional office that it does not appreciate the needs of the community.

I should also like to pay tribute to the League of Friends. The hon. Gentleman was right in his introduction. It raised a considerable amount of money. Many a hospital scheme would like to be able to start with an endowment as generous as that given by the league. We will build on that—I should make it clear that I mean build in the metaphoric rather than physical sense: that is by no means a ministerial commitment. We will use that good will and support as a foundation on which to progress. Although the withdrawal of the PFI scheme in Lymington has undoubtedly caused anxiety locally, I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman that every effort is being made by all parties to bring this matter to a swift conclusion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): We come now to the penultimate topic for our consideration today.

Local Radio

1 pm

Mrs. Christine Butler (Castle Point): I am grateful for the opportunity to outline some major concerns about independent local radio in advance of a communications Bill and the forthcoming White Paper. The concerns primarily focus on ownership rules, convergence and content regulation. Moves to consolidate ownership go back to the Conservatives' Broadcasting Act 1990 and the Broadcasting Act 1996, which accelerated the process and removed most of the ownership rules. The current situation shows that companies want more liberalisation and less regulation.

The 1990 Act removed most of the content controls on local radio, leaving the Radio Authority able to work only through the promises of performance, now called formats. In the past few days, I have received input from spokespersons acting for some of the giants in the commercial radio sector, but today I wish to speak for the wider public interest rather than for specific vested interests. Sound broadcasting is special and cannot be left to competition law and criminal law. Advertisers are the clients of commercial radio but listeners are also important to that commercial interest. Six groups—Capital Radio, GWR, Emap, Chrysalis, The Wireless Group and Scottish Radio Holdings—dominate the market, generating 80 per cent. of commercial radio revenues and owning more than 60 per cent. of the points that make up the radio ownership system. Should we continue with the trend towards more convergence with extensive networking and automation, we shall be in danger of losing the localness in local radio and having national radio in all but name.

As the summer recess began, so did a spate of letters from constituents horrified that they might lose a favourite local radio station, Breeze AM. Common to all the letters was the refrain, "Are you able to do anything to help—please?" The letters reflected the feelings of so many people throughout Essex who over the years had grown to love and, in many ways, depend on Breeze AM and Essex FM. In its early days, Essex Radio covered a wide range of music and phone-in programmes and there was a compelling interaction between broadcasters and listeners. The group started its own charity, Helping Hands, which was relaunched in 1998 as Cash for Causes. It had grown not because of a corporate decision but through a natural evolution that was supported by listener activity. Families, schools and individuals all contributed to community fundraising, benefiting, among others, the local Mencap, the Cot Death Society, Hearing Help Essex, Braintree Women's Aid, Homestart Harlow, Action for Kids, St. Claire's hospice—I could go on and on.

Local people decided to fight for Breeze AM when they became aware that it was to pass into new ownership. They feared losing the character and identity of a local radio station that thousands of people had regarded as run by and for locals—the chat between listeners and presenters, the immediate reporting on local situations such as school closures, neighbourhood events and the minutiae of road works that might affect

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local travel. As one doughty campaigner, my constituent Penny Pringle, said at the launch of the Essex Campaign to Save Local Radio:

> Above all, as an observer of one of Peter Holmes' brilliant talks to schoolchildren about the art of communication, remember to stress—as he did—that communication is a two-way process. Breeze speaks to us, we speak to Breeze. But at the moment we must speak for Breeze, because do we really want to lose all this?

I pay tribute to the efforts of Penny, who lives on Canvey island, of Maxine Meadows from Maldon and of Geoff Bonser from Southend, who was a co-founder of the original Essex Radio. They came with me to the Radio Authority in September to argue the case about programming, licensing rules and, essentially, local radio. With the *Daily Mail* and General Trust as the owner of the Essex stations, there had not been swingeing changes to format and content had not been much affected, but with a new owner, GWR, it was beginning to look like goodbye to all that.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): Mr. Cook, I should like to point out that in Bristol, where GWR already has a significant presence as well as owning Orchard FM in neighbouring Somerset, it also has a stake in the most recent community radio station, Eagle FM. That was given, to my dismay, to the *Bristol Press and Post*, which is hardly a local community group, and was subsequently bought by the *Daily Mail*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Perhaps I should offer the gentlest of gentle admonishments on two counts. First, in a 30-minute Adjournment debate an intervention is unusual unless it has been pre-arranged with the presiding officer. Secondly, I should be failing in my duty were I not to remind hon. Members that when the decision was taken for parallel proceedings to take place in Westminster Hall it was agreed that they would be overseen by a Deputy Speaker, not by a Chairman. The exception is when a nameplate can be seen, in which case hon. Members may use the Chairman's name, but on other occasions it is Mr. Deputy Speaker. The intervention is unusual—quite extraordinary—so it must be the briefest of brief interventions.

Valerie Davey: Please accept my apology, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had arranged it with my hon. Friend but not with you. I add only that following the takeover of the *Bristol Press and Post* by the *Daily Mail*, or DMG, the latter's radio interests have been taken over by GWR, so we have come full circle and the enterprise is no longer local.

Mrs. Butler: I apologise for my earlier error, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I take my hon. Friend's point. In fact, GWR now cuts a swathe across the south of England from the west to the east coast and as far as Peterborough and the midlands. It is a major operator in those regions. That was one of the bells that rang for local people, who were determined to protect not just their own interest, but that of all those who love to listen to independent local radio stations. Indeed, as has been said, there was great consternation throughout Essex, and a campaign was started in the wake of GWR's takeover of Breeze and Essex FM, as well as other stations.

Devotees shed tears when local presenters who had given such a distinct character to Breeze began to be given their marching orders. Surely some protection of listeners' interests is needed and we should not be taking a cold view of the matter. The current concentration of ownership allowed by Conservative legislation enables distant groups to do away with valued local services in the pursuit of short-term profit. There is a desperate need for a regulator to stand up for listeners so that they can enjoy a genuine local radio service.

Following meetings with the Radio Authority, and to allow GWR to come within ownership rules, some of the people on our local station, Breeze, were given a reprieve and although there were some changes the format was not immediately switched to Gold. Until now, we have retained a little localness, but that will soon go, because for some of the presenters the reprieve was to last for only a few months. We have lost some really good people, and I am afraid that the spirit has gone.

The licence that was held before the GWR takeover allowed live output for up to 16 hours a day, with automation in only off-peak, night-time and early morning periods, and although Essex was part-networked to Crawley, presenters made sure that the Southend-Crawley split worked well. The station was able to react immediately to any situation. For example, on the evening of the Stansted air crash, listeners to Breeze 1521 in Crawley continued to receive its regular output. Indeed, Ray Clark has, on occasion, presented two different programmes at the same time. Ray joined the station in 1989 and has won five world-class awards, yet he was made redundant. It is regrettable that he and other highly professional and experienced broadcasters were jettisoned. I am speaking for not only one station, but for the nation. The development is ominous in terms of the encouragement of rising stars.

When GWR took over further stations from the *Daily Mail* and General Trust for £146 million, it exceeded the 15-point limit. It therefore had to sell some of its assets to a third party that would be prepared to broadcast the classic gold format. By October, it had become known that Unique Broadcasting had become a major shareholder of several of GWR's former acquisitions, including Breeze. It was felt at the time that the situation had gone from critical to not quite so dire. However, GWR maintains a 20 per cent. interest, and many observers believe that these interests are being warehoused until ownership rules are relaxed even further.

Unless legislation prevents it, one or two companies will soon own all local independent radio stations. With cross-media ownership, and if members of one company board sit on other company boards, as at present, there is an inherent danger to the public interest. The Radio Authority has suggested ways to protect the public interest in regions and local areas in its submissions to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Trade and Industry, in advance of the White Paper and in response to the Green Paper consultations. However, independent local radio takes a different view.

I feel strongly about independent editorial content. Local radio cannot be considered merely as a product. The relationship between the producer—if I may use that term—and the consumer is different. Two important points must be emphasised. One is about quality, diversity and choice. The other is the potential for a monopoly of editorial view. If that were to happen, the situation could become very dangerous. During the recent campaign in Essex alone, one mid-Essex newspaper, owned by DMG, would not cover the activities of local people engaged in their fight to save the distinctiveness of Breeze. We should take the issue very seriously.

The Radio Authority also mentioned access radio. The campaign for access radio, which would be a non-profit making body, was born out of the frustration of losing genuinely local radio. It has been suggested that it could be funded by a levy on the independent sector, but that sector says that it should be publicly funded. The idea for access radio is a symptom of present ills and not a cure. In my view, the project has only a slight chance of becoming viable. For instance, would the independent sector want to fund access radio until it became popular enough to decrease audience ratings for that sector? I think not. Would access radio, which would be mainly run by volunteers and would work on a shoestring budget, be able to deliver the range—I hesitate to use the word "quality"—of programming that listeners expect?

Some people might say that the internet could provide ready access for everyone, but I urge people to hesitate before concluding that it could cure all ills. Essentially, it is an unregulated medium. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will say more about that. I am speaking about traditional radio broadcasting. Whatever happens in technology, I am speaking for the listeners at home. They will be less interested in advanced technologies than they are in what they hear in their living rooms.

I am left wondering whether it might be a better idea to invest more in local BBC radio so that it can undertake more research and perhaps engage in more local documentary programming. We owe something to the listeners out there. I ask all those who lament the loss of truly locally inspired and produced independent radio to come to Essex and learn from us in our attempt to bring localness and plurality of ownership back.

1.18 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Mrs. Butler) for securing this debate. She has raised an important issue, about which, as she knows from our conversations, I too have strong feelings. I also thank also my Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) for pointing out the similar circumstances that affect her constituents, and my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst). I have received a considerable amount of correspondence about local radio. In response to the remarks that have been made, I should like to speak about the Government's commitment to local radio and to outline how we see the future developing.

I visited Breeze FM—I think at the invitation of Eric Moonman, who I believe is its chairman and who was also once a colleague here. I was very excited by what I saw and by all the work done with local community groups, charities and so on. I was sorry to learn that some of the presenters who have now gone, including Ray Clark, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point cited as having received five world-class awards. Employment matters are for the broadcaster and we have no power under the Broadcasting Acts to intervene, but I hope that GWR will take note of local concern. I pay tribute to Penny Pringle, Maxine Meadows and Geoff Bonsor for their campaign to save local radio in Essex.

I turn to existing regulation, which is under review. The Radio Authority was established under the Broadcasting Act 1990 to license and regulate independent radio in the United Kingdom. The Act provides that the authority should ensure that the local character of a radio service is maintained during the period of the licence while allowing individual stations the flexibility to make commercial and programming decisions. The authority sets out to meet that statutory obligation to maintain the essential character of a service by requiring output to be within a programme format. I understand that, as of this morning, it has not received any application from GWR to change that format.

The 1990 Act enables a local radio station to change its format, but the Radio Authority may consent to a change only if it would not narrow the range of programmes available by way of independent radio services to people living in the area for which the service is licensed to be provided, or would not substantially alter the character of the service.

Mrs. Butler: It is difficult for the regulator to deal with ownership rules in the local independent radio sector because there is a perceived weakness in what it can and cannot do, notwithstanding section 106(1) of the 1990 Act. Further strengthening is necessary because the drafting of the provision is too loose and open to interpretation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat that interventions must be brief.

Janet Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting those concerns and we shall take them on board in our deliberations on the White Paper.

The Broadcasting Act 1996 promotes plurality and, therefore, consumer interests through restrictions on media ownership, including radio. Notwithstanding my hon. Friend's concern, it is important to say a little about this. As well as the provisions that apply nationally—for example, those preventing any one person from holding radio licences accounting for more than 15 per cent. of the total number of points available, with such points being attributed to licences depending on audience size—a number of restrictions will prevent the concentration of ownership of local radio. A person is allowed to own one FM and one AM licence that share a potential audience. However, a person may hold a second licence on the same waveband with the same potential audience only if the Radio Authority is satisfied that the holding of that licence could not be expected to operate against the public interest. A person wishing to control three radio licences that share a potential audience must have one service on each of the

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AM and FM wavebands. In considering the public interest, the Radio Authority must consider the effect of the proposal on the range of independent radio programmes in the area and, in particular, the impact on diversity in the sources of information available and opinions expressed.

My hon. Friend referred to the need to maintain quality, diversity and choice, and I can reassure her that that is one of the Government's priorities. The authority takes a firm and objective stance in support of the development and growth of a successful UK independent radio network that offers a wide listening choice.

A key point in today's debate is the future for local radio in the context of the communications White Paper. The available spectrum for new radio services is extremely scarce and there is strong competition for new analogue licences, which continue to be advertised by the Radio Authority. Demand for new licences outstrips supply. The Radio Authority, in deciding licence awards, has to strike a difficult balance between the demand from large and small organisations.

Digital radio has now commenced and the Radio Authority is advertising new local multiplex licences at the rate of one per month. Although digital technology enables the available spectrum to be used more efficiently than the equivalent analogue spectrum by increasing the number of services available, the spectrum continues to be limited at present. Digital technology is also enabling broadcast and communications to converge.

The Government are, therefore, concerned that an appropriate system of regulation should be in place that will allow the radio industry to grow, but which will also protect consumers' interests. Last February, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced, jointly with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, that we would publish a White Paper later this year. My hon. Friend has obviously been studying the progress made on that. The White Paper will set out the Government's proposals for the reform of broadcasting and telecommunications regulation. A joint communications team from my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry has been set up to examine how the broadcasting and telecommunications industries will develop over the next 10 years, and what regulation will be appropriate in this converging digital environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West and I have exchanged correspondence about the review of spectrum. The Government commissioned a review of the use of FM frequencies earlier this year to determine the likelihood of FM frequencies being found in the United Kingdom for new radio services. The conclusions of that review will help to inform our deliberations on the White Paper.

We consulted widely while drawing up the White Paper and, earlier this year, the team carrying out those consultations invited comments on a range of issues. They included the pace and direction of change in the communications markets; the needs and demands of consumers; the objectives, principles and systems for content regulation; and the implications of conclusions on those issues for the organisational structure of regulation. We received a number of responses to this consultation from both larger and smaller radio stations. I assure hon. Members that those responses will be given careful consideration. I cannot, of course, discuss the Government's proposals in detail before the publication of the White Paper.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Radio Authority's proposal for access radio. We are looking closely at that issue, and I note her concerns about how it might or might not work. I assure her that we are considering that very carefully. It might be possible to establish a fund to assist small-scale, non-commercial radio. Such a fund could maintain, at a low cost, a richly innovative range of services with significant public support, some of which could play a major social role in addressing problems in difficult neighbourhoods. That would fit in with the Government's agenda on social exclusion.

I would like to emphasise once more that the Government appreciate the concern expressed over the sale of local radio licences. We want all participants in the radio industry—large and small, and including, as my hon. Friend said, the BBC—to succeed, as they all have an important role to play in its continuing development. I thank her for bringing the matter to my attention, and I hope that she will give us her views on the White Paper when it is published.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We come now to the final topic for our consideration.

A50 (Sudbury and Doveridge)

1.30 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I last raised the issue of road safety in Derbyshire with the Minister on 20 June, when I expressed my concern about the dramatic number of fatal accidents that we have seen on Derbyshire's roads over a six-month period. The latest figures show that there have been some 59 fatalities.

It is incumbent on all hon. Members to consider the subject of road safety and to raise concerns about specific danger areas. For that reason, I want to return to two issues relating to the A50, which runs through part of the southern end of my constituency and has become extremely busy—it is now, in effect, the link road between the M1 and the M6. It has about 38,500 traffic movements a day, and that figure is growing at a rate that is to be expected on such a busy road.

The crossing at Sudbury is the only crossing on the A50 from the M1 to the M6 that is an unmarked crossing going through a central reservation. There is a big pedestrian crossing a mile or two further down, which ensures that people can visit Fosten prison safely. However, people in my constituency who have to use the Aston crossing cannot do so safely. On 1 September this year, I attended a protest when a number of local residents temporarily brought the road to a standstill to demonstrate the great problems that they have in crossing it.

The crossing is just a gap in the central reservation for people who wish to cross from both sides to get to the bus stop, which is the sole reason for using it. I visited the site on Saturday with June Smith, Christine Hickson and Bob Jeffreys, the chairman of Sudbury parish council. The speed of the traffic that went past us was frightening. It is unacceptable to have to try to cross the road in those conditions: something must be done, as a matter of urgency, to put that right. All the indications that I have received so far suggest that there is no intention of doing so.

I received a letter from the Highways Agency, which states:

> We are considering a longer-term solution for this section of the A50 that would provide a two-level junction. That would include facilities for pedestrians to cross the A50 safely without conflicting with dual carriageway traffic. We have started the process by asking our Agents to investigate matters further, though this will take some time to complete.

I am worried about the length of time that it will take to improve the road. I know that several hon. Members use it, but I doubt whether any have noticed the existence of the crossing. It is extremely dangerous, and I hope that the Minister will tell me that he will instruct the Highways Agency to look into this problem as a matter of urgency.

On the A38, two sets of pedestrian traffic lights have been installed at the Markeaton island and the Little Eaton island. The Sudbury crossing deserves at least that, as a move in the right direction. We should not be told that we have to wait endlessly while the Highways Agency investigates the whole area to consider whether further measures should be taken.

I should also like to discuss the new part of the bypass, known as the Doveridge bypass, which is the main part of the link road, and the noise on that road. I raised the issue with the Minister on 20 June, when I pointed out that much of the A50

> goes through open countryside and has a whisper concrete surface. However, concrete has been used on a small section of the road, which goes through Doveridge, and the noise increase in that area is amazing. As soon as one hits the concrete surface, the noise level rises. It seems unbelievable to me that Connect, who built the road, was allowed to lay a noisy road surface on the most populated stretch of the A50.

I asked the Minister to send a strong message to Connect to consider the issue and make changes. The problem has a tremendous effect not only on the people who live in Doveridge, who hear the noise of the road, but on people living in Somersal Herbert and Marston Montgomery.

On 20 June, the Minister said:

> I come now to the problem of ... the A50 ... The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Highways Agency has a programme to quieten particularly noisy stretches of road. The A50 Doveridge bypass was not included in the list of most pressing cases, but in view of local concerns, there is no reason why it should not be assessed retrospectively in line with the original criteria. The Highways Agency is considering whether the circumstances at Doveridge warrant further noise analysis as a precursor to early maintenance work, which in turn could reduce the ... noise from the road.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 23-26WH.]

Having pressed the Department and waited for a reply, on 19 July I received a letter from the Under-Secretary of State, the noble Lord Whitty, which states:

> Turning to noise, at the time the Doveridge Bypass was planned, brushed concrete was an approved surfacing material for roads carrying up to 75,000 vehicles per day. The then specifications allowed a range of surfacing to ensure best value, bearing in mind the local availability of construction materials. The quieter surface materials now used were still on trial at that time and, unfortunately, were not adopted in time to be used in this case.

My attention was drawn to a campaign about the A30, which has a similar surface to the A50. I tabled some parliamentary questions to the Minister, which he answered on 27 July. He said that noise tests were being done on the A30 and that its surface was going to be changed. I then asked him to include the A50 in that scheme. On 27 July, he answered:

> I have asked the Highways Agency to draw up a programme for all such trunk roads for agreement. The A50 at Doveridge will be included in this programme. No detailed estimate of the cost of resurfacing .... at Doveridge exists.—[*Official Report*, 27 July 2000; Vol. 354, c. 787W.]

I very much welcome, and was pleased to receive, that answer from the Minister, because it took us forward in a constructive way. However, as often happens, I subsequently received a further letter from the noble Lord Whitty on 12 October, which states:

> The A50 Doveridge noise study is progressing well but is taking longer than anticipated to complete. Until we have the results of the study we are unable to indicate the priority cases for treatment.

My constituents were pleased when they heard that there was a good chance of the A50 being resurfaced. However, they were worried that that was being discussed in the context of the Government's 10-year road transport plan. They rightly want to know where they stand in that 10-year plan. On their behalf, I should

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like to ask how it is being put together, where the road is in the lists, and when they can expect some relief from the tremendous noise level increase.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that he will instruct the Highways Agency to consider the unsafe crossing to which I have referred. I also hope that he can tell us how the work is progressing on the noise studies on the A50, and when he expects a resurfaced road to be laid through the Doveridge section.

1.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) on securing another debate on the A50 trunk road. He mentioned my reference to A50 noise during the Adjournment debate on 20 June. As he knows, a 30-year design, build, finance and operate concession for the A50 Stoke-Derby link was awarded to Connect A50 Ltd., a private consortium, in May 1996. Part of the consortium's remit was to construct the Doveridge bypass. I know that the hon. Gentleman supported the scheme, which provided traffic relief to the village of Doveridge and was fully opened to traffic on 6 February 1998.

The specification at the time allowed the main carriageway of the bypass to be constructed in concrete. I am aware of local concerns about the traffic noise created by the popularity of the route linking the M1 and the M6. The Highways Agency and Connect A50 held a public meeting on 21 November 1998, which the hon. Gentleman attended. They explained and clarified the decisions taken on design and construction at that time. Connect A50 is required to operate and maintain the A50 Stoke-Derby link until the end of the concession period in 2026. There will almost certainly be a need to resurface the Doveridge bypass in that period. As it is a new road in good condition, and given the condition of the pavement, that will not be necessary until after 2010.

I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged the Government's commitment to surface all concrete trunk roads with low-noise surfacing in our 10-year plan for transport. My noble Friend Lord Whitty, the Minister responsible for roads, has decided to consult widely to develop criteria for prioritising the resurfacing of all concrete roads. All local authorities will be consulted in the next two months, and the consultation letter will be published on the Highways Agency website. The Government will study the comments received and finalise the criteria by March 2001. I expect a list of those sites likely to be resurfaced in the next three years to be available early in the spring. I shall ensure that the Highways Agency keeps the hon. Gentleman fully informed of developments.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about road safety. Sudbury is located at the western end of the Foston-Hatton-Hilton bypass, which opened in 1994 and upgraded that section of the route to dual carriageway standard. With the opening of the Derby southern bypass in September 1997 and the Doveridge bypass in February 1998, we became aware of increasing local concerns about road safety due to traffic speeds at the A50-A515 Sudbury roundabout. As a result, the Highways Agency was instructed to introduce several local safety measures in spring 1998. They resulted in an observed improvement in safety at the roundabout, and were well received by the local community.

The Highways Agency was also instructed to commission a further investigation into options for additional improvements, especially regarding the difficulties experienced both by pedestrians crossing the trunk road to the west of the Sudbury roundabout in the small hamlet of Aston, and by drivers accessing the roundabout from the Aston lane side road. A report was produced in August 2000 and a copy was supplied to the chairman of Sudbury parish council for his consideration. The main conclusions were that in the five years to December 1999 there were no accidents that involved pedestrians; the measures that were introduced in spring 1998 have been successful in improving safety and remain so; queue lengths and waiting times at the roundabout are not excessive; and pedestrian movements, even allowing for suppressed demand, are very low.

The report therefore recommended that additional modifications could be made to signing so as to increase drivers' awareness of pedestrian movements and to further encourage lower speeds, and that monitoring of the site should be continued to identify further options for improvement. I have asked the Highways Agency to organise a meeting with the parish council and local residents to discuss the report's findings, consider possible options for the future and report back to me. That meeting will take place on 28 November.

I have also asked the Highways Agency to commission a study of roundabout junctions along the Stoke-Derby route to ensure consistent standards. The study will commence in March 2001 and, when I have received the results, I shall consider the need for major scheme construction within the 10-year transport plan. I recognise, for example, that full-grade separation at junctions could incorporate facilities that would enable pedestrians and side road traffic to cross the A50 without coming into conflict with through trunk road traffic.

Mr. McLoughlin: Increased signing or new signing will not be a significant enough solution to the problem. That is not acceptable, nor should my constituents be asked to cross the road when the amount of traffic is increasing. Several measures have been imposed for pedestrians in other cases, but that has not happened in the case under discussion. That has been due partly to the fact that the whole road was not completed in one go, but was built in bits, which has led to such a huge increase in traffic. I urge the Minister to consider the problem seriously. The days are now getting shorter and the traffic volumes are tremendous. June Smith told me that it once took her 20 minutes to cross the road. That is not acceptable.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his further exposition of the difficulties experienced by his constituents. He is right to press as hard as possible for a solution to the problem. I hope that I have given him some reassurance that the Government, via the Highways Agency, are seriously considering the problem. There will be an opportunity for the parish

council and local residents to discuss matters further with the Highways Agency at the meeting to be held later this month.

Finally, I advise the hon. Gentleman that full grade-separated standards, with ample facilities to cater for the safety of pedestrians and other road users, will be fully considered within the Government's route management strategy, and that implementation of the strategy will deal with the safety concerns at the locations to be discussed. I will make it my business to let the hon. Gentleman know when we are ready to announce the route management strategy for the A50, which will incorporate the whole length from the M1 to the M6.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twelve minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 November 2000

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Fishing Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I am delighted that the Speaker saw fit to allow this debate on fishing safety. It is many years since the House was able to debate safety at sea, and it is clear from the attendance in this Chamber that the matter excites considerable interest in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Fishing is one of the UK's longest and proudest traditions, and for many fishermen the history of our fishing industry is in their blood. They accept the reality of hard, physical work in harsh and sometimes dangerous conditions, and the fact is that for many, the rewards are variable at best. What they sometimes find harder to accept is the regulation of their activity in the interests of safety.

Sadly, however, there is also a tradition that goes hand in hand with the business of fishing: the loss of fishermen's lives. We have only to think back to the loss of deep-water trawlers in the late 1960s and the 1969 Holland-Martin inquiry into trawler safety to remind ourselves how true that is. By comparison with other UK industries, including those long regarded as dangerous, such as mining and quarrying, sea fishing still has by far the worst record of fatalities. On average, more than 20 fishermen have lost their lives in each of the past five years as a result of accidents on board their vessels. With the loss of 30 fishermen already this year, the record of fatalities in 2000 looks like being the worst for 10 years. Add to that accidents where fishermen survive more by luck than good judgment, and one sees that the problem is even worse. It is appropriate to say something at this point about the considerations that have followed the 1998 consultation on fishing vessel accidents and those lost at sea.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that all of us have a particular concern for the protection of young, inexperienced fishermen? I would ask him—if he needs urging—to keep a close watch on the investigation into the sinking of the Karianda, which the Scottish media allege was deliberate. The young boy involved made some serious allegations about the sinking of that vessel, and I urge my hon. Friend to tighten regulations if the inquiry calls for such action.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He will understand that, as that matter is now subject to criminal inquiries, it would be quite wrong for me to comment on it. Having said that, I take on board his general observation about young entrants into the fishing industry, and I shall say something about the proposals that we have for them. We are all very conscious of the matter, and the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) will, I dare say, want to talk today about the Solway Harvester tragedy.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I represent Brixham, which is the second largest fishing port in England and Wales. The Minister will appreciate that although the dangers of the sea are recognised, so is the cost of doing what is expected on safety, security and hygiene. The Government are expected to spend unlimited amounts of time and money putting things right in those three areas. Does he agree that there must be an assessment of the cost and likely risk of new regulations? If he does not, he may find that he is putting fishermen, especially shell fishermen, out of business. As my constituency has the largest crab and lobster fishing fleet in the south, I would not want him even to consider anything that would do so.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman refers to anxieties that have been well vented in our consultation on the safety code for under 12 m vessels. I am sure that he will have the patience to wait for me to deal with some of his concerns in the course of my remarks.

I was referring to the 1998 consultation on fishing vessel accidents and the recovery of those lost at sea. Government policy continues to be to regard the wreck site as an honourable burial ground, but we recognise that that view is not always shared by the families of those who are lost. Therefore, consideration is being given to the practicalities of establishing a trust fund that could be called on to recover bodies of fishermen when accident or criminal investigations do not require their recovery. Work to follow up the Clarke report on the loss of the Gaul will also help us to trace vessels that sink so suddenly that they are unable to transmit explicit distress messages.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Does the Minister accept that, because the families involved and others collected money to raise the Sapphire, important evidence in the investigation into the tragedy was uncovered? That helped to get closer to identifying the cause of the tragedy.

Mr. Hill: I am certainly aware that the families succeeded in generating significant sponsorship to secure the raising of the Sapphire, but not that the raising of the vessel yielded further evidence about the causes of the sinking. The general policy of the marine accident investigation branch is that vessels are raised only in cases of suspected criminality, or when it is deemed that raising them will make a specific contribution to discovering the reasons why they sank.

If hon. Members will forgive me, I have a rather hefty speech to make. For the sake of permitting a wide range of debate, I had better make progress.

Why do so many fishermen, often skilled and experienced individuals, die while earning their living? The investigations carried out by MAIB identify the primary causes of accidents. Flooding, capsize and "man overboard" incidents result in the greatest loss of

[Mr. Hill]

fishermen's lives, but we must look behind those "labels" to see how accidents are caused, or how they escalate from problems to catastrophes. In doing that we begin to see what needs to be done to prevent those accidents from happening repeatedly.

In many cases, the underlying cause is human error. People often know what should be done, but for some reason do not do it. Fishermen often think that they know what should be done, but discover too late that they are wrong. Once the error is made, it may be too late to prevent the consequences. It is worth taking time to consider what that means. Flooding is a major cause of vessel losses, and when the vessel is lost, lives are at risk.

The causes of flooding can vary. Perhaps the pipe work is of poor quality or poorly maintained; perhaps the bilge-pumping system has not been checked; perhaps the bilge alarm is not working, or worse still is switched off, denying those on board the opportunity of an early warning of a problem. Another obvious cause of flooding is the leaving open, for convenience, of doors and hatches that should be closed at sea, allowing water to flood into the vessel.

There are also cases of more sudden and potentially more catastrophic capsizing, which occur when the vessel's stability is compromised. That may be due to the shifting on deck of a weight such as a heavy catch, the exertion of forces on the vessel by powerful winches when trying to free fishing gear from an obstruction on the sea bed, or a lack of control of the weight of a catch as it is brought inboard. The last of those is a particular problem on beam trawlers.

I shall pause to recognise the work that has been done by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in conjunction with the fishing industry to follow up a MAIB recommendation on beam trawler safety following the loss of the Margaretha Maria. A study of the sea-going stability levels of a sample of beam trawlers is leading towards a new operational stability regime. What will happen if, despite all precautions, an accident occurs with little or no warning? Will the emergency position-indicating radio beacon work? It will not do so if it has not been correctly maintained, or if the float-free mechanism has been compromised by painting over or is incorrectly secured.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as he has a heavy speech to make on a serious subject. I am anxious because all the technical deficiencies that he mentioned are symptoms of the problems. I know, because I represent a fishing area, that the most significant problem is that there is no safety culture. The priority is catching fish. Fish stocks are declining rapidly, and the Government are discussing next year's quotas with Brussels. My fear is that, as stocks decline, safety will become even more of a problem. My hon. Friend has already said that deaths in the fishing fleet are the highest for many years, and I want him to address the culture issue.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is right. Culture is central to any discussion of safety at sea, and I shall say a few words about it in due course. Safety is lacking in the fishing industry, especially at the margins, and we shall seek to improve the culture, which is central to the delivery of safety.

I was discussing the failure of precautions: life rafts can float free if the hydrostatic release unit is wrongly connected or if the life raft is not otherwise secured to the vessel. Even if correctly secured, the position of the life raft needs to be carefully considered if it is not to become trapped in the vessel's rigging or superstructure as it inflates and rises to the surface.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) mentioned the safety culture. What happens if fishermen become careless through over-familiarity with the routines of fishing or through fatigue? A moment of inattention or loss of concentration may be fatal if the fisherman is operating machinery, keeping watch or simply moving around on deck.

I am not in the business of scaremongering; the scenarios that I have described appear in the report of the marine accident investigation branch—some with depressing regularity. Neither the Government nor the fishing industry should be willing to accept that so many fishermen lose their lives each year or that many more only just survive an accident that should never have happened. Fishermen do not set out to put themselves or others in danger. I can understand why they may not want to be reminded of the risks that they face, but the danger is that a lack of awareness, convenient rather than safe working practices, and over-familiarity with the routines of fishing may have a desensitising effect.

What can Government and the fishing industry do to change such a culture? The solution lies in creating a positive safety culture, where identifying risks and taking action to mitigate them is part of the way that a fisherman thinks. Fishermen say—some said it in response to consultation on the code of practice for small fishing vessels—that they think about the risks before every trip, but just thinking is not enough. It must be reinforced with information about and awareness of the risks to which their vessels are exposed, and with effective measures that will mitigate those risks.

The fishing vessel owner, the skipper and the crew member must first ask themselves the "what if" questions: "What if my vessel were to flood, capsize or catch fire? What if I or another member of the crew were to fall overboard?" Fishermen must then ask themselves the "what can I do" questions: "What can I do to prevent those things happening? If I cannot prevent them, what can I do to reduce the consequences? If, despite all I have done, the worst happens, what can I do to ensure that the crew survives?"

In asking and answering such questions, the fisherman is undertaking the process of hazard identification and risk assessment. That is a much more effective way of addressing operational safety issues than prescriptive regulations. The problem is that, although many fishermen dislike any regulation that appears to get in the way of their earning their livelihood, the absence of prescription is unfamiliar. It places responsibility on them to take decisions about risks associated with their vessels and the actions that they need to take to mitigate those risks.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I have listened closely to the Minister, whom I am delighted to see in his place, for reasons that I shall elaborate on in due course. Fishermen tell me something fundamentally different from what he has been outlining. They make the point that they are not members of a suicide squad. They are concerned that their experiences and views about what might improve their safety are often dismissed out of hand by people who are conducting a consultation exercise. Until Ministers understand that feeling among fishermen, we shall not make much progress.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful for those observations, with which I am familiar. I have had several meetings with representatives of the fishing industry as part of the consultation process, including one yesterday in the company of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), and I am aware that there are deep suspicions and misgivings about the Government's intention in the consultation process. It will be part of my purpose, in my remaining remarks, to dispel many of those anxieties and—I hope—correct some of the misinformation that has developed.

Perhaps it is asking a lot of an industry that for the past 25 years has been used to the prescribed requirements of the Fishing Vessel (Safety Provisions) Rules 1975, but it must be right that those who know the vessel best take responsibility for such decisions—albeit with appropriate guidance. When that is done well it is a significant step towards building a positive safety culture.

On that note, when I met the fishing industry safety group earlier this month, I was encouraged by what I learned of industry organisations' activities to promote that positive safety culture. Initiatives include a working group on safety at sea, studying pipe-work failure; support for a research project on health and safety issues, including fatigue, on board fishing vessels; support for training; and the provision of constant-wear life-jackets.

The last item builds on the spontaneous reaction of industry in the south-west of England in promoting the wearing of life-jackets, following the death in January of Daniel Kebble, a single-handed Cornish fisherman. The campaign represents a significant breakthrough: the promotion of a positive safety culture by industry at local level. Those who would once have laughed at their fellow fishermen for wearing personal buoyancy equipment while on deck now wear it themselves and encourage others to do so. If such an approach can work with personal buoyancy equipment, it can work with all the other issues that I have mentioned—but it depends on Government and industry working together to get the message across to the grassroots of the industry.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): On a recent visit to the south-west, I met Daniel Kebble's mother and father and heard about their campaign. They want the Government to make the wearing of life-jackets mandatory for all fishermen, particularly those on smaller boats, so that, otherwise, insurance claims will not be paid, and so on. Have the Government investigated ways in which to make the wearing of life-jackets mandatory?

Mr. Hill: Although I totally understand the motives of Daniel Kebble's parents, Government action towards establishing a mandatory system would create precisely the hostility and suspicion towards the relationship between Government and industry that we want to dispel. We of course maintain that some basic pieces of equipment are necessary for safety on vessels, but on the whole our purpose is to create a safety culture, to work with the industry and to go with the grain, encouraging more and more fishermen to wear buoyancy equipment. We want to work with them on deciding which equipment is appropriate.

Many fishermen have deep misgivings about life-jackets. They say that they become tangled with gear and that the danger that they create is greater than their contribution to safety. That might or might not be so. Perhaps certain types of life-jackets could be used. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) has powerful views on the matter, and I dare say that he will allude to the wearing of immersion suits, which the fishing industry seems to resist. I want to work with, not against, the industry.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is responsible not only for developing and enforcing high standards of marine safety, but for promoting them. It is working with the fishing industry and organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution to find new and better ways of getting safety advice and information into fishermen's hands and minds.

More fundamental approaches are also needed. That is why the Government have taken a fresh look at the objective of providing safety grants, which have been used to subsidise the purchase of statutory safety equipment. A new generation of safety grants is seen as providing an opportunity to promote fishermen's safety awareness and a positive safety culture through training.

I am delighted that fisheries departments have agreed to fund, over the next three years, the development and delivery of industrywide courses, which will provide, first, safety updates for older fisherman who have been exempt from basic safety training requirements. Secondly, they will provide accident prevention and risk awareness courses for all fishermen. Thirdly, there will be a training package for new entrants, which will encompass existing basic safety training in sea survival, first aid and fire fighting, and introduce basic training in risk awareness and accident prevention. The fishing industry has asked us to consider supporting fishermen's attendance on training courses and we will do so. On safety grants, fisheries departments are also keen to support the trialling of innovative experimental equipment that might have a safety benefit.

I have said little about the regulation of safety, but in building a safer industry, a statutory framework must set the standards. Those relating to the safety of fishing vessels are encompassed in regulations that are a quarter of a century old. Regulations that govern fishermen's safety training, and training and certification, though not as dated, are also in need of review. A great deal has changed in the fishing industry since those regulations were developed. We will incorporate the review of the regulations in a comprehensive strategy for safety in the fishing industry, which brings together regulations, education and other initiatives to meet the needs of a modern industry.

[Mr. Hill]

The review process began with the development of the code of practice for small fishing vessels—those under 12 m—and work is beginning on a code for larger fishing vessels of between 12 m and 24 m. Requirements for fishermen's training and certification are due for review. I shall focus on the code of practice for small fishing vessels and round off the consultation process on it. I see this debate as the natural culmination of that process by allowing parliamentary colleagues to express their views.

As I said, the development of a code of practice for small fishing vessels marked the beginning of the first major review of fishing vessel safety regulations since 1975. The principal aims in developing the code were to update the safety equipment requirements for small fishing vessels and, building on the concept of hazard identification and risk assessment that already applies to health and safety on board the vessel, to introduce an assessment by owners of the fitness of their vessels.

The industry's reaction to the code, both in its development and in response to consultation, has been mixed. There is broad acceptance by some, strong resistance from others and some evident misunderstandings. Points of detail must be addressed before conclusions are reached.

I shall deal with some of the concerns and misunderstandings. Representatives of the under 12 m sector have often asked why the regulations for smaller fishing vessels need to be changed, because that sector appears to have a better accident record than larger, more heavily regulated vessels. In assessing relative accident rates, some account must be taken of the greater time spent at sea by larger vessels, at greater distances from shore and in greater extremes of weather. The MCA is working with the industry to refine the assessment's parameters. However, the simple answer is that accident rates may be better in the under 12 m sector, but they are not so overwhelmingly good that they can be ignored. Perhaps the most significant fact is that accident rates in the under 12 m sector improved during the years that the code of practice was under discussion—the result, I believe, of increased safety awareness in that sector. It is important to maintain that awareness by implementing the code effectively.

It is suggested that the introduction of the code will place such an enormous cost burden on the industry that fishermen will be driven out of business or forced to put to sea in worse conditions in order to earn the money to pay for the additional equipment requirements. The balance between safety and cost is not easy to strike, but we are proposing minimum requirements aimed at reducing accident levels through increased vessel safety in foreseeable operating conditions and improved survival rates in the event of an accident. At the end of the day, fishermen must decide, as part of the risk-assessment process, whether it is safe to go to sea. They must also decide whether, if their business is close to the margins of viability, they can operate in accordance with the regulations applicable to their vessel.

Mr. Steen: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way twice. I also want to thank him for seeing yesterday some Devon fishermen who greatly appreciated his approach and his kindness to them. May I ask the Minister one question? Does he know, from the consultation process, whether any shell fishermen or others who fish in boats of under 12 m approved of the proposals, or whether every one of them disagreed? My information is that every fisherman who goes to sea in a boat of under 12 m believes that the proposals are neither right nor good, and will not work.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind remarks. We received several hundred responses to the consultation exercise, and I have to confess that I have not analysed each of them. The response was mixed. In the under 12 m sector, about a third—mainly those in Scotland and Northern Ireland—are broadly in favour of the proposals. I guess that they include some of the categories of fishermen to which the hon. Gentleman referred. There were also mixed responses from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, although, there was almost universal agreement with the safety equipment list among all groups, despite difficulties with other aspects of the proposals.

I am conscious that I am speaking at length; the Chamber can be assured that the end is in sight. Let us consider the costs of the proposals in the safety code. I shall deal first with the additional items of equipment required by the code, why they are important and what the one-off costs are. First, a VHF radio costs between £200 and £400. The industry says that several fishermen in the under 12 m sector are already equipped with VHF radio; others argue that a mobile phone is a cheaper option and just as good. Coverage, however, is patchy and batteries get flat—no use at all when fishermen are in serious trouble and need to call for help. Secondly, bilge pumps and bilge alarms together cost about £400. I have already spoken about the problems of flooding, which can affect some small vessels as much as their larger counterparts. For the smallest vessels, the minimum requirement is a bailer.

Thirdly, a magnetic compass costs up to £500. Again, it is likely that reasonable numbers of vessels under 12 m are already equipped with a magnetic compass, but it is not unreasonable to regard it as an essential item for all vessels. Fourthly and finally—and only on larger vessels from 10 m to 12 m—a life raft costs about £1,000. That takes us back to what I said earlier about the hazard identification and risk assessment, where the question is, "And if, despite all I have done, the worst happens, what can I do to make sure the crew survives?" I need hardly say more on that.

Let me tell the Chamber about two further matters. First, the industry says that many fishermen on smaller vessels already choose to carry life rafts. Secondly, in response to consultation, fishermen asked why we did not require all vessels under 12 m to carry a life raft. For all those equipment items, it is important to appreciate that the requirement will be for items that are fit for the purpose and not necessarily those that are formally approved.

Another major concern is the cost of inspections. There is a significant misunderstanding here. The consultation draft of the code made it clear that existing inspection arrangements would apply for the first two years of the code's existence. Let me emphasise that there will be no charge for the first visit to a vessel. No fees will be incurred if the vessel complies with the code

or if any defects found can be rectified without the need for a revisit. Fees would be incurred only where the defects were significant enough to warrant a revisit and would, in all probability, have resulted in the vessel's detention. That is a clear incentive to comply with the code.

One of the most difficult areas for the industry has been the requirement for a fitness-of-vessel assessment. Again, misunderstandings have arisen in the minds of some fishermen who appear to see that as the first step towards making smaller fishing vessels subject to the same requirements for survey as those over 12 m. That is emphatically not the case. The concept behind the fitness-of-vessel assessment is akin to that of the health and safety risk assessment in that the fishing vessel owner himself assesses the hazards to which the vessel is exposed—flooding, capsize, fires and explosions—and the action needed to mitigate them. No guidance currently exists, although it does for health and safety assessments, and that, I believe, has been a significant part of the problem for the industry.

For that reason, I am considering whether the requirement for a fitness-of-vessel assessment should be remitted to the committee that will review the code after its first two years of operation. However, if the matter were to be remitted to that committee, I should want the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to work during the intervening period on the development of draft guidance, which might assist the committee to reach a decision on the future inclusion of a fitness-of-vessel assessment.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I have many fishermen who belong to the Clyde Fishermens Association in my constituency, as does the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). Could the Minister say something about the appeals procedure for those who are found to be in breach of the code of practice? My constituents are concerned that the appeal would be determined by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which is the enforcer. There may well be a conflict of interest.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I hope to deal with that question towards the soon-to-be-arrived-at conclusion of my remarks when inspiration finally reaches me. [*Interruption.*] Inspiration has now reached me. There will be an appeal to the local manager and then to the headquarters of the MCA and then to an outside body. There is quite clearly a good deal of scope for pursuing an appeal beyond the level of the local administration. I hope that that is of some use to her and the fishermen whom she represents.

Development of the code of practice for small fishing vessels has proved a long and hard road for Government and industry alike. I know that not all of its members would agree with me, but we have listened to the fishing industry. We listened in 1997 to their concerns about the complexity and cost of the draft code. We listened again in 1998 when the industry suggested a code based on schedules of safety equipment and risk assessments. We listened again before the current consultation by leaving existing inspection arrangements in place and in making it clear that fitness-of-vessel assessments would not be required until guidance had been developed. We are still listening as we move towards a decision on the code.

The work that lies ahead of us in modernising the fishing vessel safety regulations for larger vessels and for fishermen's training and certification will, I am sure, have its own share of difficulties. However, the Government are committed to working with industry to create positive attitudes to safety, which are the key to driving down accident rates and creating a safer industry. From my meetings with its representatives, I know that the fishing industry is also committed to that and I look forward to meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

I welcome the opportunity to co-operate with fishermen in raising safety standards and am aware, from regular joint meetings, how much is happening on both sides of the fishing industry. We still have a long way to go, but we know that everyone wants more safety. There is potential for improvement.

3.4 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I, too, welcome the debate, which is long overdue. It gives many hon. Members an opportunity to express their concerns. The subject concerns me, both as shadow Shipping Minister and as representative for Poole which, apart from being a port, has a small fishing fleet. I shall not speak at length, given the number of hon. Members present, but will briefly address a few topics—coastguards, fishing vessel safety grants and the code of practice—and make a few general comments. I shall also ask the Minister a few questions.

Last year, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency decided that it would close five coastguard stations by 2003. Those involved were Oban, Pentland, Tyne-Tees and Liverpool, while Portland and Leigh-on-Solent were to merge. As I understand it, Liverpool was reprieved, but Oban, Pentland and Tyne-Tees have closed or will soon close. Following the intervention of Lord Donaldson, Portland and Leigh-on-Solent are to remain open and independent stations. The condition of the buildings and equipment in both stations is not of the highest standard. I therefore seek an assurance that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency will upgrade them as a matter of priority because the stretch of water between Portland and Leigh-on-Solent is one of the busiest in the world. I expressed concern when the closures were first proposed because it has always been clear to me that local knowledge is an important commodity among coastguards. I would like further reassurance that the coastguards are happy with the arrangements as they are proceeding. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), who was involved with some of the original announcements, gave reassurances on that at the time. We are further down the road and a few further reassurances are necessary.

On fishing vessel safety grants, the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food decided on 21 May 1999 to end the grants that had been given for several years to larger fishing boats, for what were described as budgetary reasons. In a written answer, the relevant Minister spelled out that the Department had looked at that aspect as part of the comprehensive spending review and decided that it would not proceed with the grants. Since the budgetary position is somewhat better at this stage, perhaps the Minister will ask his colleagues why the Government have not reintroduced them, and what the Government's strategy is. The matter has caused some controversy, as my hon. Friend the

[Mr. Robert Syms]

Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) has said on several occasions—he will probably raise it in more detail during the debate.

The Minister stated that the code of practice was the key reason for the debate. All of us with fishing constituencies, particularly those with small fishing boats, have had quite a lot of correspondence on the subject. I understand that Mr. Alan Cubbin has received considerable correspondence from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency—some of which sounds a little irritable. There are real concerns in the industry. I received a letter from the South Coast Fishermen's Council, which expressed concern that it had not had any input into the latest proposals and was not satisfied with the consultation. The letter points out:

> Every boat under 12m is different and general legislation such as this code cannot work without putting many out of business.

It also makes the point that the Minister made:

> It is significant, however, that the accident rate for the longer and more heavily regulated vessels is substantially greater than that for the smaller vessels.

That is a good point. The letter goes on to make other good points, the first being a general one:

> We are completely disgusted by the content of 4 (ii). Fishermen do more for the rescue services than any other group, not only have many been lifeboatmen and coastguards but they carry out many rescues of the totally unregulated and often inexperienced sailor.

Many leisure sailors get into difficulty, and the fishing community does a fair amount to help them out.

The South Coast Fishermen's Council, which represents 400 boat owners between Lyme Regis and Portsmouth, summarised its objections by saying:

> We totally reject the code as it stands.

The main points that upset them were: written risk assessments; the fitness of vessels; any attempt to tie registration to compliance; making non-compliance a criminal offence; recommendations and matters of opinion; the exclusion of smaller boats and beach boats, because stowage is a genuine problem; the fact that no paperwork is to be carried on board open boats; self-certification; and inspection fees.

The Minister's mention of inspection fees may have clarified matters because, even if one started softly, perhaps saying that the regime would not change for a year or two, people would still be suspicious of what might happen in future. The fear is that if the regulatory regime were to change suddenly, the costs would fall on those who are already finding it pretty difficult to earn a living. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) was right to say that we all want a safe fishing industry, but a balance has to be struck between the real cost of upgrading boats and the real safety of the fishing vessels. The Minister also mentioned the appeals procedures. I am a little happier to know that there is a means of going beyond the agency; it is important to have a degree of independence.

People are worried about the code of practice. The Minister used the phrase "mixed response". I wonder whether a summary of replies or copies of some of the letters might be kept in the House of Commons Library. I know that 700 hundred letters have been received, and that they will have expressed various different opinions, but if the real weight of consultation is against the change, Members ought to know that and not simply be told that the response is mixed. We are all politicians, we have all undertaken consultation, and we all know that different opinions can be expressed and that "mixed response" can mean many things. The phrase does not shed much light on today's debate.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency does an excellent job. It reported that the accident rate among fishermen had fallen since 1995, but seemed to suggest that there had been under-reporting because some people in the fishing industry were unnecessarily unwilling to be included in the statistics. However, some changes are welcome, and the safe fishing campaign and the spot-the-risk competition are good ideas. Nevertheless, although we need to change the culture, we must be sensible about it.

The director of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution told me recently that he believed that some fishermen thought that wearing a life jacket meant that one was a bit of a wimp. As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) made clear, it is important to try to change that culture.

That is all that I have to say. I welcome the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's answers to some of the points that I have raised.

3.13 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am grateful to the Minister and the Government for making time for this overdue debate. Although I had an Adjournment debate on the matter in July 1998, things have moved on since then. However, our worries about safety in the fishing industry have not gone away. As the Minister said, despite the fact that the fleet is being reduced and mechanisms to improve safety and communication systems to maintain contact with land are becoming more sophisticated, the number of lives lost is increasing. The figures for this year are already unacceptably high. That confirms the fact that fishing is, without question, the most hazardous occupation in the country, and has been for many years. The Government are right to take the view that they should not simply step aside, and that safety is an issue on which they should intervene. They do not accept that that danger is simply a fact of life and that Government intervention is inappropriate.

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Grennock—

Dr. Godman: Greenock.

Mr. George: The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman); pardon my Cornish pronunciation.

As hon. Members have said, it is a sad and all too regular fact of life that lives are lost in the fishing industry. Such loss formed part of my upbringing in Cornwall. A few decades ago—the culture continues—risk taking was sometimes admired as bravery. The industry needs to face up to that culture, as do we, as representatives of constituencies in which there are fishing ports.

Following the tragic loss of the Margaretha Maria, to which the Minister referred, Herculean efforts were made in the port to establish a fisherman's reporting and

positioning scheme. We did not know that the tragedy had occurred until many days after the event; such a scheme would enable continual reporting between the boat and someone on land. There should be a mechanism to detect the problem that occurred on the Margaretha Maria, when the emergency-release mechanisms for the emergency position-indicating radio beacons—EPIRBs—and life rafts did not work. Even in Newlyn, however, it is difficult to persuade fishermen to sign up to such a system, despite the fact that they know that information would not be disclosed to their competitors at sea who were chasing the same fish.

The Minister emphasised the initial response to the Government consultation on the under 12 m code. As other Members have noted, he said that the response was mixed. However, I have spoken to several people in the industry who did not respond but said that they were generally happy with the proposals. There were aspects of the code that they did not like but, broadly speaking, there was no contention over the safety equipment check list, or over the proposals for self-assessment, self-certification and risk assessments. Those to whom I spoke did, however, have a problem with the proposals over the fitness of vessels—a point to which the Minister referred. I hope that the Government will review their approach in that regard, as the Minister implied.

I can cite a recent example of the problems created by such an approach in my constituency. The inspector involved was responsible for interpreting the generalised regulations with regard to a working boat with a good record. A draconian interpretation of the rules nearly put a marine operator out of business. That is the sort of thing that the industry fears, so I welcome the Minister's undertaking to review the matter. It would be helpful if, when winding up, he described the approach that will be taken to charges when inspections are carried out by Maritime and Coastguard Agency surveyors. When a boat owner fails to comply with the regulations, an MCA surveyor could become involved. At what point will charges be imposed on the industry?

Following the tragic death in March 1997 of my constituents William Pirrie, Steven Cooper and Philip Benney as a result of the Gorah Lass disaster, the first recommendation to the MCA was for it to consider funding a research project into the behaviour of under 12 m fishing vessels in rough seas, to establish how the risk of capsize or swamping is related to freeboard, freeing ports, static stability and bilge keels. I am not aware that such work has been undertaken or that any report has been published on the outcomes of any such research. Issues arose from the marine accident investigation branch inquiry into that sinking from which we should learn lessons, but I am not certain that we have done so.

There are broader issues to be considered. Life rafts, EPIRBs and hydrostatic release units have failed many times and, on some occasions, for inexplicable reasons. Admittedly, at times they had been tied down or had not been maintained, but on other occasions a proper explanation has not been given for such failures. The MCA is undertaking further research into the matter and it would be helpful if hon. Members who have a close interest in the subject were kept informed of any progress.

As for safety equipment on board, I welcome the Minister's recognition of the excellent campaigning of the Cornish family of Danny Kebble—of Polperro—who died earlier this year. I strongly support campaigns that encourage the use of permanent-wear life-jackets, particularly on single-handed vessels. That has been long overlooked. I agree that it is partly a culture issue, but such campaigns need encouragement and to be led from the front.

The MAIB's digest of lessons learned from fishing accidents identifies several problems with working conditions on vessels. Some commonly encountered serious issues cause accidents on board fishing vessels, but could be corrected at relatively little expense. I refer to fish rooms without ladder access—climbing or jumping down during rough conditions can be extremely hazardous. In difficult conditions, unpreserved wooden decks covered with fish slime can become ice rinks. Bent booms on beam trawlers can be hazardous. Indeed, the beams themselves can pose a danger for the men, especially during rough conditions. In my experience, the sheer weight of the beams are a cause of concern. Sometimes, there are devious warp winches and warps are poorly maintained. I shall refer later to exhausted fishermen. It is hardly surprising that mistakes can be made in certain conditions. Watertight integrity breaches are a worry, as are inaccessible life rafts, the lack of upper deck lifeline rigging and clutter, especially old netting that is unsecured on the upper deck.

I draw attention to the positioning of safety equipment and the working conditions on boats. I recently experienced some time aboard a fishery protection vessel. We have very well trained fisheries inspectors working in the Royal Navy and inshore. While on board to inspect the catch, they could provide a helpful support service by offering fishermen advice. Fisheries inspectors tell me that they witness some extremely dangerous working conditions on boats, such as the strapping down of life rafts, on which they are not permitted to comment while they are on board. That is a wasted Government resource. With a little inter-departmental co-operation, those issues could be discussed and that advice given. I am not suggesting that fisheries inspectors should become safety inspectors, but they could offer advice and should be encouraged to do so.

The Minister rightly identified serious concerns about the stability of trawlers following the tragic loss of the Margaretha Maria to which he referred, which resulted in the loss of four men from my constituency—Robbie Holmes, Vince Marshall, and John and Kerry Todd—in November 1997. The MAIB report into that incident identified, not before time, that static stability tests in the harbour may not have given a true picture of the sea-going stability of beam trawlers.

The recommendations of the MAIB's report were welcomed at the time, and last year's Wolfson report, and the subsequent roadshow around the ports of the UK, provided an opportunity for skippers to discuss the issue. A lot of expertise was injected and their input was extremely welcome. Some experienced beam trawler skippers expressed to me a serious lack of confidence in MCA inspectors. There should be a closer relationship between the MCA and beam trawler skippers: the MCA should call on their experience a great deal more.

[Mr. George]

From my experience on board a beam trawler, it is clear that I would probably turn it over in two minutes. Enormous experience is required, but fortunately the experience of beam trawler skippers around the coast is first class, and that is what keeps those vessels afloat. However, beam trawlers can be extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. I hope that the work on that front is taken further.

We support the proposed training and the training grants, which are welcomed by crews. However, skippers feel that the fishing industry is not being treated in the same way as the merchant shipping industry, where skippers are given grants from the small firms merit award for research and technology to fund maintenance and course fees. The Minister should go further and offer support to skippers, because, after all, skippers set the tone for safety on board vessels. Correct training at that level will percolate through the rest of the industry and certainly through the crews.

The fishing industry is in crisis, as the Minister is aware. The crisis relates to the impact that high fuel prices might have on safety at sea, which has not been covered so far in today's debate. The 200 per cent. increase in fuel prices in the past two years is putting pressure on the industry. Fuel costs have risen from between 10 and 20 per cent. of a vessel's earnings to more than 50 per cent. Although last week hauliers were given sweeteners, the fishing industry has not received any support, unlike other European fishing industries. The Government could help the industry by means of many measures that are in their gift, such as survey charges, light dues and landing dues.

The tone of the debate has been absolutely right. All too often, debates in Parliament tend towards juvenile point scoring. That is clearly inappropriate in the case of fishing safety, as all parties have a genuine and sincere interest in improving the unacceptably poor level of safety in the industry. The Government are right not to accept that they can have no impact on that safety record.

We welcome the under-12 m code, the review of the fitness of vessel requirements and recommendations following the Gorah Lass sinking that work should continue on improving equipment reliability; that the use of fisheries protection vessels to offer advice at sea should be considered; that anxieties about the stability of particular vessels should be considered; that the Minister should speed up the review process; that training should include skippers as well as crew; and that, in the light of the fuel crisis, the Minister should consider taking action before the crisis leads to a fatality at sea.

3.32 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I begin by responding to a comment made by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) about fisheries protection crews. They do a great job, but he must remember that they are maritime policemen. He obviously has no experience of the people whom I would describe as the toughest maritime policemen in the north Atlantic—the Norwegians. My brother, Leslie, is the skipper of a freezer trawler. While fishing off northern Norway recently, he was visited by such a bunch of policemen from the fisheries protection service in Norway, and they were on board his vessel for four hours.

We need tough policing, because many fishermen will fish illegally. I have been on vessels that have fished illegally off Shetland, Bear Island and Norway. The hon. Member for St. Ives may say that I keep disreputable company, but many fishermen will cheat if given the chance—not that my brother Leslie would.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not referring to the company that he was keeping last week.

Dr. Godman: You and I were in the company of Orange Order representatives in Drumcree, Mr. Deputy Speaker—not that I would say that they were disreputable.

This is an important issue. I have known about the involvement of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in campaigns to improve the safety of mariners since the early 1960s, when we were both so-called mature students at Hull university. I disagree with him about the national air traffic control system, which I shall not discuss, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you will rule me out of order.

The recent sinking of the Karianda was a deeply disquieting affair, but I accept what my hon. Friend the Minister said about the matter now being sub judice. On the sinking of the Solway Harvester, when I think of the young lads involved, some of whom were constituents of the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan), I am deeply concerned, as is everyone in Scotland. I believe that our Ministers, including my hon. Friend here today, do their best to protect and promote the interests of our fishing communities. That was not always the case with Conservative and Labour Administrations, but I have no time to discuss that now. I believe that our Ministers fight their corner well in Brussels.

In that context, the dismissal of the Scottish Fisheries Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), was unfortunate and deeply regrettable. His dismissal is especially unfortunate given that the Fisheries Council meets tomorrow. Rhona Brankin is a formidable woman and a formidable politician, and I am sure that she will become an equally formidable Scottish Fisheries Minister. I want a Scottish Fisheries Minister to be treated as an equal, along with my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in negotiations in Brussels. The Scottish fishing industry is an important industry, and, comparatively speaking, much bigger than that south of the border.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that he is seeking a constitutional impossibility? Regardless of how equal he would like the two Ministers from different jurisdictions to be, under the current constitutional set-up there can be only one UK negotiating position in Brussels.

Dr. Godman: I knew that the hon. Gentleman would not be able to resist that observation. I have long argued

that, given the contrasting importance of the industry north and south of the border, the Minister leading the negotiations should be from the Edinburgh Parliament. However, that is another story. I am talking about the safety of fishermen.

I was 12 years old when my mother told me that my Uncle Midge had been killed. He was the mate of the Boston Seafire when a wave demolished the bridge of his vessel. I remember, as a young teenager, the loss of the Norman, the Lorella and the Roderigo, which accounted for the loss of about 60 men in terrible conditions. The terrible loss of the three Hull trawlers in 1968, to which the Minister referred, led to the setting up of the Holland Martin inquiry. The most recent statistics, to which the Minister, the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) and the Opposition spokesman referred, were given to me in an oral answer by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. He said:

> Over the past three years, the total number of fishermen who died as a result of their vessel being lost or of falling overboard is 53, and the number of vessels that capsized or foundered is 60. This year, there have been 14 deaths up to May.—[*Official Report*, 13 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 778.]

That is a disgraceful record. This is not a question of party political differences—the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) has always been concerned about such matters, and I cannot recall his missing a single fisheries debate. All hon. Members must agree on the need to improve safety.

I make no apology about returning to the issue of survival suits, or, as they are now called, immersion suits. I am happy to respond to the Minister's comments about my campaign to have a regulation introduced at national and European Union level. Such a regulation would require the skippers and owners of vessels to carry immersion suits for all crews. My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), who unfortunately had to leave the debate early, reminded me of remarkable developments in lightweight immersion suit design by BP—in relation to which I do not have to declare an interest—which have been produced in collaboration with Gore-Tex. My hon. Friend suggested that the new suits felt like underwear; I do not know what kind of underwear he wears, but I cannot imagine that even the most lightweight immersion suits are as lightweight as that. My hon. Friend made a serious point: BP has adopted the Gore-Tex suit, which costs £150, for its offshore oil and gas industry workers.

Many members of the Scottish fishing industry chastise me for continuing with the campaign, and I hope that the Minister is listening closely to what I say. BP has also introduced a personnel locating device that can be worn like a wristwatch, and if a man goes over the side and cannot get his arms out of the water because of the gear he is wearing, the device can send out a signal, which can be picked up by an answering device from several feet below the surface.

I ask the Minister to take the BP development seriously and to respond to it. When a ship is going down and everything is in darkness it is a horrible experience, but if a fisherman or other mariner has the time to put on an immersion suit, he has a much better chance of being picked out of the water than a lad who goes over the side wearing his ordinary gear. For example, about 13 or 14 years ago, a large French trawler, with a crew of 27, went down off St. Kilda. The fourteen men who were on watch had time to put on their immersion suits, which in those days were big, clumsy things. It was February and there was a force 8 gale blowing, but those men survived upwards of two and half hours, which was enough time for a helicopter to come from Lossiemouth, which was quite a long way away. The men and youths who were in their bunks when the ship went down had to jump over the side in their sleeping gear and they all died within minutes.

A more recent example of which the Minister will be aware, as it was in all the Scottish papers, is an Orcadian deckhand who was knocked overboard from a purse-seiner off Shetland and was in the water for about half an hour. Fortunately, he was wearing a survival suit and he was rescued. His skipper said, "I have not paid much attention to the need for survival suits, but from now on everyone on my ship will have one." It is a disgrace that there are no European Union and national regulations on the issue.

I am reminded of the character in Sir Walter Scott's "The Antiquary" who said, "It's no fish ye're buying—it's men's lives." Men's lives are being sacrificed because we have failed to introduce regulations. On a fishing vessel, especially a single-handed vessel, if a fisherman who is leaning over the side to get the pots falls in, he is likely to drown. I am sad to say. However, if he is wearing an immersion suit he has a chance of surviving long enough to be rescued.

I am pleased to support the proposals on safety training for youngsters and the refresher training outlined in the Scottish Fishermen's Federation brief, of which the Minister has a copy. The federation and others in the fishing industry's safety and health group are to be complimented for helping to sponsor research into fatigue at Aberdeen university.

3.43 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4 pm

On resuming—

Dr. Godman: I am coming to the end of my speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

On the provision of safety aids, I must say to my hon. Friend the Minister that where they are introduced, especially on vessels of less than 12 m, the Government must give serious consideration to grant aid. Am I right in thinking that such domestic aid is quite common in other maritime member states of the European Union, and that the same holds true for emergencies? I know that French trawlers cannot leave port without carrying immersion suits, but I think that that applies only for trawlers of more than a certain overall length. The kinds of trawlers that we—unfortunately—see fishing in our traditional fishing grounds certainly carry them.

On EU funding for safety equipment and training and all other matters relating to the catching sector of the fishing industry, I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to give me an assurance in writing, and to send a copy to the Library, that we receive the same kind of aid as, for example, the Spanish fishing fleet, and the fleets of other

[Dr. Godman]

member states. There is a perception among our fishermen not that we are less generous than other maritime member states of the Union, but that they get more. I have no illusions about our fishermen, being the son of one and the brother of three of them. We know that some of them are chancers, but I think that they have a genuine case for receiving grant aid for the introduction of safety equipment. They make a legitimate request that we should examine our record on EU funding for equipping our crews and vessels to the very best standards.

I am pleased by the Minister's commitment to safety. We have to improve the safety record of our industry for the fishermen themselves, their families and their communities. Some may think that I have been critical today, but let me end by complimenting the Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman wants his compliment to be recorded, will he stop drifting away from the microphone? If he does, he will not be recorded upstairs.

Dr. Godman: I always drift to port, and one might say, "Don't drift to starboard with this character next to you." I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I apologise to the *Hansard* official.

I want to compliment the Government on the compensation that they have awarded, largely at the behest of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. My hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) and for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) and others from the fishing ports have also played a role. The compensation is going to those elderly ex-fishermen who lost their jobs when the Icelanders—rightly and properly, I think—sought to protect stocks for their indigenous industry. I have heard of one ex-fisherman in his mid-70s receiving £18,000. That is not a great sum, but it will make his life a little easier. I offer my sincere compliments and congratulations to the Government on behalf of him and all the other ex-fishermen. Much more must be done on safety, so that our fishermen's lives are a little safer as they go about this most hazardous occupation.

4.4 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): It is always a great pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). When he saw me coming into the Chamber, he said that he thought that I would be here. I could not work out whether he had thought so in a spirit of hope or dread.

I did not expect to say this, but I greatly valued the way in which the Minister opened our debate today. He will understand that some of what I must say will sound critical, but the tone of what he said was excellent and absolutely right. The content may not be right yet, but it is early days. He has obviously listened to the points made today.

To some extent, the debate is a precursor to the major fishing debate that we always have in December. I am afraid to say that the same cast will probably reassemble for it this year, though with a different Minister. It is good to be able to talk specifically about safety today, and not to have to do a tour d'horizon, as we must do during the annual fishing debate.

We are really debating the new fisheries safety grants that were produced on 6 November. Despite what I said about the Minister, it may be instructive if I briefly state how we find ourselves in the current position. I do so not just to be critical, but to try to explain why many people in the fishing industry, although they will be pleased with the tone of what he has said today, will be sceptical about whether he can carry it through.

The regulations were introduced on 6 November, but the background goes back to Whitsun last year when a, doubtless planted, written answer was sneaked out at the last moment in the grand old tradition of politics. It was an announcement by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that he would withdraw the fisheries safety grants. Unsurprisingly, that caused a stir among those of us who take an interest in such matters. It certainly caused a stir in the west country, especially because it was within a matter of days of the European elections.

At that stage, something dramatic happened. The *Western Morning News* was told by the Deputy Prime Minister to hold the front page, because he had a marvellous announcement and would come down to the west country to make it. He slightly spoiled the effect by saying that he had heard about the withdrawal of the grants on the radio, that they would not be withdrawn and that it was all a misunderstanding. It was obvious that there was confusion at the heart of the Government. I did what any concerned Member of Parliament would do: I wrote to the Prime Minister to ask who was correct. He followed a safe and prudent course, and has yet to reply.

In the ensuing months, there was pressure to find out what was happening. By the middle of October, my "friends" in the press were telling me that MAFF officials were unofficially saying that there was no question of the grants being restored, and that the Deputy Prime Minister was wrong. By 21 October, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was taking a different line. He said:

> The Deputy Prime Minister has made it clear that fishing safety grants will be reinstated, and MAFF has made no attempt to overrule that.—[*Official Report*, 21 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 564.]

That was clearly confirmation in ringing tones that the original press story was right. Confusion was piled on confusion, so I put down a priority written question to try to work out what was going on. The instructive answer was:

> The Government are currently considering the issue of reinstating a scheme.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 165W.]

There was no longer a firm commitment to overrule the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. There was reference to "a" scheme rather than "the" scheme, and it was a question of currently considering it rather than doing something about it.

Matters then moved on. In the annual fisheries debate there was an exchange, as there often is, between myself and the Parliamentary Secretary, who said:

> New structural funds will be introduced next year. There will be an opportunity to consider safety grants—[*Official Report*, 13 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 54.]

In a sense, despite the valiant efforts of the *Western Morning News* in particular to keep the issue at the forefront of the public's attention, that was that. Finally, today, some 18 months after the planted parliamentary question and the scrap between the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Deputy Prime Minister, the matter is resolved.

There are many opportunities for Opposition Members to attack the Government. You will remember that well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you were no bad hand at it. I do not particularly like to use an occasion such as this to do it, but it is relevant. There was obvious confusion about what the devil was going on. I take what the Minister said today at face value. I do not know how these turf wars resolve themselves in the end, but I suspect that it comes down to departmental budgets. A scheme has now been installed, and I am delighted that the Minister will be responsible for it on a day-to-day basis.

I said that I welcomed the tone in which the Minister spoke, but there was a problem with the content. The reason is simple. It has been echoed by the Minister's comments today, although I suspect that he toned down some of the initial draft that he was offered. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency apparently assumes that fishermen belong to a suicide squad and want to go to sea in the most hazardous conditions and risk their lives in a macho fashion. There may be people like that out there, but they have not spoken to me. Fishermen are almost the last of the hunter gatherers. Undoubtedly, when the stocks are there, there is a strong inclination to go for them, but I do not recognise the notion that they willingly and deliberately put themselves at risk and flout safety regulations that are designed to help them.

Over the past 18 months to two years I have tried to understand why the MCA takes that view. In fact, that attitude is probably shared by the Deputy Prime Minister himself. There is no doubt that as an ex-seaman he has a passionate concern about the safety of those who go to sea. I accept that to the hilt. But all his remarks, especially the unscripted ones, and his body language suggest that he believes that fishermen are part of the great downtrodden, mythical working classes who are chased off to sea in coracles by top-hatted capitalists. It is not like that any more, if ever it were. We are for the most part, although not exclusively, dealing either with the self-employed or with people with a real share in their catch. There may be examples of downtrodden people chased out to sea by rapacious employers, but it is not the general position.

Dr. Godman: I am reluctant to intervene, given that I have just made a speech. I know of the hon. Gentleman's commitment to the fishing communities, but when the Deputy Prime Minister referred to fishermen being placed in danger of their lives, his remarks related, in many cases, to incidents at the behest of bosses of small trawler companies on the Humber. I can assure him from personal experience that trawler companies have an appalling safety record. We are not talking about share fishermen.

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman speaks from long experience. I suppose that, to an extent, we speak as we find. He speaks from what he knows from his locality, and I speak from what I find in mine. For the most part, it is true to say that for entirely honourable reasons, the Deputy Prime Minister has the wrong attitude. That is important, because, if the safety regulations are to work, there has to be a degree of ownership. Those on whom they will be imposed must believe that they will do them some good. If they do not believe that, they will break them and flout them. The improvements that we all want in safety records simply will not happen.

My second point is more sombre, but it has to be made. Fishermen who speak to me have the impression that an understanding, almost an obligation, is being imposed on them, that fishing can be as safe as any other occupation. However, it cannot; fishing is a dangerous and hazardous occupation. That should never stop us trying to improve safety, but the idea that it can be as safe to go to sea as it is to go to Westminster simply is not correct. That must be acknowledged.

Fishermen tell me that the regulations with which they are threatened have not arisen as a result of their experience. No one has said, "Look, you've got to improve your game. How do you think that can happen?" They feel that those in the front line at the MCA who are directly charged with such responsibilities are mostly retired master mariners with a big-ship mentality. Why, indeed, should they not have such a mentality? That is how they gained their experience, but fishermen believe that the proposed regulations have no relevance to the way in which they conduct their working lives.

In what is inevitably a short debate—I am grateful to the Government that it is taking place—I cannot give a range of the examples that have appeared in the west country press, but perhaps two will suffice. Fishermen have told me that if they wore a regulation life-jacket on some of the boats that they take out, they would be unable to get into or out of the wheelhouse. As a piece of kit for jumping overboard, it might be a good idea, but it has obviously been devised by people who do not understand what conditions on such boats are like. Fishermen tell me repeatedly that that is typical of the way in which the MCA treats them. There is a fear that, in the end, the MCA will inspect their boats as well. Confidence between fishermen and the MCA simply does not exist, and it needs to be built up.

I can do no better than quote Dave Pessell, of Plymouth Fishermen's Association, whom the Minister knows. I have always found that Mr. Pessell gives a good account of himself and the industry and deserves to be listened to. He recently said:

> We don't believe this is a consultation exercise. It has obviously come out without the agreement of the industry. We are sure the Government will try to push it through.

Perhaps I am becoming less cynical and more naïve as I get older, whereas that traditionally happens the other way round, but when the Minister said that this debate was the end of the consultation, I took that to mean that the consultation was now over and that Ministers would consider whether what had been said would help them to formulate policy. If that is the business that we are in, today is a good day. However, if the Minister acts behind closed doors without my being a fly on the wall, he will have a battle on his hands.

In a press notice of 16 October, the MCA said:

> The consultation process has prompted a mixed reaction from fishermen. Though significant numbers are in favour of updating existing safety standards, there is still some concern

[Mr. Nicholls]

amongst fishermen about the processes of risk assessment, annual self-certification, and inspection. We need now to analyse the responses to consultation and to consider how best to address the concerns which fishermen and their representatives have put to us.

Some of that is absolutely glorious for connoisseurs of Whitehall. I have been in government and know that the phrase "a mixed reaction" means that the people to whom we spoke thought that we were nuts, so we are going to ignore them. I have probably written or sanctioned the same phrase in the past, so I know that that is what it means in a Government document. "Mixed" means that no one at the sharp end agrees at all.

I hope that the Minister will tell the MCA that not all fishermen are members of a suicide squad or determined to flout the rules. Ultimately, it is the fishermen who go to sea in what will always be a relatively dangerous occupation and who are concerned about their standards.

Today we have seen a new Minister at the helm. If he is prepared to consider what fishermen are saying and accept that they must have some ownership of the regulations, a great deal of good could come from this debate. If not, I fear that ultimately the fishermen will suffer.

4.19 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): My constituency is perhaps not best known as a fishing area, despite its extensive coastline along the Solway. The fishing industry is not insignificant, particularly scallop fishing and its on-shore processing. We have a significant export industry to France. When people buy scallops in France, they have probably come from Galloway.

Our lack of a national reputation for fishing was cruelly changed on 11 January, when the Solway Harvester was lost off the Isle of Man. The accident highlighted many features typically associated with sea disasters. As hon. Members have said, many of the crew were young and either related or boyhood friends. The skipper, Craig Mills, was the father of a five-year-old daughter. Also in the crew were his brother Robin Mills, whose wife was pregnant, and his 18-year-old cousin, David Mills. David Lyons, aged 17, and Wesley Jolly, also 17, were others. We should recognise that not all of their families had a fishing background, but in the economic climate in the southern Machars of Galloway, few jobs were to be had. Martin Milligan and John Murphy also died in the tragedy.

The tragedy typically impacted on the small, tight-knit communities of the area—in this case, the Isle of Whithorn and Garlieston. The communities came together in their grief and much support was given to the bereaved families. If anyone ever doubted the necessity for constant efforts to improve fishing safety, attendance at the funerals of these seven lads would have convinced them of the need for unstinting attention.

I do not want to comment on the reasons for the disaster, which are still under investigation by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch. I learned during an adjournment that the result may not be released until May next year. Having looked at the MAIB website at lunch, I wanted to urge the Minister to press for its conclusions on accidents to be delivered much more quickly. A comparison of the dates on which the MAIB published its reports with the dates of the accidents revealed considerable delays, which seems inexplicable.

I want to make a specific point about the Solway Harvester disaster. There will always be fishing accidents: we are talking today about reducing the likelihood of their occurring, or reducing their tragic consequences as much as possible. Accidents will never be eliminated, so the recovery of wrecks—and the bodies on them—is important. The traditional view is that the sea is the final resting place for people who have drowned, but the MAIB will fund recovery of a vessel if it is practical and necessary to ascertain the costs of the accidents.

Fishing communities are among the most traditional in the country, so we might expect them to hold to traditional views. However, things have begun to move on significantly in that respect. We have had 25 years of North sea oil technology. It is now possible to accomplish things at depth in the ocean that it was impossible to accomplish 25 years ago. The technology that makes that possible is in daily use. In many more cases than was hitherto practicable, we can recover wrecks, and bodies if they are in them.

Social attitudes have changed even in traditional fishing communities. People want their loved ones brought back, if possible. They want to finalise the grieving process and provide comfort to the families. In recent military conflicts such as the Gulf war and the Falklands war, bereaved relatives had the option of having the bodies of their loved ones brought home.

The Minister alluded to the fact that, after the campaign to raise the Sapphire by public subscription, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) played a prominent part, the Government set up a consultation exercise. The result of that consultation, like the results of other consultation mentioned earlier, seems to have been somewhat mixed—if not contradictory. In a letter to me, the Minister summarised that consultation by saying that

> the majority of respondents believed that the sea should continue to be regarded as an appropriate grave for those lost at sea.

In the next paragraph, however, he said:

> The majority of respondents to the consultation exercise held the view that a funded industry-based scheme should be established for the recovery of those lost at sea.

It seems that if you ask the same question twice, you will receive two different answers.

Mr. Andrew George: Has the hon. Gentleman found from speaking to his constituents, as I have found from speaking to mine, that there is a strongly held view that funerals are love's last act? I do not know of a single family that would not strongly wish to have the bodies of its loved ones recovered.

Mr. Morgan: Yes, I agree. That was certainly the unanimous feeling among the relatives whom I visited in the case of the Solway Harvester disaster. It was unanimous also among the relatives of those killed in the Sapphire disaster. The universal feeling is that, if it is practical, people want their loved ones brought home.

I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Government are investigating the setting up of an industry trust fund. How much has been achieved, and when does he expect to be able to draw some conclusions from that investigation? Has he given any thought to the fact that the Government might wish to make a contribution to that fund instead of leaving it solely to the industry?

In the Solway Harvester case, the families were fortunate—that is probably the wrong word—that the incident did not happen in UK territorial waters, but in those of the Isle of Man. The Isle of Man Government immediately committed themselves to recovering the vessel, and persevered with that recovery despite the significant delays caused by the weather and the increases in the budget set for that recovery. I put on record my thanks and the thanks of my constituents to Donald Gelling, Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, and Alexander Downey, the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries and Forestry, both of whom subsequently came to my constituency and visited some of the bereaved families.

Some of my constituents believed that the Government were being shown up by the Isle of Man, because, despite its having an enviable gross domestic product per capita, its total resources are much less than ours. We expected that the Government would do more. I asked the Minister if the Government could not offer some contribution to the Isle of Man's expenses. He replied:

> As regards the provision of financial assistance to the Manx Authorities to meet the recovery costs of the Solway Harvester, it was the decision of the Isle of Man Government to respond to the wish of the bereaved families to recover the bodies. They did so, aware that they would be responsible for the costs of the operation. The Government considers that to contribute to those costs would set a precedent that cannot be overlooked.

There are too many fishing accidents, but how many boats can we expect to founder in the territorial waters of the Isle of Man—or even those of the Channel Islands, which is the only other jurisdiction where it is likely to happen? Surely we are morally bound to take action, and I ask the Minister to reconsider the Government's position even at this late stage.

My second point is on a different matter. A constituent of mine is having a new vessel built at Hepworth yard in Hull. Work on the vessel, which will be 24 m long, has started. My constituent needs to decide by early next year whether a shelter deck should be installed. He wants it primarily for crew comfort and safety, but following a recent European Council ruling, tonnage is, I believe, strictly monitored. The cost resulting from extra tonnage units to cover the shelter deck could be £100,000. However, the Council has also ruled that member states can increase their multi-annual guidance programme capacity, to make allowance for safety improvements such as a shelter deck of the kind envisaged. How flexible are responses likely to be to requests for extra tonnage capacity to install vital safety measures? In that context, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) that financial assistance in general should be available for the many extra safety features that are being considered.

I support what has been said about the need to inculcate in the industry a real culture of safety. We should recognise, however, the huge commercial pressures on fishermen. In the scallop fishery alone, many areas off Scotland have been closed for fishing at various times this year due to amnesic shellfish poisoning. That, of course, increases the pressures on fishermen at the times when the grounds are open. They must bring in their year's catch in a much shorter time. We need a realistic regime and culture, which can survive the pressures that work against it.

I welcome, as did the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde, the proposals for training, and the positive impact that the Scottish Fishermen's Federation has made in drawing those up.

4.32 pm

Mr. Hill: The debate has been an important one, with many valuable contributions. The numbers present are depleted relative to when we began the debate, but that is perfectly understandable due to the exigencies of the transport situation. Various colleagues who were present earlier have apologised to me for their necessary absence. I shall of course endeavour to respond to the points that they made, so that they will appear in the *Hansard* record.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) asked for an assurance that the buildings and equipment at coastguard stations at Leigh-on-Solent and Portland will be upgraded at the earliest opportunity. They will be. He asked for further reassurance that Ministers are content with the programme of closures in respect of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The answer is yes. He also asked about fishing vessel safety grants and why there was no intention to reintroduce grants for safety equipment. I remind the hon. Gentleman of a point that I want also to explain in response to some comments by the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls).

Such safety grants previously applied only to vessels of more than 12 m and are therefore not central to a debate about the provision for smaller fishing vessels. Those grants were largely devoted to subsidies for statutory safety equipment, but the Government have chosen not to persist with that. Our strategy now is to focus on safety training. To that end, £1.2 million has been allocated over the next three years, about which I shall say a little more later.

The hon. Member for Poole mentioned the response of the South Coast Fishermen's Council on the proposed code. In response, I offer the reassurance that there is no absolute requirement for a written risk assessment. There is simply a recommendation that any changes to the code be subject to discussion with the industry, through the committee responsible for the review—which will include the industry—and that responses be publicly available. That was mentioned by other hon. Members. Responses to the consultation are publicly available in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency summary of responses, which will be published and placed in the Library. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) made a wide-ranging and knowledgeable speech, as befits an hon. Member representing a constituency in which fishing plays such a major part. I was grateful for his general support of the Government's efforts and for his welcome of the under-12 m code. I was encouraged by his report of the positive attitudes of those fishermen

[Mr. Hill]

who did not respond to the consultation. We will have in some way to embrace them in our considerations on those matters. He also asked about the charges of the MCA surveyor. Charges for follow-up visits will be made in accordance with the fee regime applicable at the time. Fees are currently applied to all time on board and in the office, plus a maximum of four hours travelling time.

The hon. Gentleman then asked about lessons learned from the sinking of the Gorah Lass. The first phase of the report on that ship has recently been completed and the results are being discussed with the industry. The second phase, which should be completed early next year, will be aimed at obtaining more details. The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would undertake to keep hon. Members informed of progress on that research; I certainly do so. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman. He asked about co-operation between the MCA and sea fisheries officers. British sea fisheries officers already carry out checks on vessel safety certificates and on the certification of officers and we will certainly consider, with the fisheries department, what more can be done in terms of co-operation.

The hon. Gentleman next asked about the health and safety rules on beam trawlers. The new rules require that all skippers and owners consider the risk for the crew while working on board, which includes conditions on decks and the beams on the beam trawlers. There are clear requirements on beam trawlers in the new health and safety rules.

Mr. Andrew George: On the issue of the stability of beam trawlers, as the Minister knows well, as a result of the inquiry into the loss of the Margaretha Maria, serious questions have been asked about beam trawler stability. Although the Wolfson report has come out, subsequent phases of the follow-up work have not been completed. The speed with which we broadcast information to the industry is important and would ensure that issues of stability are properly addressed.

Mr. Hill: I fully accept that point, and reiterate my undertaking that that information and final report will be available early next year. We recognise the urgency of the matter, but we must obviously draft as comprehensive, detailed and proper a report as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the working time directive in connection with fisherman fatigue. The Government are committed to extending the protection of the working time directive to workers in the sea fishing industry. However, we recognise that a balance must be struck between a fisherman's need to earn a living and the requirements of the directive. My officials are working with the industry to implement the directive in a way that meets its aims without threatening the livelihoods of those employed on fishing vessels. That kind of balance always needs to be struck for the fishing industry.

The hon. Gentleman said that other member states were giving aid to the industry to combat the fuel crisis. The United Kingdom fishing industry already benefits from tax-free fuel, as I am sure he is aware. We have pressed the European Commission to ensure that any measures adopted by other member states comply fully with the community's state aid rules, and the Commission is taking action on that.

I note the positive response of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), who remains heavily involved in the European dimension of the matters that we are discussing. His intervention reflects a lifelong study of maritime issues and especially of safety issues. I remember his service on the Labour party national executive committee's working party on the law of the sea in the 1970s; he was brought in as an expert on those matters. He will not remember my being there, because I was there only in a support capacity, as a mere minion—a researcher—but I have a distinct recollection of, and respect for, his contribution.

My hon. Friend expressed concern about the treatment of young fishermen. The loss of the Solway Harvester, and other incidents in which young fishermen have been lost, has raised awareness of the requirement for basic safety training and, reassuringly, the demand for courses has increased as a result.

My hon. Friend also referred to the question of immersion suits and the campaign in Europe, as I had predicted that he might. Under the Fishing Vessels (EC Directive on Harmonised Safety Regime) Regulations 1999, immersion suits must be carried on new vessels of 24 m and over. Those regulations certainly apply to the French vessels to which he referred, but they are not intended to impose new domestic requirements in excess of those called for by international or European obligations. The owners of existing vessels of 24 m and over and of smaller vessels remain free to make such provision voluntarily. I am confident that my hon. Friend will maintain his campaign on that matter.

My hon. Friend asked about the experience of other maritime countries, especially European countries, with regard to grant aid. I undertake to write to him on that subject, as he requested. I was grateful for his warm remarks and congratulations on the recent announcement of compensation for those who lost their livelihoods as a result of the Icelandic fishing disputes. He also referred to personal indicator beacons worn on the wrist. I am told that they cause problems on radio frequencies, but I assure hon. Members that the matter is under review.

On the general question of immersion suits, I give an undertaking to my hon. Friend that we will look at the BP designs to which he alluded. I am open-minded on the design question, and I know the problems experienced by fishermen in the use of personal buoyancy equipment. I would regard it as the abiding monument of what will doubtless be a brief tenure as Minister with responsibility for such matters if we secured progress and agreement on the issue.

I was grateful for the kind remarks made by the hon. Member for Teignbridge about the Government' s tone and approach on safety matters. He is right that there is a history of uncertainty in relation to safety equipment grants. As I said to the hon. Member for Poole, such grants applied only to vessels of more than 12 m. To that extent, they are not central to our discussion of safety

arrangements for small vessels. However, £1.2 million has been allocated to safety training over the next three years, which has been widely welcomed by the industry.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the industry's misgivings about the attitude of the MCA. First, the MCA does not believe that fishermen are a suicide squad. It is concerned, as we all are, about the lack of a safety culture among some, but by no means all, fishermen. The MCA wants to work with the industry to ensure that a good safety culture prevails. As for the fishermen's apparent impression that the MCA is run by a group of master mariners, it has introduced ex-fishermen into the organisation and is working with fishermen to improve the approach to safety matters. I agree with the hon. Member for Teignbridge about the need for ownership by fishermen of the safety regime in the industry. I recognise that we can succeed only if the Government work with fishermen to achieve common safety objectives.

The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale reminded us of the tragedy of the Solway Harvester and its devastating impact on the local community, especially the families affected, on the Isle of Whithorn. It was a timely reminder that in dealing with such matters we are dealing not only with the deaths of fishermen but with the dreadful ramifications for families and whole communities. The hon. Gentleman expressed concern about delays in the publication of marine accident investigation branch reports. I remind him that, in connection with the Solway Harvester, the MAIB issued a safety bulletin following the initial investigation, which highlighted points of concern and addressed the issues of hatch covers and safety training. Furthermore, a major reason for the delay in the Solway Harvester report is the Isle of Man police investigation into the loss.

The MAIB, for which I have the highest esteem, is extraordinarily hard pressed—especially so at present, for the reasons that we discussed at the beginning of the debate—but seeks to issue reports as quickly as possible. For a tiny organisation, its work rate is phenomenal. It deserves support, both public and in terms of resources.

The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale referred to the recovery of vessels and the recovery of those lost at sea. I must say to him in all candour that no Government could undertake always to recover bodies from sunken vessels. There may be many practical difficulties with the recovery operation and no one would wish further lives to be put at risk in an attempt to retrieve trapped bodies.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: I was talking about recovery not in all circumstances but where it is practical and does not pose undue danger to those engaged in the recovery operation. We all agree that such criteria would have to be met. It is the current blanket insistence that recovery will not happen that people consider unsatisfactory.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that qualification of his remarks. Such matters must be considered seriously. We have agonised over the issue and will continue to do so, but our position remains as I have stated.

The consultative document on the recovery of those lost at sea is in the House of Commons Library. The hon. Gentleman seemed to identify a contradiction in that consultation process, but the majority of the respondents upheld the tradition that for those who are lost, the sea should be the final resting place. They recognised that, when there was a desire on the part of families to recover the bodies, that should be made possible. To that end, we are examining the practicality of establishing a trust fund, primed at least in part by public money. I offer that specific positive response to the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. We envisage in principle that the fund would administer moneys that could be called on to recover the bodies of fishermen when there was no case for doing so to assist accident or criminal investigations. A board of trustees would be entrusted to determine the feasibility of an operation before any funds were released. We are considering how to take that proposal forward and I am sure that we shall be making an announcement about it in due course. Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about extra tonnage capacity. Quotas for tonnage are considered when a vessel is designed.

I have attempted to respond to the many specific points that have been raised in the debate in appropriate detail. I reiterate my gratitude to those who have participated in our discussions. They have made an important contribution to the consultation process and we shall consider their proposals thoroughly.

Undoubtedly, difficult balances will have to be struck between education and regulation and between the cost of compliance with regulations and the safety benefit. There will always be some people who consider that the balances are not right. The test is whether those balances result in fewer accidents and fewer lives lost. If they do not, we must try to understand why and make the necessary changes more speedily than we have done in the past. I personally look forward to that challenge. Let me say again that the views and ideas that have been put forward today have provided valuable food for thought in the quest for a safer fishing industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 6 November 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency, of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136167]

The Solicitor-General: In October 1999, in line with national policy, the City of Manchester Branch of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in liaison with the police and Manchester City Magistrates Court, introduced the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence now make their first appearance before Manchester City Magistrates Court within 72 hours. Present figures would suggest that between 40 per cent. and 45 per cent. of all defendants now have their cases finalised far more quickly than previously was the case. On 13 November 2000, the City of Manchester Branch will be altering its structures in line with the proposals in the Glidewell review. This will enable the CPS to place greater emphasis on more serious crime in Manchester Crown Court. The CPS, together with other agencies, has also helped to draw up procedures and protocols to speed up youth justice, particularly persistent young offenders.

Since May 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service has successfully prosecuted a number of major cases arising in the Gorton area. In November 1997, James Patterson Smith was sentenced to life imprisonment for the brutal murder of Kelly Ann Bates in Furnival Road, Gorton the previous year. This year the CPS has successfully completed prosecutions arising out of Operation Sydney, involving the supply of hard drugs in the Bennett Street area of West Gorton, and Operation Peking, where four men received substantial custodial sentences for violence and intimidation in Gorton.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

British Council

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what contracts her Department is currently funding through the British Council. [136644]

Clare Short: DFID currently has 100 contracts with the British Council, 65 of which are consultancy type contracts. The remaining 44 are for the provision of training services and have been called down under a general Enabling Agreement for management of DFID's Technical Co-operation Training Programme.

Indonesia

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the officials she met on her recent visit to Indonesia. [136625]

Clare Short: During my visit to Indonesia from 9–12 October, I held formal discussions with the following people:

President Abdurrachman Wahid

Lieut. Gen. (Ret.) Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Co-ordinating Minister for Political, Social and Security Affairs

Mrs. Erna Witoelar, Minister of Settlements and Regional Infrastructure

Prof. Bungaran Saragih, Minister for Agriculture and Forestry

Dr. Nur Mahmud Isma'il, Junior Ministry for Forestry

Mr. Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

Mr. Aspar Aswin, Governor of West Kalimantan

Mr. Gusti Samsumin, Chairman, Regional Assembly, West Kalimantan

Mr. Mark Baird, Country Director for the World Bank

Mr. John Dodsworth, Resident Representative the International Monetary Fund

Mr. Jan van Heeswijk, Resident Representative of the Asian Development Bank

In addition, I held informal discussions with a number of other Government representatives, Parliamentarians, donor representatives and representatives of civil society and other non-governmental institutions.

Globalisation White Paper

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her White Paper on globalisation will be published. [136624]

Clare Short: We are aiming to publish the White Paper before the Christmas recess.

Communicable Diseases

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the recent EC communication on "Accelerated action targeted at major communicable diseases within the context of poverty reduction"; and what plans she has to support it. [136766]

Clare Short: The UK Government were closely involved in the drafting of the EC policy framework for tackling poverty and major communicable diseases which strongly reflects our own developmental priorities. The communiqué represents an international consensus and is part of the wider process of building on the commitment to achieving the international health targets. A crucial next step is the forthcoming December G8 meeting in Japan, which provides an opportunity to ensure that the international architecture required to take forward the effective global partnership to tackle infectious diseases is in place.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in implementing the commitment increase by 50 per cent. spending on basic education, health care and clean water in sub-Saharan Africa. [137185]

Clare Short: At the G7/8 Denver Summit in June 1997 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister committed the Government to increase by 50 per cent. spending on basic education, health care and clean water in sub-Saharan Africa over the next three years.

To fulfil this promise my Department's target was to commit at least £360 million over the three years to 1997 to 2000 compared with £240 million in the previous three years.

We achieved this at the end of October last year. In total, we have committed £452 million; some 25 per cent. over the target.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Bishops' Palaces

34. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the future of the remaining bishops' palaces. [135369]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The hon. Gentleman may have in mind a report in 'The Sunday Telegraph' on 15 October, speculating on the possible recommendations of the Archbishops' Review of Bishops' Needs and Resources, chaired by Professor Anthony Mellows. That Review's report is expected early next year. We do not yet know what its recommendations will be. But we will of course pay careful heed to what it says.

Clergy (Stipends and Pensions)

36. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will report on the contribution made by the Church Commissioners to clergy stipends and pensions. [135373]

Mr. Stuart Bell: In 1999 the Commissioners contributed £156.1 million in support of the Church's ministry, representing some 20 per cent. of the Church's overall running costs of approximately £760 million.

That sum includes the Commissioners' expenditure of £87 million on clergy pensions and transitional relief of £17 million to help dioceses with the cost of the new funded pension scheme. It also includes £20 million paid towards the stipends of parish clergy, much of which is targeted specifically towards those dioceses most in need of financial help, and stipends paid to other clergy of nearly £7 million.

Bibles (Ethnic Minority Languages)

37. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what changes have taken place in the past 10 years in the Church's spending on Bibles in ethnic minority languages. [135374]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners' expenditure is committed to the support of clergy stipends, pensions and other legal commitments. Those commitments do not stretch to the publication of bibles.

Redundant Churches

Mr. Paterson: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the rights of congregations to purchase churches made redundant by Church authorities. [135372]

Mr. Stuart Bell: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave him on 10 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 369W, in which I explained that the procedure for settling the future of redundant Church of England churches gives priority to dioceses seeking and achieving suitable alternative uses. Dioceses are also encouraged to keep informed the local parochial church council who are also given the opportunity to make representations for or against the proposed use.

Clergy (Conditions of Service)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the conditions of service of the clergy. [135370]

Mr. Stuart Bell: Conditions of service will vary slightly from diocese to diocese but should include a stipend (based on a National Stipend Benchmark of £16,420), free accommodation (or a housing allowance), membership of a non-contributory pension scheme, and the full reimbursement of all working expenses.

Investment

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what account the Church Commissioners take of scripture in their investment decisions. [135371]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Commissioners' ethical investment policy is exercised in the context of their duty to manage their inherited assets to provide financial support for the Church of England's ministry, especially in areas of need and opportunity.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Privatisation (NAO Review)

33. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what discussions he has had with the Comptroller and Auditor General on the resources available to the NAO to review the effectiveness and economy of the privatisation of public assets. [135368]

Mr. Sheldon: Over the past 10 years the National Audit Office has published more than 50 reports on privatisations and a variety of public/private partnerships. The Public Accounts Commission last met on 18 July to consider and approve the National Audit Office's Corporate Plan for 2001–2002 and beyond. The resources to be made available to the National Audit Office will include provision to enable it to continue its work on this important area.

DEFENCE

Territorial Army

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the size of the Territorial Army. [134414]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 271W.

Trafalgar Class Submarine

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the state of seaworthiness is of each Trafalgar class submarine. [134918]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Torbay, HMS Trenchant and HMS Talent are currently undergoing refit and repair at Devonport. The initial phase of the inspection programme for Trafalgar class submarines has shown that, of these, HMS Trenchant is clear of the defect affecting HMS Tireless, which is being prepared for repair in Gibraltar. Of the remaining submarines, HMS Trafalgar and HMS Turbulent show early signs of the defect and are alongside at Devonport. HMS Triumph has been found to be clear of the defect and will return to operational duties shortly.

Chinese Armed Forces (UK Visits)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions during May and June on which representatives of the Chinese armed forces visited the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement on the *(a)* purpose, *(b)* itinerary and *(c)* cost to his Department of each. [134428]

Mr. Hoon: *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* There were three visits to the United Kingdom by representatives of the Chinese armed forces in May and June this year. These were:

1. A PLA Logistics Delegation of six officers (led by a Major-General) visited the UK between 10–12 May in order to study the logistics organisation in the UK armed forces. The delegation visited the Defence Logistics Organisation in Bath, Andover and Yeovilton, and the Defence Procurement Agency in Bristol. The costs of the visit were met by the Chinese.

2. The PLA Air Force Command College visited the UK between 28 May-4 June in order to learn about UK defence policy, the organisation of the RAF and its concept of operations in a joint environment. The delegation consisted of eight college staff (led by a Major-General), twenty-eight students, five interpreters, and eleven aircrew. They visited the MOD in London, RAF Brize Norton, RAF High Wycombe, RAF Lossiemouth, RAF Cranwell and BAE Systems in Warton. There were also cultural visits to London and Edinburgh. The cost of the visit to the MOD was approximately £10,000.

3. General Cao, the Head of the Chinese General Equipment Department, and an accompanying delegation of twelve officers visited the UK between 18–25 June as part of an ongoing programme of senior military visits and ministerial exchanges. The General visited the MOD in London, the Defence Procurement Agency in Bristol, the Defence Logistics Organisation in Bath, BAE Systems in Farnborough and Warton, and Racal Electronics in Crawley. There were also cultural visits to London and Scotland. The cost of the visit to the MOD was some £15,700.

In addition, a Chinese officer was attending the Royal College for Defence Studies course (which runs from January to December), and another officer was conducting English Language Training at the Defence School of Languages in Beaconsfield between 19 June-8 August. The cost of this training to the MOD was approximately £50,000 and £5,000 respectively.

All of these visits were part of our wider efforts to develop a substantive defence relationship with China through regular balanced and reciprocal engagement in order to promote confidence-building and dispel mistrust.

Defence co-operation forms a key part of the UK's overall strategy of constructive engagement with China, and improving contacts with the Chinese in all areas.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many reserves there were in the Defence Medical Services in *(a)* the RAF, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the Navy in (i) 1992–93, (ii) 1993–94, (iii) 1994–95, (iv) 1995–96, (v) 1996–97, (vi) 1997–98, (vii) 1998–99 and (viii) 1999–2000. [134294]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The numbers of reservists in the Defence Medical Services for the years 1992 to 2000 are set out in the tables. They comprise members of the Volunteer Reserve Forces and the Regular Reserve Forces. The latter are ex-Regular personnel who retain a specific liability to call-out on leaving the Regular Forces. The figures do not include ex-Regular personnel who are not in a Reserve Force, but who retain a general liability to recall to the Regular Services in a serious crisis as defined in the Reserve Forces Act 1996. RAF figures are available only from 1 April 1998 as prior to this date medical and non-medical reservist manpower figures were not recorded separately.

Volunteer Reservists

Year	*Royal Naval Reserve*	*Territorial Army*	*Royal Auxiliary Air Force*
1992	370	6,125	—
1993	340	5,955	—
1994	233	5,355	—
1995	328	5,086	—
1996	278	4,758	—
1997	256	4,475	—
1998	275	4,434	182
1999	276	4,223	231
2000	289	4,395	233

Note:
Figures are as at 1 April except for the Territorial Army for 1992 and 1993. The Territorial Army figure for 1992 is as at 1 May 1992 and for 1993 includes officers as at 1 March 1993.

Regular Reservists

Year	*Royal Fleet Reserve*	*Army Reserve*	*Air Force Reserve*
1992	—	2,445	—
1993	—	2,196	—
1994	—	2,175	—
1995	—	2,132	—
1996	—	2,092	—

Regular Reservists

Year	Royal Fleet Reserve	Army Reserve	Air Force Reserve
1997	101	2,054	—
1998	112	1,917	609
1999	92	1,777	564
2000	67	1,699	559

Notes:

1. Royal Fleet Reserve figures are as at 1 January. The figures comprise non-commissioned personnel only as figures for officers are not available and no figures are available prior to 1 January 1997.
2. Army Reserve figures are as at 1 April except for 1992 and 1993. The Army Reserve figure for 1992 is at 1 May 1992 and for 1993 includes officers as at 1 March 1993.
3. Air Force Reserve figures are as at 1 April.

Research Projects

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how long his Department has given to BAE Systems RO Defence and Thomson Racal Defence to complete the radar counterstealth research; what response each company has made to the deadline; and if he will make a statement; [135702]

(2) how many industry proposals to conduct three-year research projects into the new innovative radar counterstealth technologies his Department is reviewing; what is the estimated cost of each proposal; and if he will make a statement; [135748]

(3) what targets his Department has set for Category B work to be undertaken for the purpose of inventive research; what percentage of the research budget is allotted for such research; what this represents in cash terms; and if he will make a statement; [135714]

(4) if *(a)* BAE Systems RO Defence, *(b)* Thomson Racal Defence and *(c)* the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency have responded to his Department's mandates for three-year research projects; and if he will make a statement; [135713]

(5) what assessment he has made of the impact of radar counterstealth technology on the exploitation of the stealth technology currently in use; if use of radar counterstealth technology will increase the ability to avoid detection; and if he will make a statement. [135753]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Ship War Graves

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government have taken to protect war graves of the HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales; what further action is planned; what co-operation is taking place between the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore and the United Kingdom on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [135882]

Dr. Moonie: As I informed the House on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 243–50WH, my officials in both Malaysia and Singapore have made representations to officials within the respective governments. Both Malaysian and Singapore Navies have been asked to keep my officials informed of reports of intrusive diving or salvage and to inform us of any untoward activity in the area of the wrecks.

Furthermore, I am mindful that although designation of HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales may not present the degree of protection that is sought for these vessels, that designation would provide evidence of the wrecks' status and this Government's commitment to honour its war dead. For this reason I have asked my officials to look again at detailing what designation will entail and what it will provide and whether this can be linked effectively to ensure better protection. I will write to the hon. Member when this work is complete.

Naval Fire Support

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what percentage of the total cost *(a)* his Department, *(b)* BAE Systems RO Defence, and *(c)* the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency will pay to fund the study to assess future naval fire-support requirements for the Royal Navy; and if he will make a statement; [135745]

(2) how much time his Department, BAE Systems, and DERA have allotted for the fire-support requirements study; what percentage of the time frame will be dedicated to the development programme of the 155 mm naval gun; and if he will make a statement. [136000]

Dr. Moonie: Although some preliminary MOD funded studies are being conducted, we have yet to define a programme to assess future naval fire support requirements. A number of studies will be necessary ranging from operational analysis to technology research. Until this is done, it is not possible to estimate the scope or cost of the work. One study is about to start to examine the technical options for naval variants of the 155 mm artillery gun, one potential approach to meeting our requirement, and this has a 50/50 funding split between MOD and BAE Systems.

Naval Equipment

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what estimate he has made of the cost of development and subsequent production of the 155 mm naval gun; and if he will make a statement; [135747]

(2) what is the *(a)* timescale and *(b)* cost of retrofitting (i) Type 45 destroyers and (ii) new Type 45 destroyers with the new naval 155 mm gun; and if he will make a statement; [135989]

(3) what *(a)* cost and *(b)* performance advantages the 155 mm naval gun to be deployed on the type 45 destroyer will have over the mk 8 mod 1 gun now deployed; and if he will make a statement; [135997]

(4) how the development programme for construction of the 155 mm naval gun will ensure it is capable of unloading 20 rounds per minute; and if he will make a statement. [136003]

Dr. Moonie: The Type 45 Destroyer is being designed to allow the incremental incorporation of additional capabilities through life, to meet changing defence needs and to take advantage of technological developments. Some work is currently underway to consider what additional capabilities (including, potentially, enhanced

naval fire support) we may need in the future but until it has been completed it would be inappropriate to prejudge its outcome. It is not therefore possible to estimate the value for money of a 155 mm gun or other potential solutions for Naval Fire Support for the Type 45.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress he has made in developing the new extended-range guided munitions for use in land-based 155 mm artillery; what has been the cost to date of the development and production of ERGMs for the *(a)* land-based and *(b)* naval 155 mm gun; and if he will make a statement. [135999]

Dr. Moonie: The Extended Range Guided Munitions programme is a specific US Naval project in which my Department has no direct involvement. The nearest UK equivalent programme is the Low Cost Guided Munition (LCGM) Research Programme. This is a research programme to develop new technologies and assess their application to land and maritime systems.

Nuclear Submarines (Gibraltar)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action his Department took to upgrade the Port of Gibraltar from category Z to category X for servicing nuclear submarines; and if he will make a statement. [136153]

Mr. Spellar: The category Z berth in Gibraltar Naval Base has not been upgraded to a category X berth.

To undertake the specific repair to the reactor coolant system of HMS Tireless, the Z berth in Gibraltar has been enhanced to the standard necessary to obtain approval from the regulatory authority to undertake the repair.

This included enhancing the management organisation in Gibraltar and providing the additional equipment needed for the repair. This equipment will be removed when the repair is completed. The temporary enhancement to the Z berth occupied by HMS Tireless does not involve structural work and there are no changes required to the existing emergency planning arrangements.

Joint Helicopter Command

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will implement joint flying rules for all three services in the Joint Helicopter Command; and if he will make a statement. [134308]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* Joint Flying Regulations have been in place for some time for all Service aircrew, including those in the Joint Helicopter Command although each of the three services retain individual regulations specific to their aircraft type and role. A review of regulations applying to military flying operations is currently under way and this work is due to be completed by January 2003. Other work, in parallel to the study, is being carried out to identify the areas where joint regulations need to be expanded.

Lynx Helicopters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Lynx helicopters are available for operational duty in *(a)* the Royal Navy, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the RAF; for each service how many of those are flying beyond the 500-hour deep-servicing requirement; and if he will make a statement. [134298]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* On 26 October, the Army had 39 fully serviceable Lynx aircraft in units. As at 24 October, the Royal Navy had 17 Lynx aircraft allocated to current operational duty and a further 21 aircraft are carrying out training and support activity and could be made available for operations although at penalty to their primary activity. The RAF does not have any Lynx helicopters.

'Deep' scheduled maintenance for Army Lynx aircraft is every 800 and 2,400 flying hours. The Royal Navy does not carry out block maintenance. Scheduled maintenance of Royal Navy Lynx aircraft is carried out on a rolling calendar basis throughout the life of the aircraft. Currently no Lynx aircraft is operating beyond authorised maintenance limits.

Kosovo

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the relative contribution to the outcome of the conflict in Kosovo of *(a)* air power and *(b)* other factors. [136254]

Mr. Spellar: The success of the air operations, although a critical element, is unlikely to have been the sole reason why Milosevic eventually agreed to the international community's demands. Although it is certain to have had a substantial effect, we believe that it was the cumulative effects of international pressure on all fronts, diplomatic, economic (trade and financial) and military, that achieved the aims of the international community.

Theatre Wide Area Communications System

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which British companies were asked to tender for the vehicle for the Theatre Wide Area Communications System; and if he will make a statement. [136784]

Dr. Moonie: Our procurement strategy has been to seek a prime contractor for the entire Theatre Wide Area Communications Network for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force. The two competing companies (Nortel Networks Global Professional Services (Defence) and Thomson Racal Defence) for the prime contract were invited to propose the most suitable means, including communications equipments and vehicles, to meet the capability requirement. My Department has therefore not sought any tenders directly for vehicles to meet this requirement.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the expected cost is for of the *(a)* Theatre Wide Area Communications System and *(b)* the vehicle to be used for the system; and if he will make a statement. [136788]

Dr. Moonie: In the absence of the selection of a preferred contractor and finalisation of negotiations, a firm figure is not available, but we expect the cost of the Theatre Wide Area Communications Network manufacture contract, including vehicles and the first three years support, to be around £120 million.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Bucher-Guyer Duro vehicle is used by *(a)* British and *(b)* NATO forces; and if he will make a statement. [136786]

Dr. Moonie: The Bucher-Guyer Duro vehicle is not currently used by British forces. I understand a total of some 3,500 of these vehicles are in service with the armed forces of Belgium, Switzerland and Malaysia.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the Bucher-Guyer Duro vehicle for use with the Theatre Wide Area Communications System; and if he will make a statement. [136782]

Dr. Moonie: Against the overall capability sought for the Theatre Wide Area Communications Network (TWACN) for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force the Bucher-Guyer Duro vehicle has been proposed as the most suitable vehicle by both companies competing for the prime contract. Assessment continues of both companies' offers for TWACN, including the vehicles, against the capability sought.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what specification of vehicle was prepared for the Theatre Wide Area Communications System; and if he will make a statement. [136785]

Dr. Moonie: The requirement sought from industry was in the form of the capability required for the entire Theatre Wide Area Communications Network (TWACN) for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force (JRRF). In broad terms this included a requirement for a vehicle capable of being deployed, including by air, and used in accordance with the needs of the JRRF. The detailed requirements applicable to the vehicle are classified and I am withholding them under paragraph 1a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tests the Bucher-Guyer Duro vehicle has undergone for use in the British Army; and if he will make a statement. [136787]

Dr. Moonie: The Bucher-Guyer Duro has been subjected to date to a range of tests including airportability; human factors integration; Theatre Wide Area Communications Network box body fit and integration with the Duro chassis; and, initial recovery assessment. We have received copies of reliability trials reports from both the Swiss Ministry of Defence and from Germany, plus a technical evaluation report from the Czech Republic. UK type approval from the Vehicle Certification Agency has been confirmed.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when contracts will be placed for the Theatre Wide Area Communications System; and if he will make a statement. [136783]

Dr. Moonie: We expect to place the prime contract for the entire Theatre Wide Area Communications Network for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force by the end of December 2000, subject to the satisfactory outcome of final contract negotiations with the preferred contractor, a decision on which is expected to be taken around the middle of November.

Lee Clegg

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what grounds he decided that Lee Clegg could be paid retrospectively for loss of salary while in prison; and by what contractual arrangement he was required to make such a payment. [134885]

Mr. Spellar: The Army Pay Warrant (1964) directs the terms under which Army personnel are paid. In accordance with this Royal Warrant, pay was forfeited for the period of imprisonment awarded to Corporal (Cpl) Clegg. Following successful appeals, Cpl Clegg's convictions were quashed. As a result Cpl Clegg has no convictions against his name, and there are no regulations to prohibit the award of the pay that had been previously withheld.

Force Research Unit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the costs were of his attempts to prevent the *Sunday People* publishing articles concerning the activities of the Force Research Unit and allegations of collusion and loyalist paramilitaries. [134886]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence's costs for this case are currently estimated at approximately £28,000. The *Sunday People* is paying its own costs.

The Ministry of Defence made an application to the Court because there was good reason to believe that the *Sunday People* intended to print information that could put lives at risk and damage national security.

The Court made Orders (agreed between the newspaper and MOD) on 13 October which include provisions preventing the newspaper publishing certain information of that kind.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Portcullis House (Refreshment Facilities)

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee when the Refreshment Department's facilities in Portcullis House will be available for use by hon. Members and staff. [136289]

Mr. Dennis Turner: I fully understand the disappointment of hon. Members who had expected to be able to make use of refreshment facilities in Portcullis House as soon as the offices were ready for occupation.

I am pleased to advise the hon. Member that "the debate" self-service restaurant and "the adjournment" brasserie on the ground floor of Portcullis House are expected to be handed over to the Refreshment Department on Monday 6 November. Thereafter, the Refreshment Department will require a period of three to four weeks to move their equipment and produce onto the site, complete staff training and conduct trial runs for the restaurant facilities.

It is also expected that the first floor areas will be handed over to the Refreshment Department on Monday, in which case services to the meeting and conference rooms will be able to commence within the next two weeks.

The Director of Catering Services has advised me that she hopes to be in a position to open full services in time for the State Opening of Parliament on Wednesday 6 December, but that bookings for "the adjournment" or the supply of refreshments to the first floor meeting rooms cannot be made until the premises have been formally handed over the Refreshment Department.

The coffee bar to be positioned in the covered courtyard will not be in place until early in the New Year.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Gas Supplies

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will discuss with the suppliers of gas to industry measures to offset major price increases of gas in the near future, which will have an effect on manufacturing industry; and if he will make a statement. [135264]

Mrs. Liddell: Since the spring, the wholesale price of gas has risen sharply and this has had an effect on many industrial and commercial customers, especially those who have contracts tied to the spot price. The main reason for this rise has been increased trade across the GB-Belgium interconnector reflecting high oil-related gas prices, particularly in north-west Europe.

The Government are concerned about this rise. Work is already in hand to boost liberalisation and competition in Europe and thus break the link between gas and oil prices which keeps European prices higher than would otherwise generally be the case. This is the most effective long-term means of ensuring the competitive gas prices industry seeks. However, it is likely to take some time.

Meanwhile, the Government are already in dialogue with participants in the industry about the gas price rise and this is being intensified. However, it is not the role of the Government to influence the prices charged by individual companies.

Pensions (Post Offices)

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements have been put in place to ensure that those who choose to draw pensions in cash will continue to be able to do so at post offices. [135866]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to ensuring that all state benefit and pensions recipients who wish to do so will continue to be able to access their benefits in cash in full, at a post office counter both before and after the changeover to payment of benefits by automated credit transfer. The Post Office and the banks are currently discussing arrangements for the provision of Universal Banking services at post offices to facilitate this.

Job Losses (Electronics Industry)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on his industrial policy for the electronics industry in relation to job losses announced by Panasonic and Sony in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [135650]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I have not received any representations from the electronics industry in relation to the recent announcements by Panasonic and Sony.

With the transfer of devolved powers to the National Assembly for Wales, such representations would be referred to them.

Of course, I very much regret the job losses. The NAW is working closely with local partners and the Department for Education and Employment to provide assistance to those affected.

Michael German (National Assembly Deputy First Minister) and David Rowe Beddoe (Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency) met with senior managers from Panasonic on 27 October 2000 and Mr. German attended the meeting of the Welsh Electronics Forum on 31 October 2000. The Forum has established a special taskforce to deal with the after effects of job losses in the consumer electronics sector in Wales which will meet in the very near future.

The Government were alerted to the announcements prior to their publication on a confidential basis. Such decisions are ultimately commercial ones for the companies to take themselves to ensure their long term future. It is not the Government's policy to intervene in such decisions. In such a competitive sector as consumer electronics where companies operate on a global scale, costs are under constant review. It would be surprising, and rather worrying, if companies did not feel the need to re-assess and re-structure their operations from time to time.

Both companies are still employing around 3,000 people in Wales between them and are committed to continuing their presence in Wales. Both are hoping to bring new higher value, more sophisticated production to their Welsh plants in the near future, and are investing heavily in their research and development facilities in Wales. This demonstrates the confidence that both companies have in the UK.

The best contribution that the Government can make is to secure long term economic stability based on low inflation and sound public finances. This will allow business to invest and plan ahead with confidence.

Shipbuilding Communities Campaign

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the proposed establishment of a shipbuilding communities campaign modelled on the Coalfields Campaign. [136555]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We have received no representations about such a proposal. However, as my hon. Friend is no doubt aware, we already have a very active and successful group for addressing the industry's concern, i.e. the Shipbuilding Forum. The Forum—which brings together industry, Government and the unions—has played a very constructive role in producing pragmatic solutions to the industry's concerns over the past two and a half years.

Dounreay

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on managing PFR fuels at Dounreay. [136104]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* A public consultation was undertaken as part of this decision-making process. This raised a number of very different points of view. It has taken longer than expected to assess these. A decision will be announced as soon as this assessment is complete.

Ex-Miners

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans he has to improve access for ex-miners in Somerset to the Medical Assessment Process from a centre nearer to the area; [136459]

(2) what provision has been made to enable ex-miners in Somerset to access the Medical Assessment Process from a test centre in Bristol. [136460]

Mrs. Liddell: There are currently 321 registered claims in the Somerset area. To date, Healthcall has received 79 completed sets of claims documentation—including claims questionnaires; financial and other losses questionnaires; and the Mandates required to access claimants medical records. Of these, 11 have been tested, and Healthcall is searching for the medical records of the remaining 68 cases.

Healthcall currently has premises in Bristol that originally accommodated a set of COPD testing equipment. Due to the current lack of claimants ready to test in the Somerset area with completed claims documentation, this set of equipment was moved to meet demand in the South Wales area. The Bristol centre will be re-opened shortly to accommodate the claimants in the surrounding area.

Healthcall is currently considering establishing a centre nearer to the bulk of the claimants in the Somerset areas.

New Businesses in Rural Areas

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of new businesses established in rural areas in each of the last five years. [136629]

Dr. Howells: When providing assistance to businesses, the Small Business Service (SBS) has historically recorded only the size of the business helped. Age of the business is not reported.

Information on assistance given to farmers by Business Links is being collected this year as a result of the recent introduction of the Farm Business Advice Service. This is one of the measures introduced this year to help farming and horticultural industries within the Government's Action Plan for Farming announced this year on 30 March.

Information on the number of farmers receiving assistance under these measures is not expected to be available until February 2001 as the initiative was introduced only in September.

Employment Tribunal Compensation Awards

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many companies were established in each of the last three years whose directors have employment tribunal compensation awards against them in respect of their actions as directors of previously liquidated companies. [135331]

Dr. Howells: It is not possible to provide an answer to this question without incurring disproportionate cost. There is no requirement for this information to be submitted on the part of directors of newly incorporated companies under the Companies Acts; and Companies House has no ready way of correlating information on directors with such information as might be abstracted from employment tribunal records about the defined sub-set of former directors.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cases have been recorded of companies failing to make payments awarded by employment tribunals due to the company having been liquidated, in each of the last three years. [135332]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Enforcement of Employment Tribunal awards is generally a matter for the county courts, though where an employer is insolvent, payment of a limited range of awards may be made from the National Insurance Fund.

Records are not kept of the total number of Tribunal awards unpaid because of an employer's insolvency.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the number of employers in breach of regulations relating to the national minimum wage during 1999–2000. [135330]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The independent Low Pay Commission monitored the impact of the national minimum wage in the Second Report published earlier this year. They reported that the early indications were that the vast majority of businesses are meeting their obligations to pay the national minimum wage.

Bank Closures

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what impact he estimates the creation of the Universal Bank will have on the rate of bank branch closures. [136927]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No such estimate has been made. However, proposals for the provision of Universal Banking services through the post office network, which the Post Office and the banks are currently developing, will substantially increase the volume of banking activity at post offices and will restore banking services to many areas where bank branches have closed.

Oil and Gas Exploration

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the inspection mechanism under which licences are granted in the UK continental shelf for oil and gas exploration, where no development has taken place. [136308]

Mrs. Liddell: Fallow blocks and fallow discoveries are monitored on a regular basis.

One of the results of the most recent fallow initiative, which was concluded in July, is that 18 previously fallow discoveries are to be developed. In addition, PILOT's Undeveloped Discoveries Workgroup has identified six areas on the UK Continental Shelf where the licensees involved are being urged to find innovative ways of working together, with the hope that at least three additional projects will have plans for development by mid-2001.

Further steps will be taken as necessary to ensure the timely development of the UK's petroleum resources.

Mission Status Review

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in achieving the statement of business principles as set out in the Department's mission status review; and whether he expects the deadline to be met. [136767]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD has posted a draft statement of Business Principles on its website www.ecgd.gov.uk and sought comments from interested parties as part of the consultation process. ECGD is on schedule to publish its statement of Business Principles by the end of this year.

Copies of the draft statement have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Export Credit Agencies

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with his EU counterparts concerning the reform of export credits agencies. [136768]

Mr. Caborn: I have not held direct discussion with my EU counterparts on the reform of export credit agencies. However I attach great importance to the various initiatives ECGD is actively pursuing in the international forum at the OECD aimed at improving standards and disciplines applied by export credit agencies in project impact assessments, and in the areas of the environment, bribery and productive expenditure.

These initiatives are in line with the outcome of the recent Review of ECGD's Mission and Status announced in Parliament by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 25 July, 2000 *Official Report*, columns 520–21.

I wrote to the OECD Secretary General following the publication of ECGD's Mission and Status Report to urge support for multilateral agreement in the OECD that others adopt similar principles.

Post Offices

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the Government defines as a rural post office. [136681]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government definition of a rural post office is one located in a community of up to 10,000 inhabitants.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce the membership of the Postal Services Commission. [125067]

Mr. Byers *[pursuant to my reply, 6 June 2000, c. 186W]:* The Postal Services Commission has today become a statutory body created under the Postal Services Act 2000.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Waste Management

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he will issue to the Mayor of London on the exercise of his development control powers in relation to waste management developments with a capacity of more than 50,000 tonnes per annum; and if he will publish such guidance. [134056]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* GOL Circular 1/2000 "Strategic Planning in London" published in June 2000, provides advice and guidance for the Mayor and London Boroughs on their responsibilities for strategic planning. The circular includes guidance on the relationship between the Borough's Unitary Development Plans, the Mayor's spatial development strategy and municipal waste management strategy, and the Mayor's role in decisions on planning applications. The circular also requires that the spatial development strategy should take account of Planning Policy Guidance Note 10—Planning and Waste Management, which provides advice on providing new waste management facilities consistent with sustainable development.

Furthermore, in preparing the Municipal Waste Management Strategy the Mayor shall have regard to the National Waste Strategy (Waste Strategy 2000, CM 4693). We therefore have no plans to offer the Mayor further guidance on the exercise of his development control powers in relation to waste management facilities.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report an action which *(a)* is illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* is in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* is otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [134461]

Mr. Hill: Civil servants working in DETR have, at any time, the statutory right to express concerns under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. Moreover, DETR employees also have a contractual obligation to report alleged breaches of the Civil Service Code in accordance with the procedures set out in the DETR Staff Handbook. The procedures require individuals, in the first instance, to approach a senior line manager and to ensure that evidence of criminal or unlawful activities by others are reported to the appropriate authorities. If the individual considers this to be inappropriate or they wish to take the

matter further, they have the right to make a formal report to the Director of Human Resources, or other designated senior officer. It will always be assumed that the individual has made the report in good faith. A formal response will advise the individual that they have further rights to submit a written appeal to the Permanent Secretary and a further appeal to the Civil Service Commissioners.

Water Conservation

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he is pursuing to encourage water conservation. [135230]

Mr. Meacher: My Department is pursuing a number of initiatives to promote water conservation across a wide range of end users. Our 'Are You Doing Your Bit' campaign is encouraging individuals to make lifestyle changes to conserve water and to benefit the environment. Also, from 1 January 2001, the maximum flush volume of all new WCs will be reduced by 20 per cent. due to measures introduced by the Water Supply (Water Fittings) Regulations 1999. To help businesses reduce their environmental impact and improve their competitiveness the Environmental Technology Best Practice Programme provides information and best practice advice on efficient water use. My Department is also working closely with the Environment Agency and the Buying Agency on projects to reduce water use in schools and other public sector buildings.

We are also taking steps in the Water Bill to prevent damaging over-abstraction.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he is pursuing to promote energy efficiency in *(a)* the business environment and *(b)* the home. [135233]

Mr. Meacher: For business, we are introducing the Climate Change Levy and a new system of Enhanced Capital Allowances for energy saving products. We are continuing to support the Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme and are also creating a new body (the Carbon Trust) with a specific brief to help business move towards an energy efficient economy.

To promote energy efficiency in the home, my Department funds the Energy Saving Trust. The Trust runs a series of programmes which aim to improve awareness of energy efficiency, provide information and advice and to work with the market to develop and market energy efficient goods and services in the domestic and small business sectors.

My Department also funds the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, which provides comprehensive packages of heating and insulation improvements for the homes of those households who are most at risk from cold-related ill health—the elderly and families on low income and the disabled or chronically sick.

In March this year my Department issued consultation proposals for a new and extended programme of Energy Efficiency Standards of Performance to run from 2002–05. These standards, to be set by Government, will require gas and electricity suppliers to encourage and assist consumers to make energy savings. Like earlier programmes, the new scheme will focus strongly on low-income groups, helping the Government's attack on fuel poverty. Provisional conclusions on the level and format of the scheme will be issued shortly.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he has taken to promote Energy Efficiency Week. [135440]

Mr. Meacher: Energy Efficiency Week is part of the Energy Efficiency campaign run by the Energy Saving Trust, and funded by my Department. Activities during the week included the launch of a television and radio advertising campaign, a new energy efficiency website and the energy efficiency recommended logo. Events were staged on a national and regional level, with activities taking place around the country to promote the energy efficiency message to consumers.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many people on low incomes living in private sector homes in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Devon have had energy efficiency measures implemented and central heating and security devices installed in their homes as part of the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme; and how many are waiting for such work to be carried out; [135930]

(2) if he will make a statement on progress on the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, with particular reference to the rate of installation of *(a)* loft insulation, *(b)* cavity wall insulation, *(c)* draught-proofing, *(d)* efficient central heating, (d) door and window locks, *(e)* spy holes and *(f)* smoke alarms; and what steps he is taking to ensure hot water and central heating work are given priority before the onset of winter. [136027]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* The new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) for England was launched on 1 June 2000. It replaced a more basic scheme that had operated since 1991, providing low income and disabled households with a single insulation improvement such as window and door draught-proofing.

New HEES provides packages of insulation and heating measures, linked to the condition of the property and the type of householder. To provide these packages the grant maximum has been raised from the previous £315 to up to £2,000 in the case of low-income households aged 60 years or more. The latter may also receive a package of basic security measures, funded through the Home Office 'Locks for Pensioners' initiative, if they live in an area experiencing above the national average burglary rate for England.

The scheme is managed by two regional scheme managers. They are responsible for marketing the scheme and surveying homes to identify the improvements required. Once these are agreed with the householder, a works order is placed with local contractors.

The table sets out the number of households that have had work completed and those where orders have been, or are about to be, placed. Due to the package approach taken, it is not possible to break down the individual insulation and security measures that will be provided to households.

Type of measure	Number of households in England (of which in Devon) where work has been completed and invoices received	Number of households in England (of which in Devon) where work orders issued to contractors'	Number of households in England (of which in Devon) where work orders yet to be issued to installers
Insulation and security measures	21,960 (571)	42,054 (982)	1,007 (0)
Installation of new central heating system and insulation	663 (1)	9,287 (472)	2,968 (19)
Repair to broken central heating system	1,290 (0)	8,126 (186)	425 (15)

' Due to the one to three week delay between the completion of the work and the issue of invoices by contractors it is likely that work has already been completed in some of these households.

In addition to those shown above, there are a further 5,200 properties (of which 132 are in Devon) where permission is awaited from private landlords or owner occupiers for the work to be carried out.

After a slow start on the summer, insulation measures are now being installed within four to six weeks from the date of survey.

The national shortage of qualified heating engineers has severely affected the rate at which central heating systems are being repaired or installed. Devon is one of the areas most affected, with the shortage reflected in labour costs which are up to 20 per cent. higher than elsewhere in the country.

We are working with the heating industry to address this shortage of trained engineers. In addition, as part of its Affordable Warmth Programme, Transco has also allocated some £10 million towards the training of energy efficiency professionals, including new heating engineers.In the meantime, additional contractors are being sought, and it is expected that the backlog on repairs should be cleared by the end of the year. However some delays in the installation of new heating systems are likely to continue until additional engineers become available.

As energy efficiency is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of the respective Parliament and Assemblies to comment on the situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects consultations upon concessionary fares for bus travel to be completed. [135741]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* We issued last December a consultation paper on the implementation of the statutory minimum concessionary fares commitment. The consultation is now complete, and is being taken into account in consideration of implementation of the provisions in the Transport Bill, which is at present before Parliament.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which local authorities operate a concessionary fare travel scheme for senior citizens that are not part of a Passenger Transport Authority; and if he expects these schemes to continue when the Government scheme for half fare travel is introduced. [135214]

Mr. Hill: Most local authorities outside Passenger Transport Authorities operate a concessionary travel scheme for senior citizens. The Transport Bill, which is at present before Parliament, provides for a statutory minimum local authority scheme which will ensure travel for pensioners on local buses at half fare or better, with a free bus pass. Any existing schemes which do not meet that standard will need to be improved; there are no requirements for other schemes to be changed.

Car Ownership

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the principal elements in the cost of car ownership in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the latest date for which figures are available, indicating in each year the percentage of these costs of average earnings. [135407]

Mr. Hill: The principal elements in the costs of car ownership are set out in the table with a baseline figure of 100 for 1970. A similar index for average earnings is included and all figures are adjusted for overall inflation:

	1970	1980	1990	1999
All motoring expenditure:	100	103	90	100
of which:				
Motor vehicle purchase:	100	98	77	67
Maintenance:	100	120	124	149
Petrol and oil:	100	112	92	122
Tax and insurance:	100	71	83	113
Average earnings:	100	119	150	174

The information on changing costs comes from the Retail Prices Index, which monitors price changes over time for a standard collection of goods and services. Average earnings data are collected at April each year by means of a survey and represent the gross pay of adults working full-time whose pay is unaffected by absence. All figures are for Great Britain.

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what have been the changes in the costs of *(a)* private car ownership, *(b)* rail travel and *(c)* bus travel since 1970. [135396]

Mr. Hill: Information on relative price changes is collected by the Office for National Statistics for use in the Retail Prices Index (RPI). The DETR also collects specific information on changes to average bus fares. Setting indices to a base figure of 100 in 1970 changes, without allowing for inflation, are as follows:

	1970	1999
Motoring costs	100	877
Train fares	100	1,663
Bus fares	100	1,483
Overall RPI	100	880

Emissions

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the *(a)* amount and *(b)* percentage was of (i) carbon dioxide and (ii) nitrogen oxide emissions in (1) 1970, (2) 1980, (3) 1990 and (4) the last year for which figures are available in the road transport sector. [135409]

Mr. Hill: Official estimates of the annual emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions in the UK since 1970 are contained in my Department's National Atmospheric Emission Inventory. The table shows road transport's contribution to national emissions of carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides by source category in 1970, 1980, 1990 and 1998. 1998 is the last year official data are currently available.

	1970	*1980*	*1990*	*1998*
CO[1] emissions from road transport				
Ktonnes	16,299	21,221	29,776	31,529
Percentage of total UK emissions	8.8	12.9	18.7	21.2
NOx emissions from road transport				
Ktonnes	769	989	1,328	799
Percentage of total UK emissions	30.8	38.2	47.6	45.6

[1] As carbon

Road Resurfacing

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when information and advice from the Highways Agency will be available on the priorities for resurfacing concrete roads up to 2010. [136012]

Mr. Hill: Information on the initial priorities for resurfacing concrete roads will be available next spring after the Highways Agency has obtained and considered the views of local authorities on the approach they propose for prioritising the work.

Tyre Safety

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigations he has instigated to ascertain the safety of Firestone tyres fitted to Ford Explorer vehicles imported from the United States of America. [135842]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* There is a possibility that under certain circumstances and operating conditions that tread separation and rapid tyre deflation may occur in the case of Firestone P235/75 R 15 Radial ATX, ATX11 and Wilderness AT—all "S" rated tyres fitted to Ford Explorer vehicles.

The Secretary of State's power in this respect is limited to checking compliance on the part of Bridgestone/Firestone UK Ltd. with the voluntary Code of Practice on the recall of tyres drawn up by the Department and the Tyre Industry Council.

Vehicle Inspectorate Vehicle Safety Branch is satisfied that the company has taken the appropriate action in recalling Firestone P235/75 R 15 Radial ATX, ATX11 and Wilderness AT—all "S" rated—tyres fitted to Ford Explorer vehicles. In accordance with the terms of the Code, this action has been registered with the Vehicle Inspectorate.

Road Deaths

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were killed in road accidents in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 in Devon; and how many of these were children. [135814]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The number of children and adults killed in road accidents in Devon for the years 1997–1999 are shown in the table:

Fatalities in Devon, by age: 1997–1999
Casualties

Year	*Child*	*Adult*	*All*
1997	4	52	56
1998	4	49	53
1999	2	46	48
Total	10	147	157

[1] Aged 0 to 15

Rail Vehicle Accessibility

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if there is an exemption order for the fleet of new Class 170/3 trains to be introduced into service by South West Trains Ltd. in respect of the provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; and if he will make a statement. [137186]

Mr. Hill: We have received an application from South West Trains Ltd. relating to the new Class 170/3 trains they wish to introduce into service. The exemptions have been discussed with our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. An exemption Order relating to the exemption of these trains was laid before Parliament on 3 November 2000. Copies are available from the Library.

Further applications for exemption from certain aspects of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 have also been received from Gatwick Express for their Class 460 vehicles, Chiltern Railways Ltd. for their Class 168/1 vehicles and South West Trains in relation to their Class 458 vehicles. The exemptions sought were also discussed with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. The exemption Order relating to the Gatwick Express vehicles was laid before Parliament on 1 September 2000 while the Orders relating to the Chiltern Railways and South West Trains vehicles were both laid before Parliament on 8 September 2000.
The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trains. Indeed, we believe that their introduction will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people.

Transport (Disabled Access)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received concerning the introduction of legislation to improve access to transport

for disabled people; what has been his response; what proposals he has to improve access for disabled people; and if he will make a statement. [137005]

Mr. Hill: The Department has held widespread consultations with disability organisations and with the transport industries in the course of developing proposals to implement the transport provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Regulations have been in place since the end of 1998 to require all new trains to meet detailed technical standards to guarantee accessibility. In the order of 250 trains in service are already DDA compliant. Regulations setting similar standards for buses used on local or scheduled services are also in place and will take effect from 31 December this year. A package of measures to introduce access requirements for licensed taxis is being finalised and will be subject to further consultation.

In addition, we are also considering the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force as they relate to transport and I hope to make a statement in response to the recommendations shortly.

Render Plants

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has *(a)* to deal with the problem of smell from animal render plants and *(b)* to ensure that regulations are enforced by local authorities. [136438]

Mr. Meacher: Animal rendering plants are regulated under the air pollution control regime established by Part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Regulation is transferring to the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 over a transitional period.

In accordance with the 1990 Act, rendering plant must be authorised and regulators must include in authorisations conditions aimed at ensuring the use of the Best Available Techniques Not Entailing Excessive Cost (BATNEEC) to prevent, minimise and render harmless emissions. "Harm" is defined in the Act as including offence to the senses and hence local authorities must address any odour issues. The statutory guidance issued to regulators concerning BATNEEC for animal rendering plant focuses especially on the odour issue and we updated and strengthened the guidance earlier this year.

The 1990 Act gives regulatory responsibility for animal rendering plant to local authorities. It additionally provides the Secretary of State with a number of reserve powers which could be exercised in the event of regulatory failings. These include the power to direct what conditions should be imposed in a given case, to direct whether an enforcement notice should be served or whether an authorisation should be revoked, to direct that regulatory responsibility be transferred to the Environment Agency, and to direct that an application for authorisation be referred to him for determination.

Drink Driving

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what research he has evaluated as to the age groups most prone to drinking and driving; and if he will make a statement; [136505]

(2) what research he has commissioned on the best ways to discourage drinking and driving; [136511]

Mr. Hill: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has commissioned a wide-ranging programme of research into drinking and driving. This research has included trends in drinking and driving, and characteristics of drink drive offenders, including the age distribution. Research has also evaluated the drink drive rehabilitation scheme and reviewed the High Risk Offender scheme. Other research has considered drink drivers' attitudes to enforcement and penalties. Much of this research is reflected in the Government's Road Safety Strategy "Tomorrows Roads—Safer for Everyone". The following research reports, published by the Transport Research Laboratory, are relevant:

Drinking and driving in Great Britain—a review. G. Maycock. TRL Report 232. 1997.

The high risk offender scheme for drink-drivers. G. P. Davies et al. TRL Report 394. 1999.

Drink/driver rehabilitation courses in England and Wales. G. P. Davies et al. TRL Report 426. 1999.

Unlawful driving behaviour: a criminological perspective. C. Corbett et al. TRL Contractor Report CR 301. 1992.

Copies of these reports have been placed in the Library of the House of Commons.

An analysis of drink-drive data, including trends in accidents involving illegal alcohol levels, casualty and accident characteristics and breath test outcomes is included annually in Road Accidents Great Britain.

The Department also commissions market research into the attitudes of those who drink and drive so that its advertising can be effectively directed.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* serious injuries in the last 10 years have been attributed to drinking and driving. [136503]

Mr. Hill: The data required are given in the table.

The estimated number of fatalities in accidents involving illegal alcohol levels in the years 1989–99 was 6,520, and the estimated number of serious injuries for the same time period was 35,170.

Table 2a: Estimates of casualties involving illegal alcohol levels and the consequent casualties adjusted for under reporting: 1988–99

Number

Year	*Fatal*	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
1988	790	5,100	16,860	22,740
1989	810	4,790	16,620	22,220
1990	760	4,090	15,550	20,400
1991	660	3,610	13,610	17,880
1992	660	3,280	12,770	16,710
1993	540	2,660	11,780	14,980
1994	540	2,840	11,780	15,160
1995	540	3,000	12,450	16,000
1996	580	3,010	13,450	17,040
1997	550	2,940	13,310	16,800
1998	460	2,520	12,610	15,590
1999[1]	420	2,430	13,980	16,830

[1] Provisional data. Final fatality data from coroners are available for 1998 but 1999 estimates are based on around three-quarters of expected coroners' returns and may be biased. They remain provisional until more complete information for 1999 is available.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has commissioned on the impact of insurance costs for drivers aged 17 to 25 on the rate of drinking and driving. [136504]

Mr. Hill: None.

Local Government Finance

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes he plans to make to the SSA methodology following the transfer of funding for 2001–02 for Adult Education, Nursery Education Grant and Care Leavers Grant. [137067]

Ms Armstrong: We have consulted local government on whether adjustments were required to the SSA methodology to reflect the transfers of funding for Adult Education, Nursery Education Grant and Care Leavers Grant. Over 100 responses were received, the vast majority supporting our recommended approach.

I therefore propose that we implement our recommended approach. That is, that we make no change to the SSA methodology for Other Education or Children's Social Services following the transfers for Adult Education and Care Leavers Grant, and that we make a small adjustment to the Under 5s SSA methodology following the transfer of funding for Nursery Education for four-year-olds. The purpose of the adjustment to the Under 5s SSA is to ensure that the distribution of this funding matches, as closely as possible, the previous distribution under specific grant.

Rural Areas

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's definition of a rural area. [136727]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have no single definition of a rural area. But different definitions are used for different policy purposes to ensure that policies are sensitive to differing circumstances and to ensure administrative efficiency.

The Countryside Agency, which is the Government's statutory adviser on issues relating to the environmental, economic and social well being of the English countryside currently uses a working definition of rural areas as those wards which lie outside settlements of 10,000 people.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people in England live in settlements of between 2,000 and 20,000, and, of this number, how many live in settlements of 10,000 or more. [136719]

Mr. Meacher: In 1991 the population living in settlements in England of the following size was:

Settlements of 2,000–20,000: 6,890,253

Settlements of 10,000–20,000: 2,682,336 (included in above)

These figures are taken from the 1991 Urban Area statistics. More recent information is not currently available.

Parish Councils

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government have any plans to change the law on parish referendums. [136726]

Ms Armstrong: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new parish councils have been formed in each of the last 10 years. [136718]

Ms Armstrong: The table shows the number of new parishes that have been created in each of the last ten years:

Year	*Number of parishes created*
1990–91	19
1991–92	10
1992–93	6
1993–94	10
1994–95	4
1995–96	18
1996–97	9
1997–98	1
1998–99	20
1999–2000	42

Trans-European Network

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what ports in the UK are included in the Trans-European Network transport network; and what *(a)* EU and *(b)* UK funds have been used for improving facilities at those ports in each year since 1994. [129466]

Mr. Hill *[pursuant to his reply, 12 July 2000, c. 561–62W]:*

£ million

Year	*Ports receiving funds*	*EU funding*
1995	None	—
1996	None	—
1997	Portsmouth, Great Yarmouth, Boston, Port of London, Southampton, Felixstowe, Heysham	0.70
1998	Portsmouth, Sunderland, Tyne, Humber, Heysham, Southampton, Harwich	1.60
1999	Great Yarmouth	0.24

Rail Freight

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the *(a)* initial and *(b)* longer-term cargo-deck heights on the sprinter trains proposed by the winner of the recent rail freight competition; and if the layout of their longer-term sprinter-train design has been finalised. [129997]

Mr. Hill *[pursuant to his reply, 10 July 2000, c. 403–04W]:* I would like to confirm that the deck-height of the Railtrack MPVC (multi-purpose vehicle container) used in the trials is 1,200 mm and of the intermediate container flats 1,000 mm and not as printed in the *Official Report*.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the maximum cargo height on the piggyback trailer systems that have been proposed by the winner of the recent rail freight competition. [129996]

Mr. Hill *[pursuant to his reply, 10 July 2000, c. 404W]:* I would like to confirm that the maximum cargo-height will be 3.4 m permitting the conveyance of the semi-trailer or 9'6" ISO containers in the wagon pockets or a C45 Swapbody over SBI-c cleared routes and not as printed in the *Official Report*.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in how many of his Department's PFI contracts KPMG has been an adviser. [132868]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[pursuant to her reply, 27 July 2000, c. 773W]:* I have now been advised that KPMG have also acted as a financial adviser and quality assurance to the Vehicle Inspectorate for the procurement process of the computerisation of MOT testing project. The contract was signed in April 1998.

Supporting People Programme

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make further information available on the structure and resourcing of the Supporting People programme. [133617]

Mr. Raynsford *[pursuant to his reply, 27 July 2000, c. 778W]:* I would like to confirm that we will be providing £153 million of revenue funding over three years to enable to implement the Supporting People programme and not £140 million as printed in the *Official Report*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Situation

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 491W, what steps have been taken to reduce the security presence consistent with the level of threat; and what steps will be taken in the next three months. [134883]

Mr. Ingram: Further to the Secretary of State's statement in the House on 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 491–92W, all the measures have now been completed except for the Cookstown base and the Fort George army base. These should be finalised this month and the beginning of December respectively.

On 29 September the Chief Constable announced a further tranche of normalisation measures. These were:

demolition of six patrol bases in Co. Fermanagh;

closure and demolition of Long Kesh Army base situated beside HM Prison, Maze;

return to its owners of land at Newtownhamilton, currently used by security forces; and

closure of Strand Road Holding Centre in Londonderry and granting of solicitor access to terrorist suspects held at Gough Barracks, Armagh.

All these measures have been set in train and will be completed within six months. Further measures will be taken when it is safe to do so.

Secondary Education

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place in the Library a copy of the report published by the Northern Ireland Department of Education, 'The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland'. [135825]

Mr. Mandelson: A copy of the report will be placed in the Library shortly.

WALES

Fuel Protests

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps have been taken to prevent disruption by fuel protests in Wales. [136614]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary published on 29 September a memorandum of understanding signed by all members of the Fuel Supply Task Force aimed at putting in place more robust systems to avoid disruption of fuel supplies throughout the United Kingdom. He also made a statement to the House on 2 November 2000, the details of which are contained in the *Official Report*, columns 837–52.

My right hon. Friend the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales is a member of the task force and a signatory of the memorandum and will continue to be fully involved in the task force's work.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many of the troops trained to drive fuel tankers in the event of fuel protests will be stationed in Wales. [136615]

Mr. Spellar: I have been asked to reply.

Should the armed forces be asked to provide assistance, their precise disposition will be determined at the time in consultation with the relevant civil authorities. This will take into account a number of factors, in particular the relative need for military support for the delivery of fuel in different parts of the country.

University Spaces

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* applications for degree courses were received and *(b)* vacant university spaces there were in each of the past five years in Wales. [134913]

Mr. Hanson: The numbers of applications to Welsh higher education institutions[1] are shown in the table:

Year of admission	*Number of applications*[2]
1995	116,455
1996	88,131
1997	91,173
1998	89,548
1999	88,247

[1] The number of higher education institutions in Wales, within the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), was 15 for the years 1995 to 1998, rising to 16 in 1999.
[2] In 1995 up to eight selections were available to each applicant, subsequently reduced to six.
Source:
UCAS

Information on the number of vacant university spaces is not available centrally.

Foreign Investment

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives are being pursued by his Department to attract foreign investment in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [134899]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Since primary responsibility for promoting Wales as a location for inward investment now rests with the National Assembly for Wales, my Department is pursuing no specific initiatives to this end. However, I maintain close contact with the First Minister and his Cabinet and with the Chairman of the WDA. I and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State also emphasise the attractions of Wales for foreign investment when our duties involve meetings with people from overseas.

The National Assembly, in conjunction with its "Team Wales" partners, continues to enjoy considerable success in securing projects from foreign investors. Important developments announced during the current year have included:

One2One Personal Communications Ltd. at Merthyr Tydfil;
Cycle City Ltd. at Bangor;
SPX Contech at Welshpool;
General Domestic Appliances Ltd. at Bodelwyddan; and
Manpower plc at Pembroke Dock.

These five projects will involve capital investment totalling more than £50 million. They are expected to create nearly 1,500 new jobs, while safeguarding a further 1,000.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much foreign investment Wales received in the last 10 years. [135226]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Between April 1990 and March 2000, capital expenditure reported by overseas-owned companies at the time of the investment decision was £8,603 million.

School Closures

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of *(a)* junior and *(b)* secondary school closures by constituency in Wales in each of the last five years. [135221]

Mr. Hanson: Information is not available by constituency. Local education authorities (LEAs) notified the Welsh Office of the following school closures between 1 January 1995 and 30 June 1999. On 1 July 1999, responsibility for education transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

LEA	*School*
Primary[1]	
1995	
Dyfed	Blaenau CP School
Dyfed	Llanddeusant CP School
Clwyd	Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr CP School
Dyfed	Crugybar CP School
1996	
Mid Glamorgan	Ferndale Junior School
Mid Glamorgan	Dyffryn Infants School
1997	
Ceredigion	Brongest CP School
Conwy	Ysgol Llwydgoed
1998	
Pembrokeshire	Barham VC Primary School
Pembrokeshire	Rosemarket VC School
Carmarthenshire	Llandyfaelog VCP School
Conwy	Ysgol Cadnant
Conwy	Ysgol Bodlondeb
Conwy	Ysgol Babanod Gyffin
Caerphilly	Brithdir Primary School
1999 (to 30 June)	
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Dunraven Primary School
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Blaenrhondda Primary School
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Blaenycwm Primary School
Secondary	
1995–97	
No closures	—
1998	
Blaenau Gwent	Glanyrafon Comprehensive School
1999 (to 30 June)	
No closures	—

[1] It is not possible consistently to distinguish junior schools

In addition, there were 17 amalgamations of infant and junior school during the period covered by these figures. Some amalgamations might have resulted in the closure of premises.

Class Sizes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the average class sizes in *(a)* junior and *(b)* secondary schools in each local education authority in Wales in each of the last three years. [135224]

Mr. Hanson: The following is the available information for 1997–98 and 1998–99. Responsibility for education transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Average class size for registered Key Stage 2 classes in maintained primary schools

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Isle of Anglesey	24.6	24.2
Gwynedd	25.0	24.9
Conwy	27.2	27.2
Denbighshire	27.7	27.6
Flintshire	29.8	28.0
Wrexham	28.6	28.0
Powys	24.1	23.7
Ceredigion	22.4	21.9
Pembrokeshire	24.6	25.0
Carmarthenshire	23.5	23.9
Swansea	28.6	29.1
Neath Port Talbot	26.8	27.1
Bridgend	30.5	29.7
Vale of Glamorgan	28.6	28.2
Rhondda Cynon Taff	28.8	28.0
Merthyr Tydfil	28.9	28.3
Caerphilly	29.2	28.9
Blaenau Gwent	30.1	29.8
Torfaen	30.4	28.5
Monmouthshire	29.4	29.5
Newport	30.1	29.3
Cardiff	28.9	28.6

Average class sizes for registered classes in maintained secondary schools

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Isle of Anglesey	19.5	20.5
Gwynedd	17.7	18.1
Conwy	20.8	22.1
Denbighshire	19.9	20.3
Flintshire	20.1	19.8
Wrexham	22.0	22.7
Powys	17.7	17.8
Ceredigion	19.7	18.2
Pembrokeshire	21.5	20.5
Carmarthenshire	20.9	20.8
Swansea	21.0	20.8
Neath Port Talbot	20.9	21.1
Bridgend	21.7	20.7
Vale of Glamorgan	22.4	21.0
Rhondda Cynon Taff	20.5	20.6
Merthyr Tydfil	19.2	20.2
Caerphilly	20.5	20.9
Blaenau Gwent	19.3	19.5
Torfaen	21.0	21.2
Monmouthshire	20.2	21.2
Newport	21.4	21.8
Cardiff	22.5	23.2

Welsh Language

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of children received their education in the primary education sector through the medium of Welsh *(a)* within Wales as a whole and *(b)* by constituency, in each year since 1980. [135688]

Mr. Hanson: Figures for Wales are available only from the academic year 1985–86. At the constituency level, they are available only from 1996–97. Responsibility for education transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Available information is set out in the tables:

Percentage of primary school pupils in classes where Welsh is the sole or main medium of instruction—Wales

Year	*Percentage*
1985–86	11.7
1986–87	11.9
1987–88	12.2
1988–89	12.5
1989–90	13.5
1990–91	14.1
1991–92	16.0
1992–93	16.6
1993–94	16.4
1994–95	17.1
1995–96	17.2
1996–97	17.2
1997–98	17.7
1998–99	17.7

Constituencies	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Ynys Môn	66.7	68.1	65.7
Caernarfon	100.0	100.0	100.0
Conwy	43.7	42.6	36.4
Clwyd, West	23.0	22.5	23.0
Vale of Clwyd	14.0	13.6	13.8
Delyn	13.5	12.8	12.3
Alyn and Deeside	0.9	0.9	1.0
Wrexham	9.6	9.9	9.2
Clwyd, South	13.3	14.2	14.6
Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	88.4	97.5	89.5
Montgomeryshire	19.0	19.3	19.3
Brecon and Radnorshire	8.6	8.6	8.3
Ceredigion	72.1	72.0	71.2
Preseli Pembrokeshire	20.9	21.4	21.9
West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire	17.4	17.2	17.6
East Carmarthen and Dinefwr	69.8	70.2	71.3
Llanelli	30.0	28.8	30.3
Gower	9.2	9.0	9.2
Swansea, West	6.9	7.1	7.2
Swansea, East	5.7	6.3	6.7
Neath	24.3	24.1	24.1
Aberavon	4.9	5.1	4.9
Bridgend	7.7	7.4	7.5
Ogmore	9.9	9.9	9.8
Vale of Glamorgan	8.0	8.1	9.1
Cardiff, South and Penarth	7.0	7.3	7.4
Cardiff, Central	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cardiff, North	11.2	11.7	13.6
Cardiff, West	7.9	8.3	9.1
Pontypridd	18.3	18.5	18.3
Rhondda	14.8	15.4	16.2
Cynon Valley	13.4	13.8	14.1
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	9.8	9.6	10.7
Caerphilly	12.6	13.0	13.3
Islwyn	4.4	5.1	5.3
Blaenau Gwent	4.1	4.1	4.1
Torfaen	3.4	3.5	4.2
Monmouth	0.8	0.9	1.1
Newport, East	3.8	4.1	4.1
Newport, West	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source:
Welsh Office Schools Census

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of children received their education through the medium of Welsh *(a)* within Wales as a whole and *(b)* by constituency, in each year since 1980. [135687]

Mr. Hanson: Information is not available in the form requested. Because data are not collected on the same basis from primary and secondary schools, separate tables are provided, setting out the most appropriate available indicators for each sector. Figures for primary schools are available only from the academic year 1985–86. In both sectors, a constituency-level breakdown is available only from 1996–97. Responsibility for education transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Percentage of primary school pupils in classes where Welsh is the sole or main medium of instruction
Wales

	Percentage
1985–86	11.7
1986–87	11.9
1987–88	12.2
1988–89	12.5
1989–90	13.5
1990–91	14.1
1991–92	16.0
1992–93	16.6
1993–94	16.4
1994–95	17.1
1995–96	17.2
1996–97	17.2
1997–98	17.7
1998–99	17.7

Constituencies	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Ynys Môn	66.7	68.1	65.7
Caernarfon	100.0	100.0	100.0
Conwy	43.7	42.6	36.4
Clwyd, West	23.0	22.5	23.0
Vale of Clwyd	14.0	13.6	13.8
Delyn	13.5	12.8	12.3
Alyn and Deeside	0.9	0.9	1.0
Wrexham	9.6	9.9	9.2
Clwyd, South	13.3	14.2	14.6
Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	88.4	97.5	89.5
Mongomeryshire	19.0	19.3	19.3
Brecon and Radnorshire	8.6	8.6	8.3
Ceredigion	72.1	72.0	71.2
Preseli Pembrokeshire	20.9	21.4	21.9
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	17.4	17.2	17.6
Carmarthen East and Dinefwr	69.8	70.2	71.3
Llanelli	30.0	28.8	30.3
Gower	9.2	9.0	9.2
Swansea, West	6.9	7.1	7.2
Swansea, East	5.7	6.3	6.7
Neath	24.3	24.1	24.1
Aberavon	4.9	5.1	4.9
Bridgend	7.7	7.4	7.5
Ogmore	9.9	9.9	9.8
Vale of Glamorgan	8.0	8.1	9.1
Cardiff, South and Penarth	7.0	7.3	7.4
Cardiff, Central	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cardiff, North	11.2	11.7	13.6
Cardiff, West	7.9	8.3	9.1
Pontypridd	18.3	18.5	18.3
Rhondda	14.8	15.4	16.2
Cynon Valley	13.4	13.8	14.1
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	9.8	9.6	10.7
Caerphilly	12.6	13.0	13.3
Islwyn	4.4	5.1	5.3
Blaeunau Gwent	4.1	4.1	4.1
Torfaen	3.4	3.5	4.2
Monmouth	0.8	0.9	1.1
Newport, East	3.8	4.1	4.1
Newport, West	0.0	0.0	0.0

Percentage of pupils in maintained secondary schools in year groups 7 to 11 taught Welsh as a first language
Wales

	Percentage
1979–80	9.7
1980–81	10.1
1981–82	10.1
1982–83	10.2
1983–84	10.4
1984–85	11.1
1985–86	10.7
1986–87	11.1
1987–88	11.1
1988–89	11.3
1989–90	11.6
1990–91	11.7
1991–92	11.7
1992–93	12.1
1993–94	12.1
1994–95	12.2
1995–96	12.4
1996–97	12.6
1998–88	12.8
1998–99	13.3

Constituencies	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Ynys Môn	44.1	48.9	51.3
Caernarfon	95.10	94.7	94.9
Conwy	33.2	32.9	34.0
Clwyd, West	6.7	8.1	8.7
Vale of Clwyd	16.7	17.4	17.0
Delyn	8.1	8.7	9.0
Alyn and Deeside	0.0	0.0	0.0
Wrexham	10.5	10.5	10.9
Clwyd, South	1.6	2.0	1.5
Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	59.6	60.0	65.5
Mongomeryshire	14.3	13.7	14.7
Brecon and Radnorshire	3.4	3.5	4.5
Ceredigion	47.8	45.2	49.0
Preseli Pembrokeshire	13.1	13.8	15.0
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	14.8	15.4	16.4
Carmarthen East and Dinefwr	37.9	37.0	38.1
Llanelli	16.8	17.4	17.8
Gower	16.2	16.4	17.0
Swansea, West	0.0	0.0	0.0
Swansea, East	0.0	0.0	0.0
Neath	15.6	17.1	17.7
Aberavon	0.0	0.0	0.0
Bridgend	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ogmore	21.2	20.1	19.6
Vale of Glamorgan	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cardiff, South and Penarth	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cardiff, Central	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cardiff, North	20.1	21.1	17.2
Cardiff, West	0.0	0.0	0.0
Pontypridd	14.1	13.8	13.3
Rhondda	11.8	12.8	13.3
Cynon Valley	6.0	8.9	12.0
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	0.0	0.0	0.0
Caerphilly	11.3	11.5	11.8
Islwyn	0.0	0.0	0.0
Blaenau Gwent	0.0	0.0	0.0
Torfaen	9.4	9.8	10.5
Monmouth	0.0	0.0	0.0
Newport, East	0.0	0.0	0.0
Newport, West	0.0	0.0	0.0

Earnings

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the average percentage

growth in average gross weekly earnings of full-time employees on adult rates in Wales for *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [136271]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is in the table.

Average gross weekly earnings of full-time employees on adult rates

Year	Average gross weekly earnings (£)	Year on year growth (Percentage)
1996	313.30	—
1997	330.20	5.4
1998	342.80	3.8
1999	353.60	3.2

Source:
National Statistics, New Earnings Survey

GDP Growth

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the percentage GDP growth in Wales in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999. [136206]

Mr. Paul Murphy: GDP figures are not available for 1999. GDP at basic prices grew by 4 per cent. between 1997 and 1998.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the *(a)* minutes and *(b)* agenda of the European Community Working Group on Education and the Euro; and when the group will next meet. [134211]

Ms Jowell: The minutes and agenda of the European Community working group on Education and the Euro are the property of the European Commission, which provided the secretariat for the meeting. The Commission have taken the view that it would be more appropriate for them to release the documents rather than the Government of a member state. The papers are kept by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture who can make them available on submission of a written application. There are no plans for any further meetings of the group.

Disabled Students (University Applications)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of applications made to universities in each of the past five years were made by disabled students. [134900]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available data, covering full-time and sandwich undergraduates applying through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), are shown in the following table. Some full-time and all part-time students apply outside UCAS.

UK domiciled applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses via UCAS

Year of entry	Total applicants	Of which percentage recording a disability
1995	369,701	4.1
1996	364,885	4.6
1997	398,327	4.6
1998	389,588	4.6
1999	388,691	[1]3.8
2000	[2]388,986	Not available

[1] Because of a change in the guidance for the reporting of this information to UCAS, the figures between 1999 and 1998 are not directly comparable
[2] Near final total

University Courses

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* applications for degree courses were received and *(b)* vacant university spaces there were, in each of the past five years. [134909]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available data, showing the number of applications from UK domiciled students via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to institutions in the UK, are shown in the following table. Final figures for 2000 entry will be available in early 2001.

Applications from UK domiciled students via UCAS to full-time and sandwich first degree courses in UK institutions

Year of entry	Number of applications[1]
1995	2,103,141
1996	1,661,323
1997	1,735,497
1998	1,700,939
1999	1,752,822

[1] In 1995 each applicant could make up to eight applications; in 1996 and subsequent years each applicant could make up to six applications

Figures for the number of vacancies are not available centrally. Although universities and colleges inform UCAS throughout the clearing process which courses have vacancies, and these appear in the national press and elsewhere, they do not declare the number of vacancies.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the establishment of the learning and skills councils. [134690]

Mr. Wicks: We are making good progress in establishing the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). We have made a number of key senior appointments at both national and local level. These include the National Chair, National Chief Executive, National Council members and the Chairs of the LSC's Adult Learning Committee and Young Peoples Learning Committee. At the local level we have appointed all 47 local Chairs and local Executive Directors. Work continues apace to ensure that the LSC is operational from April 2001 and, to help ensure this, we remain on course to announce local Council members by the end of November and members of the LSC's Adult

Learning Committee and Young Peoples Learning Committee by December. The LSC is also working to ensure that its wider staffing requirements are met.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment has been made of the future occupations of young people who complete the New Deal scheme in West Sussex. [134626]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* We do not collect detailed statistics on the future occupations of young people when they complete New Deal for individual Units of Delivery and so no comprehensive assessment has been made.

The flexible design of New Deal aims to tailor provision, in particular training, to meet the aspirations of participants and prepare them for a career in their chosen field. The evidence we do hold indicates that of the 317 young people who have gained sustained unsubsidised employment from New Deal in the West Sussex Unit of Delivery, approximately 3 per cent. moved into managerial/professional occupations, 10 per cent. into clerical/secretarial occupations, 9 per cent. into craft and related occupations, 13 per cent. into personal and protective services, 6 per cent. into sales, 14 per cent. into plant and machinery operation and 45 per cent. into non-specified occupations.

Religious Freedom

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many letters he has received alleging that there was a threat to religious freedom posed by the EU directive on employment agreed between the Governments of the EU on 17 October. [135068]

Ms Jowell: We have received over 12,000 letters following publication of the European Commission's original proposal for this directive. Of these, some 10,500 raised concerns on religious grounds, in particular that the wording of the original draft of the directive posed a threat to religious freedoms. We have now negotiated a final text which, we believe, fully responds to the concerns expressed, and allows member states considerable latitude in implementing its provisions in relation to staff policies of religious organisations. In particular the agreed text allows the UK to protect the right of church schools to give preference to teachers of their faith in line with the provisions of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1999.

Class Sizes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the average class sizes in *(a)* junior and *(b)* secondary schools in each local education authority in each of the last three years. [135225]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested on class sizes in England by local education authority area has been placed in the Library. Information on class sizes was recently published in a Statistical Volume 'Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000'.

The latest infant class size data for September 2000 were recently published in a Statistical First Release 'Infant Class Sizes in England 2000' on 1 November, copies of which are available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed from the Department for Education and Employment statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics. Figures from this release show that since September 1998, 324,000 five, six and seven-year-olds have benefited from the Government's infant class size initiative. In September 2000, 30,000 children were in classes of 31 or more children, compared to 171,000 in September 1999. This demonstrates that the Government are delivering early their infant class size pledge, which is supported by some £620 million.

January 2000 saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22, is still five below the average primary class. Secondary headteachers are receiving an average of £50,000 this year (£60,000 from April 2001) in direct grant to spend as they choose. If this were spent on recruiting teachers, the average secondary class size could be reduced by up to 0.8.

For information on classes in Wales, I refer the hon. Member to the Secretary of State for Education in Wales.

New Deal (Costs)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total cost of the New Deal; and what percentage of this figure is spent on administration. [135232]

Ms Jowell: The table shows the total amount spent by the Department for Education and Employment on the Welfare to Work related New Deals, and the percentage of this spent on DfEE administration.

£ million

	1997–98 outturn	*1998–99 outturn*	*1999–2000 estimated outturn*
Total New Deal Spend	37	220	428
Of which:			
Administration costs	1.2	2.4	3.2
Administration costs as a percentage	3.24	1.09	0.75

Child Labour

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the Government's policy on Commission Recommendation 2000/581/CE,, pursuant to Convention 182 of the Organisation Internationale du Travail, on banning the worst forms of work for children; which jobs undertaken in the United Kingdom are covered; how many are involved; and if he will make a statement. [135575]

Ms Jowell: The Government fully support the International Labour Organisation's Convention No. 182 concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour and ratified the Convention in March 2000. As part of the implementation of the Convention we are required to identify work which by its nature, or the circumstances

under which it is carried out, is considered likely to harm the health, safety and morals of children under the age of 18. We are currently in the process of determining a list of harmful areas of work existing in the UK.

Work Force Dignity

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the costs involved in maintaining the dignity of the work force in accordance with Article 31 of the draft European Charter of Fundamental Rights. [135572]

Ms Jowell: None. The Charter is not legally binding. It is addressed to the EU Institutions, and to member states only when they are implementing Union law (Article 51(1)). It does not establish any new power or task for the Community or the Union or modify powers and tasks defined by the Treaties (Article 51(2)).

Learning Support Units

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many learning support units are *(a)* planned and *(b)* operating in (i) England and Wales, (ii) Nottinghamshire and (iii) Nottingham; and what the time scale is for the establishment of learning support units in each of those areas. [135487]

Jacqui Smith: We are planning to have over 1,000 Learning Support Units established in England by 2002. For information about the plans and time scales for Units in Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 19 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 201W.

The number of Units currently operating in England is around 500 of which 16 are in Nottinghamshire.

Information about the number of Units in Wales is a matter for the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the curriculum is for pupils in learning support units. [135483]

Jacqui Smith: This is for the mainstream and unit staff to determine in the light of pupils' individual needs and circumstances. But unit staff should both liaise closely with the school's teaching staff in setting and marking suitable work, and consult the senior management team in fixing the details of an appropriate curriculum.

Carers

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to ensure that people who have responsibilities as carers are not unfairly discriminated against within the labour market. [135801]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Government recognise the valuable contribution carers make both to their families and society as a whole. We are keen to give them the support they need—whether to balance work with their caring responsibilities or to get back to work when their caring responsibilities end or reduce.

For those carers seeking to enter the labour market, Employment Service advisers ensure that they have the same access to all the programmes, such as New Deal, as any other job seeker, and can be granted exemptions from requirements in certain circumstances. Advisers discuss with the individual their circumstances and skills and tailor the help that will best equip them to enter the labour market. The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) rules also contain special provision to help carers back into employment.

New Deal 50 plus takes account of time spent on Invalid Care Allowance when assessing eligibility. My Department has worked in partnership with The Carers National Association to produce a leaflet to explain how New Deal 50 plus can help carers back into work.

For those carers who are working the new entitlement to take a reasonable time off work to deal with a crisis involving the care of a dependant is a significant new right. The Government believe in a fair and flexible labour market that benefits both employers and employees, working in partnership together. Our Work-Life Balance campaign encourages all employers to introduce policies and practices which benefit the business and help their staff achieve a better balance between work and the rest of their lives. These practices can offer carers a greater choice over where, when and how they work and can help employers retain valued staff.

Higher Education Institutions

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he employs when deciding to admit private higher education institutions into the publicly funded sector; and how many such applications have been successful. [135534]

Mr. Wicks: Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, any private higher education institution seeking designation into the publicly funded sector must have at least 55 per cent. of its full-time equivalent roll capable of being defined as higher education.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provides advice to the Secretary of State on applications from private institutions seeking designation as higher education institutions.

HEFCE funding would require institutions to comply with all the conditions related to receipt of grant, including quality assessment, financial health, governance, audit and accountability standards.

No private higher education institution has been designated under these provisions so far.

Disabilities

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to improve the position of those with more than one impairment or complex disabilities. [135840]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* We are tackling the social exclusion of disabled people, including those with more than one impairment or who have complex disabilities, in three ways.

First, we are continuing to implement the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and we set up the Disability Rights Commission earlier this year. Secondly, we are working to raise awareness and give advice and information to businesses about the requirements of the DDA through disability awareness campaigns. Thirdly, the Employment Service has a range of specialist employment measures which aim at removing the barriers faced by disabled people. These included the Access to Work, Supported Employment, and Work Preparation Programmes, and the services of the Disability Employment Advisers.

The New Deal for Disabled People which has been successfully piloted, will be extended nationally. We are also considering the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force, in tandem with the implementation of the recently agreed Employment Directive under Article 13.

Students

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has sent to the Joint Council for Education in the Commonwealth/UK COSA report on international student mobility. [135937]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* We are closely considering the report's recommendations. I am pleased to see that a good deal of what the report suggests is being already implemented in the UK. For example, we place great importance on attracting more international students to the UK. We are actively pursuing this through the Prime Minister's initiative to recruit an additional 75,000 students into further and higher education by 2005.

Departmental Guidance (Teachers)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his Department's guidance to teachers is based on the principle that teachers act in loco parentis. [136261]

Ms Estelle Morris: Guidance is issued by my Department on the basis of the law, policy and good practice.

Reading (Phonetic Teaching)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the phonetic approach to the teaching of reading. [136194]

Ms Estelle Morris: The National Literacy Strategy, which is based on research and inspection evidence of best practice, gives a strong emphasis to the systematic teaching of phonics. As part of the strategy, we have provided all primary schools with practical guidance on the teaching of phonics in the booklet "Progression in Phonics". Since the implementation of the literacy strategy began, there has been a 10 percentage point increase, to 75 per cent., in the percentage of 11-year-olds achieving the standards expected for their age in English.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the eligibility criteria for students who wish to obtain individual learning accounts. [136180]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* In England, people aged 19 and over can open an Individual Learning Account and benefit from the incentives. There is no upper age limit for account holding. To hold an Individual Learning Account people must be settled in the UK under the Immigration Act 1971, or be European Economic Area nationals working in the UK, or have the right to remain in the UK. Account holders must be resident in England or, if resident outside of England, be ordinarily resident in England (i.e. living abroad temporarily). The only exception to this is for UK armed forces personnel, who qualify for an Individual Learning Account while serving abroad.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the discount arrangements for students who wish to pursue courses of study lasting *(a)* one, *(b)* two, *(c)* three and *(d)* more than three years. [136182]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* Individual Learning Account incentives are made available to individuals on a rolling year basis. For new account holders their account holding year starts when they first book learning using their account. Under current arrangements the first 1 million account holders to book eligible learning can benefit from a £150 contribution towards their course costs, providing they contribute at least £25 themselves. In second and subsequent years account holders can get a 20 per cent. discount on a wide range of learning up to a maximum of £100 in each year.

Account holders can also claim an 80 per cent. discount on a limited number of basic IT and maths courses up to a maximum of £200 in each year. The most anyone can claim in any one year is £200. Limits on how much individuals can claim through the incentives in their account holding year ensure that as many individuals as possible benefit from Individual Learning Accounts. If the course costs are split across more than one academic year, account holders will be able to use each annual entitlement to help pay for the learning costs.

Internet-based Teaching

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of internet-based teaching programmes that can develop literacy and numeracy for post-16 year olds in education. [136540]

Mr. Wicks: Improving adult literacy and numeracy skills is a priority for this Government. We have introduced a number of relevant measures and have already announced our intention to allocate £150 million additional expenditure over the period 2001–02 to 2003–04, and will shortly be publishing our national strategy.

The University for Industry in conjunction with my Department and the Institute of Education in London are currently undertaking research to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of ICT based learning

for people with basic skills needs. The project outcomes will be available early next year and will include a report and a good practice guide.

Special Educational Needs

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Special Educational Needs and Disability in Education Bill will be introduced in Parliament. [137099]

Mr. Blunkett: The Government are committed to securing comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. That commitment will be underpinned by a significant investment over the next three years until 2003–04. Over the period 2001–02 to 2003–04 the Government will be investing £220 million through the Schools Access Initiative in England to help improve the accessibility of the school building stock. The spending will be £50 million in 2001–02, rising to £70 million in 2002–03 and £100 million in 2003–04. In addition, over the period 2002–03 to 2003–04, £172 million will be made available to the post-16 sector (Further Education, Higher Education, Adult Education and the Youth Service) to improve accessibility for disabled students and adult learners in England. Provision in Wales and Scotland is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive respectively.

I can confirm that the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill will be introduced in Parliament early in the next Session, although it has not proved possible to publish a draft Bill this Session.

The new legislation will be a significant step forward for disabled pupils, students and adult learners alike.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the first year of special regional projects on special educational needs; and what plans he has to draw their annual reports to public attention. [136306]

Jacqui Smith: The network of eleven SEN regional co-ordination projects have been successfully established and cover the whole of England. A team from the University of Manchester has, since April, been evaluating the projects' work. Their Initial Impressions report is being published this week. The report reveals that there is an enthusiasm for the projects, an optimism that the structures already set up, if maintained and developed, have the potential "to make a difference" to the educational experiences of children and young people with SEN. I am today placing a copy of the published report in the Library of both Houses. Copies are also being made available to everyone involved in the projects and it can also be viewed or downloaded from my Department's SEN Website.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has made to the RADAR report on awareness of the Access to Work Scheme among small employers; and what plans he has to increase *(a)* their awareness and take-up of the Scheme and *(b)* the resources available for it. [136301]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mark Neal to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 6 November 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning the RADAR report on awareness of the Access to Work scheme among small employers and what plans there are to increase their awareness and take-up of the scheme and the resources available for it. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on Mr Lewis' behalf.

I have read the RADAR report and was encouraged to see that 74% of small business respondents to the Jobs Worth Survey reported a relatively high awareness of disability issues. However, I recognise that these respondents also indicated a low level of awareness of the Disability Service, and particularly Access to Work.

Employment Service invest around £300,000 each year in marketing and publicising its disability services and programmes, including Access to Work, through a variety of media such as external advertising, exhibitions, marketing events and video. A major process review of Access to Work is currently underway to improve the responsiveness of the programme to disabled people and their employers. A new Employment Service Website is due for launch during November and will contain information on all programmes and services provided to disabled people and their employers, including information for individuals and employers on Access to Work.

In 1999–2000, the Employment Service spent £24.39 million on providing Access to Work support to disabled people in paid employment. During 2000–2001, the Employment Service has £25.6 million to spend on providing Access to Work support.

I hope this is helpful.

Training (Disabled People)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the cost and coverage of vocational residential training for disabled people and its effectiveness in meeting demand for such training. [136303]

Ms Hodge: Residential Work Based Learning for Adults offers nationally around 1,200 places for disabled people each year at 13 specialist providers, at a cost of £14.7 million. They provide around 118 courses across a broad range of occupational sectors. In 1999–2000, 46 per cent. of those completing their training entered employment within six months of the end of their course. The type, number and content of the training programmes are regularly reviewed both in the light of demand from applicants and the needs of the labour market. An evaluation of the effectiveness of residential training provision is under way. The results are expected to be published at the end of the year.

Child Care (Rural Areas)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the latest available figures for the provision of child care places in rural areas in England; and what the figures were for each year since 1995. [136678]

Ms Hodge: The information requested is not available. Statistics on child care places are collected at a local education authority level and are not split between urban and rural areas.

New Deal (Withdrawal of Benefit)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people's benefits have been withdrawn as a result of their refusal to accept any of the options on *(a)* the New Deal for the Young Unemployed, *(b)* the New Deal for over 25s and *(c)* the New Deal for Older Workers. [136317]

Ms Jowell: Figures for the period 1 April 1998 to 30 June 2000 show that the following benefit sanctions have been imposed for (i) refusal of a New Deal option, (ii) Leaving an option voluntarily, (iii) misconduct, (iv) failure to attend and (v) other reasons:

New Deal for young people

	Number of sanctions imposed
Refusal of an Option	1,438
Leaving an Option Voluntarily	8,781
Misconduct	8,108
Failure to attend	12,544
Other reasons	1,280
Total	32,151

New Deal 25+ pilots

	Number of sanctions imposed
Refusal of an Option	40
Leaving an Option Voluntarily	233
Misconduct	192
Failure to attend	1,750
Other reasons	7
Total	2,222

As the National New Deal 25+ programme and New Deal 50+ are voluntary programmes, participants are not subject to benefit sanctions.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135494]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Departmental targets are to reduce sickness absence to 7.8 days per staff year by end-2001 and 6.9 days per staff year by end-2003.

A range of measures to reduce sickness absence are currently being piloted with a view to roll-out throughout the core-Department. These will put in place Cabinet Office "Best Practice" recommendations to manage and reduce sickness absence. Our Executive Agencies are introducing similar measures.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the civil service code. [136058]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* The procedures for reporting such concerns are the same for each issue. Where they cannot be resolved through line management staff may report issues in confidence through someone outside the normal chain of command. For core-MAFF this is the director of Establishments; for Agency staff the appropriate Chief Executive. If, after investigation, a member of staff is not satisfied with a given response a right of appeal exists to the Permanent Secretary and beyond that to the Civil Service Commissioners.

Wheat

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the average *(a)* market price and *(b)* cost of production, per ton of wheat in the last 12 months. [136965]

Ms Quin: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Bovine TB

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the results of the road traffic accident survey of badger carcases recommended by the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB; and if he will make a statement. [137097]

Ms Quin: As from today arrangements are in place to test a sample of badger carcases for bovine tuberculosis in the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire, as recommended by the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB. Road casualty badgers along with badgers found dead on farms in Krebs trial areas within these counties will be collected and tested. Survey results will be published.

Cabinet Committee for Rural Affairs

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Cabinet Committee for Rural Affairs was formed; how many times it has met to date; and on what dates. [136682]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have been asked to reply.

The Prime Minister announced on 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 542W, that he had established the Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs. Regarding details of the meetings, it is established practice, under exemption two of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, not to disclose information relating to the proceedings of Cabinet Committees.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135462]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Cabinet Office prepares an annual report of sickness absence in the Civil Service which includes information for each department. The report for 1999 is being finalised and will be published shortly. Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for 2001 and 2003 against a baseline of 1998 will be included in its Service Delivery Agreement. This will also be published shortly. In order to meet these targets the Department has streamlined procedures for recording absences, improved monitoring of sickness and pursued more active case management.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the full text of the agreements made between the UK Government and Sierra Leone since 1 April 1997 concerning *(a)* the training of the Sierra Leone armed services, *(b)* the police and security services training and *(c)* any other services provided by Her Majesty's Government. [136675]

Mr. Hain: All texts on agreements made between the UK Government and the Government of Sierra Leone on training the Sierra Leone armed services and police will be placed in the Library of the House by the Ministry of Defence and the Department of International Development respectively, except for those where disclosures would be prejudicial to our relations with the Government of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future role of the British Council in Sierra Leone. [136645]

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to close down the British Council Country Directorate in Sierra Leone. [136823]

Mr. Hain: There are no plans to close British Council's Country Directorate in Sierra Leone. Following its recent strategic review, the council intends to maintain its activities there. These will focus on governance, education and public access information services with Internet access.

Solomon Islands

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government of the Solomon Islands have asked Her Majesty's Government for assistance in relation to recent civil disorder on the islands; and what assistance has been provided. [136631]

Mr. Battle: In early August the Solomon Islands Government asked HMG to provide additional manpower and equipment for the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP). We are considering this request with other key players in the region, in the light of the Townsville Peace Agreement which was agreed on 15 October.

A World Bank delegation is in Honiara from 31 October until 7 November to assess the economic needs of the Solomon Islands and suggest how donor countries can most effectively provide assistance. Missions from the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank will make similar visits later this month. We will consider what further help we and our international partners can offer in the light of the recommendations arising from these missions.

Mercenaries

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish the Green Paper on Mercenary Activity; and if he will make a statement. [135504]

Mr. Hain: The Green Paper is in the final stages of preparation. We continue to work towards a publication date of end November, but there may be some slight slippage. I will keep Parliament informed.

Cuba

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 234W, for what reason a period of 15 days elapsed before Ministers were informed of the arrests of British nationals. [136674]

Mr. Hain: As I said in my earlier answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 234W, it is not normal practice for FCO officials to inform Ministers whenever a British national is arrested overseas. Due to a printing error, that answer appeared in incorrect form in Hansard. I would also like to take this opportunity to clarify another answer to the hon. Lady of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 234W. Our Embassy in Havana was informed of the arrest of six British nationals on 9 October and immediately began seeking details and information about their whereabouts. On 12 October they made their first formal request for access. A diplomatic note requesting access was sent to the Cuban Ministry for Foreign Affairs on 16 October.

Kosovo

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many United Nations personnel have been *(a)* earmarked for and *(b)* recruited for the United Nations civilian administration in Kosovo; and how many United Nations personnel earmarked for the United Nations civilian administration in Kosovo have already been deployed. [135418]

Mr. Hain: According to the United Nations Secretariat the authorised total for international personnel working in the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is 1,156. Of that figure, 1,088 are currently deployed and a further 68 have been recruited. In addition, UNMIK employs 4,112 locally engaged staff.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the deadline is for setting up an international police task force in Kosovo; and how many of the planned international police officers are deployed in Kosovo. [135419]

Mr. Hain: The United Nations International Police (UNIP) is already operating in Kosovo. According to the United Nations Secretariat, 4,129 of the approved total of 4,718 police officers have now deployed to Kosovo.

Overseas Territories

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what length of time has been given to the Overseas Territories to respond to the KPMG reports. [136676]

Mr. Battle: The Overseas Territories covered by the KPMG review, namely the Caribbean Overseas Territories and Bermuda, have agreed to submit written responses to the recommendations in the reports by 15 January 2001.

ASSIST Programme

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Assistance to Support Stability with In-Service Training programme; and what changes to the programme are planned. [137177]

Mr. Vaz: The ASSIST programme was established on 1 April 1998 to replace the UK Military Training Assistance Scheme (UKMTAS), with the main purpose of refocusing support to the Government's priority of promoting respect for human rights and good governance.

Nigeria

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the extent of recent violence in Nigeria; and if he will make a statement. [136765]

Mr. Hain: I was saddened to hear of the serious outbreak of rioting in Lagos on 15–18 October. At least 200 people were killed, and over 16,000 fled their homes.

The violence was predominantly between the Yoruba and Hausa communities. Its immediate cause remains unclear. The Oodua Peoples Congress, a militant Yoruba organisation, were heavily involved.

The security forces brought the situation under control, and made many arrests.

I deplore all such incidents. I urge the communities involved to resolve their differences through dialogue not violence.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts Venues (Small Towns)

14. **Mr. Beith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent assessment he has made of the future viability of arts centres and venues for live theatre and music in small towns. [135349]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Arts centres are undoubtedly important for the local communities they serve, especially where access to mainstream venues such as theatres and concert halls is difficult. It is for that reason we believe decisions on their future viability and funding needs are best taken locally by the regional arts boards and local authorities. In a number of cases they will also be considered as part of the Arts Council's theatre review.

National Lottery

17. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the measures he is taking to ensure that former coalfield areas gain a fair share of national lottery funding, and the effectiveness of those measures to date. [135352]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government would like to see all parts of the country receiving a fair share of lottery funding. My Department and lottery distributors commissioned research into the impact of the lottery on the coalfields and have established a joint coalfields action group to take forward the report's recommendations. Early indications are that the rate of awards to coalfields areas has increased since Government lottery reforms came into force in August 1998.

18. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been raised for good causes by the National Lottery since its inception. [135353]

Mr. Chris Smith: Up to the end of September this year, the National Lottery had raised £9.96 billion for good causes.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure that the arrangements for auditing organisations in receipt of National Lottery grants are robust. [135909]

Kate Hoey: Distribution of National Lottery grants is a matter for 15 National Lottery distributing bodies. The Secretary of State's directions to these bodies (or, in the case of bodies operating solely in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, the directions from the devolved Administrations) require them to establish procedures which ensure lottery resources are being used for the purposes for which grants were given and that the schemes supported represent value for money; that projects are delivering the benefits identified on the application form in accordance with specified financial arrangements; and that assets purchased are being used for the purpose for which they were intended. The distributing bodies are required to set out their performance on this in their annual reports.

My Department requires distributing bodies' accounting officers to submit a statement, verified by the National Audit Office (or equivalent) which states that their systems (including their systems for monitoring arrangements as set out above) are adequate for the distribution of lottery funds before they are permitted to draw down such funds. Other steps include an annual assurance exercise which examines distributors' compliance with their directions.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the transport vehicles to which the Heritage Lottery Fund has given

financial support since its foundation; how many such vehicles are on static display only; and how many such vehicles are in use. [136275]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The information requested is held by the Heritage Lottery Fund and I have asked for it to be provided. I will write to my hon. Friend when the information is available and place copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guidelines he has issued to the National Lottery Commission in respect of criteria for awarding the licence to run the National Lottery. [136394]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's directions to the National Lottery Commission were placed in the Libraries of the House on 4 February 2000.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what criteria there are for fitness to be granted the licence to run the National Lottery, with particular reference to the personal character and past conduct of bidders. [136244]

Kate Hoey: Decisions on fitness and propriety of the National Lottery operator are a matter for the National Lottery Commission. Section 4(1)(a) of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 (as amended) requires the Commission to secure

> that the National Lottery is run, and every lottery that forms part of it is promoted with all due propriety.

Section 5(5) of the Act further provides that

> In determining whether to grant [a licence to operate the National Lottery] the Commission may consider—
>
> (a) whether any person who appears to it to be likely to manage the business or any of the business of running the National Lottery under the licence is a fit and proper person to do so, and
>
> (b) whether any person who appears to it to be likely to be a person for whose benefit that business would be carried on is a fit and proper person to benefit from it.

Detailed criteria are a matter for the Commission.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what kind of facilities will be built in schools under the New Opportunities Fund's schools initiative; and if he will make a statement. [136297]

Kate Hoey: Subject to responses to the consultation paper, published today, we would like this initiative to focus primarily on refurbishing existing, and building new, indoor and outdoor sports facilities for schools and community use. The types of facilities we envisage being funded include playing fields, swimming pools, tennis courts, indoor nets, astropitches and facilities for outdoor adventure. This extra money would provide a wider range and greater number of facilities than would be possible through central Government funding alone.

Football (Television Coverage)

19. **Mrs. Fiona Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to ensure access to premiership and national football matches through terrestrial television channels. [135354]

Janet Anderson: The Government only intervene in the sports broadcasting market to ensure that all television licence holders have "free to air" access (i.e. on BBC, the ITV Network or Channel 4) to those sporting occasions which have true national resonance; known as "listed events". The list was last revised and extended in 1998 and will be kept under review.

As far as national team football is concerned, the entire finals tournaments of both the World Cup and European Championships are listed. Premier League football is not listed because, while the Premiership is of great interest to football fans, it does not strike a chord with the general viewer in the same way as the events which are listed.

Young Musicians

20. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is for improving opportunities for young musicians. [135355]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Ensuring all children have access to music-making opportunities is a key priority for my Department. We are working closely with partners on a range of policies to deliver this, including the Department for Education and Employment's £270 million Music Standards Fund and the £30 million Arts Council of England Lottery funding of the National Foundation for Youth Music.

Richmond Park (Traffic Management)

21. **Dr. Tonge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what views he has expressed to the Royal Parks Agency concerning the options for traffic management in Richmond park. [135356]

Mr. Alan Howarth: None. Traffic management in the Royal Parks is an operational matter which is delegated to the Royal Parks Agency. However, I am aware of the sensitivity of the issue among local people, as I know is the agency.

Library Plans

22. **Mrs. Ann Cryer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the latest annual library plans submitted to his Department. [135357]

Mr. Chris Smith: Analysis of the plans submitted at the end of September is currently taking place. Individual and confidential feedback will be given to each of the 149 library authorities in December, and a general appraisal of all the plans will be published early in 2001.

Press Complaints Commission

23. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to put the Press Complaints Commission on a statutory basis. [135358]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government have no plans to put the Press Complaints Commission on a statutory basis. I believe that an effective system of self-regulation is far preferable to any statutory system.

Broadcasting (Wales)

24. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about the impact of the change of ownership of HTV on broadcasting in Wales. [135359]

Janet Anderson: I have received no such representations as of 3 November. Changes of ownership in media companies are matters for the competition authorities and the Independent Television Commission.

Olympic Games

25. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to provide financial support for British contenders for the next Olympic games. [135360]

Mr. Chris Smith: Financial support for elite UK athletes is provided through the World Class Performance Programme. The UK programme will provide at least £100 million over the next four years to help British competitors prepare for the 2002 Commonwealth Games and the Athens Olympics in 2004.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many Olympic athletes have received sponsorship from the New Opportunities Fund. [134706]

Kate Hoey: No Olympic athletes have received sponsorship from the New Opportunities Fund because the NOF programmes cover health, education and environment projects.

National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts

26. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many grants have been awarded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts; and what proportion of funding has been allocated to *(a)* science, *(b)* technology and *(c)* the arts. [135361]

Mr. Chris Smith: NESTA does not invest according to rigid boundaries between science, technology and the arts, and many of the individuals and projects which it has so far supported do not fall into exact distinctions between these disciplines. However, I can confirm that £500,000 of the £3 million so far awarded, has been given to projects predominantly related to science, £600,000 has been spent on projects which are mainly concerned with engineering and technological innovation, and awards principally focusing on the arts total £1.9 million. Further awards in all three areas will be announced by NESTA in the near future. I am asking the Chief Executive of NESTA to write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible with details of each award made so far and shall ensure that a copy of the letter is placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

Millennium Dome

27. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for the future of the Dome. [135362]

Janet Anderson: The Government are currently in discussion with Legacy plc, in relation to Legacy's proposal for a high-technology business campus at the Greenwich site. The Legacy proposal is currently being analysed by the competition team in advance of any decision on preferred bidder status. We hope to make an announcement in due course. The Government are determined to get the best deal for the regeneration of East London.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many of the people employed in the Millennium Dome are *(a)* women, *(b)* from an ethnic minority and *(c)* both. [134585]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has advised that, of the 1,398 people it directly employs, 647 (46 per cent.) are women. Using information from NMEC's equal opportunities monitoring process, 257 (18 per cent.) of the 1,398 employees are from ethnic minorities; 815 (58 per cent.) are white and 326 (24 per cent.) withheld the necessary information. Of the total number of women employed directly by NMEC, 125 (20 per cent.) are from ethnic minorities, 380 (59 per cent.) are white and 142 (21 per cent.) withheld the necessary information.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many letters of complaint he has received about expenditure on the Millennium Dome. [134583]

Janet Anderson: Since 1 May 1997 until 16 October 2000, my Department had received a total of 7,997 letters from members of the public and 1,246 ministerial cases relating to Millennium issues. Correspondence is not logged according to issues covered. Identifying those letters which relate specifically to complaints about expenditure on the Millennium Dome can therefore be undertaken only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many staff are employed in the Millennium Dome. [134584]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has advised that it directly employs 1,398 people.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Fraud Squad regarding Millennium Dome contracts; and if he will make a statement. [134588]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Neither my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State nor I have had any such discussions. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has advised that, following third-party allegations about the award of certain contracts to a design company, David James, Executive Chair of NMEC, notified the Met's CID. Prior to these allegations David James had, on taking office, initiated a review of past contractual arrangements entered into by NMEC. This study, together with the CID investigation, are on-going and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to comment at this stage. I will, however, report to the House as soon as the investigation is completed.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many contracts, for what purposes, and of what aggregate value, were awarded to At Work Ltd. by the New Millennium Experience Company; and if he will make a statement. [135413]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I have been advised by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) that At Work Ltd. were awarded three contracts by NMEC relating to the Living Island, Shared Ground and Work and Learning exhibit zones. All the contracts were concerned with design development (interior and exterior) for each of the zones in question. The aggregate value of these contracts was £4.5 million net of VAT.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment was made *(a)* by and *(b)* for the Government prior to the final decision to locate the Dome at Greenwich of the effects on visitor numbers of locating the Dome there. [136240]

Janet Anderson: The decision to locate the Millennium Dome at the Greenwich site was taken by the Millennium Commission in 1996.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will write to the hon. Member in his capacity as chairman of the Millennium Commission with details of the commission's decision and copies of that reply will be placed in the Libraries of the House

Football Facilities

28. **Mr. Caplin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to increase investment in grass roots football facilities. [135363]

Mr. Chris Smith: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister launched the Football Foundation on 25 July. The foundation is a partnership between Sport England, the Football Association and the FA Premier League, all of which are contributing to its income.

75 per cent. of the foundation's income will be used to fund the development of grass roots football in England, including the provision of high quality facilities. The foundation is expected to distribute grass roots funding of £18 million in its first year of operation.

Picketts Lane Athletics Stadium

29. **Mr. Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects the contract for the new Picketts Lane athletics stadium to be signed. [135364]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Lee Valley Stadium project is still at the pre-design feasibility stage. Contracts for the construction of the new stadium can only be concluded once the design stage has been completed.

Theatre Funding

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure that there are sufficient resources available for the development of smaller theatres and theatre groups. [135348]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council's current review of regional theatre in its wildest and most inclusive sense, which it is undertaking in collaboration with the Regional Arts Boards and other interested parties, will be addressing these concerns when deciding how to allocate the additional funding it received from the recent spending review.

Seaside Resorts (North Yorkshire)

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to support North Yorkshire's seaside resorts. [135351]

Janet Anderson: During my seaside 2000 tour I visited both Scarborough and Whitby and also launched the Yorkshire Coastal Tourism Initiative. I also announced a 4-point plan for England's seaside resorts, including measures to improve their low levels of lottery funding and to support bids for European regeneration money. Local authorities and regional bodies can play a major role in making progress in those areas and DCMS will continue to support them and achieve good results for resorts, including those in Yorkshire, such as we did in the new objective 2 and assisted area maps and in the latest SRB round.

Tennis

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the opportunities for pupils in maintained schools to learn to play tennis. [134370]

Kate Hoey: Government policy is to encourage participation in a wide range of sports in schools. As part of the Government's Sports Strategy the first phase of the School Sports Coordinators programme has recently been established and will provide further opportunities for children in primary and secondary schools in deprived areas to participate in a range of sports, including tennis. In addition, the Lawn Tennis Association has a number of initiatives geared towards promoting tennis in schools, including the Starter Tennis Scheme, the Club-School Link Programme, and the Tennis Awards scheme.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the intended opening date of the UK Sports Institute. [134642]

Kate Hoey: Recruitment of the key staff of the UKSI Central Services team has been completed. From November 2000, sports will have access to the technical, operational and programme support provided through the UKSI Central Services Team.

The UKSI is also made up of a network of institutes operated by the home country sports councils. The establishment of the English Institute of Sport of the UKSI is on-going. The Badminton Centre in Milton Keynes, the Aquatics Centre and Velodrome in Manchester and the Ice-Centre in Nottingham are already available to athletes. In May/June 2000, the water-based hockey pitches in Birmingham and Cannock were among the first completed new projects. Over £50 million of new lottery funding has been committed by Sport England to date for additional facilities for the English network. It is

expected that the majority of the remaining lottery applications, representing over £60 million of further investment in network facilities in England, will be made in the next six months. Once the full building programme has been completed, there will be over 80 facilities that go to make up the English Institute of Sport network.

In addition, the UKSI Scottish Institute of Sport, funded by sportscotland, has been established and operating for 18 months and The Sports Council for Wales has been operating and developing UKSI Cymru for sometime. Both have been providing a range of services direct to athletes including technical training and support, conditioning guidance and supervision, preventive and reactive sports medical support and sports science. The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has identified the University of Ulster as their preferred partner to develop in partnership the UKSI network centre for Northern Ireland. Initial principles of agreement have been signed by both parties and work is under way to identify the most appropriate format to operate the network centre.

I am arranging for copies of the UKSI Quarterly Update report for August 2000—produced by UK Sport—to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses to provide further information on progress of the UK Sports Institute.

Photography

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of arts lottery funding has been awarded to projects primarily concerned with photography as an art form. [134519]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The number of arts lottery awards made to projects primarily concerned with photography is, according to figures supplied by the Arts Council, 24, totalling some £4,306,000. This represents 0.27 per cent. of the total awards and 0.32 per cent. of the total value of awards made by the Arts Council. Many more Arts Council awards will have gone to projects which also support photography through exhibitions and touring but which are not specifically for photography.

Historic Building Grants

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many historic building grants were awarded in the last five years; and what was the average cost of these grants. [135207]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Grants for historic buildings and monuments are provided by English Heritage (EH) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The information requested is provided for both of these organisations. It should be noted that the HLF's remit covers the whole of the UK, where as EH covers England only.

Since financial year 1995–96 EH have offered the following numbers of grants:

Historic Buildings and Monuments Grants:

Total Offered: £50,974,000

Number of Cases: 1,025

Average Grant: £49,731

This includes secular buildings and monuments.

Church Grants:

Total Offered: £45,717,000

Number of Cases: 1,317

Average Grant: £34,713

This includes churches and other places of worship.

Cathedral Grants:

Total Offered: £15,000,000

The actual number of cases of grants offered to cathedrals are not held centrally by English Heritage therefore we are unable to give an average grant figure.

Since 1995 the HLF have awarded the following number of grants:

Historic Building and Sites:

Total Awarded: £436,382,000

Number of cases: 1,658

Average Grant: £263,000

This includes secular buildings, places of worship and monuments.

Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) when Wembley National Stadium Ltd. will repay £20 million of National Lottery funds to Sport England; [135712]

(2) what arrangements have been agreed for the repayment of £20 million of National Lottery funding by Wembley National Stadium Ltd. to Sport England. [135710]

Kate Hoey: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 327W to the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth).

BBC Digital Services

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it his policy to allow BBC licence payers a discount if they are unable to receive BBC digital services; and if he will make a statement. [135907]

Janet Anderson: No. In February this year, in announcing its proposals for the future funding of the BBC, the Government made clear that they had opted for a unified television licence fee covering all the BBC's services, rather than differential fees for analogue and digital viewers. The Government estimate that the switch over to digital television will take place this decade, so the time has come to recognise that digital will soon be the norm.

BBC News

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received regarding the decision of the BBC to move its main evening news from 9 pm to 10 pm; and what discussions he has had with the director-general of the BBC on the subject. [136403]

Janet Anderson: We have received 45 representations on the BBC's decision to reschedule the nine o'clock news. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State

expressed his misgivings about the BBC's decision when he met the chairman and director-general of the BBC to discuss a range of topics on 6 October.

Synchronised Swimming

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the training facilities available for synchronised swimming. [136398]

Kate Hoey: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 325W.

Marine Archaeology

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made since his meeting in May with the hon. Members for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) and Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on the protection of sites of marine archaeological interest. [135329]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government remain fully committed to securing, at the earliest opportunity, the necessary legislation to provide English Heritage with powers below the mean low water mark. This will place underwater archaeology on the same footing as land based archaeology, allowing access to English Heritage grant funds and support which are currently not available to underwater archaeological work.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is working on placing, during the current financial year, a number of wreck marker buoys and information signs at or near to sites which are designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973. We are continuing to support, through the Heritage Grant Fund, a maritime archaeological project undertaken by the Hampshire and Wight Trust and the archaeological diving training programme provided by the Nautical Archaeological Society.

Playing Fields

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many new *(a)* public playing fields and *(b)* school playing fields have been funded by the National Lottery. [136769]

Kate Hoey: Specific information on lottery funding directed to both new public and school playing fields is not available. However, the Sports Lottery Fund has made 35 awards totalling nearly £17.6 million for projects creating both new and upgrading existing public playing fields, so they may be brought back into use. The Sports Lottery Fund has also made 15 awards totalling nearly £14 million for creating both new, and upgrading school playing fields.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made in the development of a national register of playing fields. [136755]

Kate Hoey: The proposals for a national register of recreational land were originally put forward during the preparation of the Playing Pitch Strategy by the GB Sports Council, the National Playing Fields Association and the Central Council for Physical Recreation in 1989. The objectives of the register from the outset were; to monitor change in the recreational land resource; to assist in policy development at the local and national level; to provide information to the public. This proved to be an extensive task, surveying over 70,000 individual pitches on more than 23,000 sites across England. An independent evaluation of the register in 1994 found a number of shortcomings with the data. These shortcomings were due to a number of factors including the voluntary nature of the project, with owner and managers of sites under no obligation to provide data, and many refusing to co-operate.

A review of the effectiveness of the register in 1998 indicated that the likelihood of achieving and maintaining a comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date national inventory of playing pitches was remote. Sport England, with the support of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the National Playing Fields Association, and the Central Council of Physical Recreation, is currently working with the Local Government Association on a suitable model of the register which can be used by local authorities to undertake assessments of playing field need and provision in their area.

National Lottery Commission

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many newsagents have made representation to his Department expressing concern about recent actions of the National Lottery Commission. [135335]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have received a range of representations about the award of the next National Lottery licence, including a few from newsagents. I have given Lord Burns, with the other Commissioners, a clear remit to bring the current process to a timely and fair conclusion and I have every confidence in their ability to do so.

PRIME MINISTER

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister which Cabinet committees monitor public service agreements; and if he will make a statement. [134832]

The Prime Minister: The Committee on Public Services and Public Expenditure (PSX) has its terms of reference

> to monitor progress against public service agreements, to review public expenditure allocations and make recommendations to the Cabinet.

Environmental Policies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the meetings (1) he has held with environmental non-governmental groups in 2000 to discuss the future of environment policy; [135434]

(2) by date and organisation he has held with business organisations or companies since 1 January to discuss the future of environment policy. [135433]

The Prime Minister: I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations, it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what account he took of comments posted on the No. 10 web site, at your say/environment in preparation of his speech to the Joint Green Alliance/CBI partnership meeting on environmental policies on 24 October. [135539]

The Prime Minister: I am well aware of the range of opinion on these issues, which I reflected in my speech.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135492]

The Prime Minister: Civil servants in my Department are encouraged to report such actions to their line manager in the first instance. If for any reason an individual feels unable to do this or if the matter cannot be resolved in the management line, he/she may report such actions to one of two Designated Officers. Alternatively, he/she may report the matter to the independent Civil Service Commissioners, either directly or through the Permanent Secretary.

Scottish Civil Service

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his responsibilities for the Scottish Civil Service and its adherence to the Civil Service Code. [135946]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, civil servants working in the Scottish Executive are members of the Home Civil Service and subject to the requirements of the Civil Service Code.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Prime Minister if he will refer to the Cabinet Secretary the proposals of the First Minister, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish) in relation to privileged access for Labour MSPs to civil servants of the Scottish Executive and compliance with the Civil Service Code. [135945]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The First Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish) has made his position clear in the following terms:

> Any talk of politicising the civil service in Scotland is nonsense. Impartiality is at the heart of everything the Civil Service has to offer and I will not let it be compromised in any shape or form. Of course there is a need for party political support and advice but that is a role for others—not the Civil Service.
>
> The Political Unit I am proposing will be entirely staffed by Labour movement staff with a range of liaison functions. It will be distinct from the Policy Unit which will continue to be staffed by Special Advisers and career civil servants.
>
> Let us also be clear that in accordance with well established practice MSPs of all parties have access to briefing from civil servants, usually on the basis that they support Ministers at meetings arranged for the purpose. This mechanism provides a valuable opportunity for MSPs to discuss issues of concern to their constituents with those closest to the detail of a particular policy and I intend that more should be made of it.

I see no reason for referring the matter to the Secretary of the Cabinet.

Definition of Superpower and Superstate

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister what reasons underlie his policy of *(a)* favouring the creation of a European superpower and *(b)* not favouring the creation of a European superstate. [136229]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Ministerial Conduct

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will provide guidance to cabinet ministers about *(a)* the declaration of loans received for house purchases and *(b)* the receipt of donations from hon. Members. [136228]

The Prime Minister: Section 9 of the Ministerial Code provides guidance to Ministers on the handling of private interests.

Fuel Crisis

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations he has had with drivers' trade unions about the possible use of Army drivers and tankers for transporting oil in the event of fuel supply stoppages. [136772]

The Prime Minister: In the past few weeks, Ministers in various Departments have held a number of meetings with representatives of organisations affected by the protests, including the trade unions.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Mr. Raymond Hale

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the President of the Council for what reason the petition by Mr. Raymond Hale of the University of Bristol, submitted to the Privy Council on 10 September 1999, has not received a response; and if she will make a statement. [136010]

Mrs. Beckett: Since the petition was received, officials from my Department have been pursuing it with Bristol University and with Mr. Hale. My officials wrote to Mr. Hale on 20 October 2000 to say that they would do all they could to secure a decision on his Petition by the end of November 2000.

Appointments Council

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the President of the Council what the total budget is for the House of Lords Appointments Commission in the current financial year. [136038]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Commission has provisionally estimated its budget for the current financial year at £250,000. The Commission will be taking into account the need for any changes in the light of experience and feedback it receives from the public and others.

CABINET OFFICE

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 102W, on Special Advisers, if she will list the destination of each of the overseas visits undertaken by departmental or non-departmental special advisers. [135255]

Mr. Stringer: During the financial year 1999–2000, Special Advisers accompanied the Minister for the Cabinet Office or her predecessor to Paris, Rome, Brussels, Lisbon and New York. In addition, the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and his deputy visited Australia, Lisbon (twice), Belgium, Vienna and Turkey.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136176]

Jane Kennedy: The policies developed by this Department generally relate to England and Wales as a whole and it is therefore not possible to say what the specific impact is on the Manchester, Gorton constituency. However, Manchester, Gorton is within the Manchester Magistrates' Courts Committee (MCC) area and will be part of the Greater Manchester MCC that comes into effect on 1 April 2001. A new 18-courtroom building is to be provided by Manchester City Council under a PFI contract. The Lord Chancellor's Department will be providing PFI Credits to the City Council to the value of approximately £45 million, which is 70 per cent. of the net present value of the scheme. Also, since 1997, £78,804 has been provided by the Lord Chancellor's Department to improve facilities available at the Manchester Magistrates' Court.

In addition, the Manchester Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP), which covers Manchester, Gorton constituency, is one of 143 CLSPs throughout England and Wales. Throughout the Manchester, Gorton constituency, 12 agencies have been awarded contracts with the Legal Services Commission.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the average change in waiting times for in-patient treatment for NHS patients in each year since May 1997. [135012]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

Weeks

As at 31 March	*Average time (median) waited by those on the list*[1]
1997	13.2
1998	14.8
1999	12.8
2000	12.9
31 August 2000[2]	12.9

[1] This is the published data used in the monthly statistical press notice, which refers to the average time waited by those on the waiting list for elective admission at a particular date

[2] Latest available figure

The National Health Service Plan states that the maximum wait for in-patient treatment will be cut from 18 months now to six months by 2005. Urgent cases will continue to be treated much faster in accordance with clinical need. As a result of delivering this policy, we would expect the average time that patients have been waiting for in-patient treatment to fall from three months to seven weeks by 2005.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in East Sussex were on *(a)* an in-patient and *(b)* an out-patient waiting list on (i) 1 May 1997 and (ii) the latest date for which figures are available. [135326]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The information requested is given in the table.

East Sussex, Brighton and Hove health authority[1]

	Patients waiting for elective admission	*Outpatients over 13 week waiters*[2]
31 March 1997[3]	20,035	Data not collected
Latest date	[4]18,460	[5]7,562

[1] HA waiting lists and times data have been collected on a responsible population basis since April 1999. Prior to this, data were collected on the basis of a resident population.

[2] Information is not collected on the total number of patients waiting for an out-patient appointment. The table gives information on the number of patients not yet seen for first out-patient appointment who had been waiting 13 weeks or over following referral by a GP.

[3] The baseline is given as 31 March 1997, as data were not collected at 31 May 1997.

[4] 31 August 2000

[5] 30 June 2000

Single Currency (NHS Trusts)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to NHS trusts of preparing for the euro. [134774]

Mr. Denham: None.

Private Medical Insurance

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met representatives of the private medical insurance industry. [134786]

Ms Stuart: During the last two years I have met representatives of the private medical insurance industry several times. The last meeting took place in March this year. There is also regular on-going dialogue with representatives from individual companies at official level. The latest meeting took place on 26 October this year.

Heart Surgery

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average change in waiting times for heart surgery has been since May 1997. [134742]

Mr. Denham: The average time patients waited for an operation involving the heart fell from 15 weeks at March 1997 to 14 weeks at December 1999 (latest data available).[1]

The National Service Framework sets out a 10-year programme to transform the treatment of people with heart disease. An extra £230 million a year is being invested in heart disease services by 2004, backed up by an extra £120 million spending on equipment. The NSF pledge to carry out 3,000 more heart operations by 2002 has now been boosted by a further £10 million for another 3,000 procedures. This programme of expansion means that the maximum waiting time for routine cardiac surgery will fall to six months by 2005 and to three months by 2008.

[1]HES data relate to the average time waited by patients for elective admission during particular periods. Unlike published waiting list statistics, this is not adjusted for self-deferrals or periods of medical/social suspension. The answer uses HES data, although Korner data are usually used to answer average waiting times questions. However, Korner data are collected by consultant speciality only, and it is not possible to identify data relating specifically to heart surgery.

Medicine Rationing

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on rationing of medicines in the National Health Service. [134954]

Mr. Denham: With the exception of the small number of medicines covered by schedules 10 and 11 of the general practitioner terms of service, and guided by any locally determined policies, National Health Service prescribers are free to prescribe any available medicines. In deciding on the appropriate treatment for individual patients they should take account of any local or national guidance, in particular any relevant recommendations on clinical and cost-effectiveness from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

Respite Care

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the availability of respite care to the carers of children with learning difficulties; and if he will make a statement. [135536]

Mr. Hutton: There has been no specific survey of how many learning-disabled children there are; the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) surveys in 1989 estimated that there were 327,000 disabled children under 16 in England and Wales. This estimate represents 3.2 per cent. of the population and is lower than other estimates. It is generally accepted that this estimate although dated, remains valid.

OPCS has also estimated that two thirds of the 110,000 most severely disabled children did not receive any support services. We can also estimate that two thirds of the most disabled 16 and 17-year-olds will receive no service—that gives a figure of about 11,500.

Of the families covered in the OPCS private households survey, only a third of the children in the 5–15 age group or their families had received a domiciliary service in the previous year, and although the rate rose to almost four-fifths among the children under five, this was mainly attributable to health visiting.

The inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate of services to disabled children and their families, published in 1998, identified a heavy demand for services in all local authorities.

The Learning Disability Strategy, to be published early next year, will address the needs of learning-disabled people of all ages. Our consultation with experts in the field and service users has emphasised the importance of increased family support.

On 27 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that we will increase the amount of money put aside specifically to support carers in England through the Carers Special Grant from £50 million this year to £70 million in 2001–02, £85 million in 2002–03 and £100 million in 2003–04.

This funding will more than double from £120 million this year to £290 million by 2003–04. This is an unprecedented investment in the future of some of the most vulnerable children in our country. I expect that at least £15 million of next year's special grant will be dedicated to the new priority area: disabled children. This money will be spent on a wide range of services, including both home based and respite care.

Psychotropic Medication

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he collates about the level of prescribing of psychotropic medication in residential homes; and what guidance he issues to doctors on this subject. [136015]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the level of psychotropic medication in residential homes is not available. The "Prescription Cost Analysis: England 1999", which is available in the Library, shows that in 1999, 5.6 million prescription items were dispensed in the community in England for drugs used in psychoses and related disorders. Drugs used in psychoses and related disorders are contained within the British National Formulary section 4.2.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has a continuing rollover work programme appraising drugs and interventions. We are considering a number of drugs for 2000 to 2001 for NICE, and an announcement will be made shortly.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will issue guidance to doctors about alternatives to the prescribing of psychotropic medication for stress and minor illness. [135990]

Mr. Hutton: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence work programme includes the development of a guideline on the management of depression in the community. This will offer guidance on drug treatments and psychological therapies.

The recently published National Health Service Plan provides a model of mental health services which requires radical shifts in the current range of provision. An investment of over £300 million will fast forward the Mental Health National Service Framework and provide real choices and alternatives for service users. An example is the investment in primary care workers who will promote a range of options in the care and treatment of stress and minor illness.

NHS Dental Treatment

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many dentists were registered to treat NHS patients in each year from 1992 to 1999 *(a)* by parliamentary constituency, *(b)* in Greater London and *(c)* in England and Wales; [135780]

(2) what was the average number of patients registered with an NHS dentist in each year from 1992 to 1999 *(a)* by constituency, *(b)* in Greater London and *(c)* in England and Wales. [135781]

Mr. Hutton: The number of principal dentists on a health authority (HA) list (Family Health Services Authority (FHSA) for 1992 to 1995) in the General Dental Services at 30 September in each of the years 1992 to 1999 is shown in tables by *(a)* health authority *(b)* in Greater London, defined by HAs indicated and *(c)* in England and Wales. The tables have been placed in the Library.

The average number of patients registered with a principal dentist in the General Dental Services at 30 September in each of the years 1992 to 1999 is shown in tables by *(a)* health authority *(b)* in Greater London, defined by HAs indicated and *(c)* in England and Wales. This has been obtained by dividing the number of registrations by the number of principal dentists on a HA list.

Registration numbers from December 1997 are affected by the shortening of the registration period to 15 months. Previously the period was 24 months for adults, while children's registrations expired at the end of the following calendar year if the patient had not visited their dentist in the meantime. Registration numbers between 1992 and 1999 were also affected by administration changes.

Data are not available by parliamentary constituency.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on dental services *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Coventry South. [136590]

Mr. Hutton: On 28 September 1999, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that within two years there would be access to NHS dentistry for everyone who wants it via NHS Direct. The dental strategy, "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan", published on 19 September 2000, shows how that pledge can be met. The strategy focuses on the areas of access, quality and oral health and is supported by £100 million new funding. Responsibility for dentistry is devolved to health authorities and they will be performance managed on service provision in their area.

There are 24 practices in Coventry still accepting new patients for NHS dental treatment. A dental access centre across five sites in Coventry and Warwickshire is due to open soon. Dental access centres provide a complete range of dental services, including routine and urgent care. People do not need to register to see a dentist at a centre, and centres have extended opening times.

Departmental Studies

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* undertaken in the last five years on the management or administration of (i) National Health Service pensions, (ii) general procurement, (iii) National Health Service payroll and (iv) drug procurement; and if he will place copies of these reports in the Library. [135763]

Mr. Denham: A prior options review of the NHS Pensions Agency, which administers the NHS pensions scheme, was completed by the Department of Health in 1998. A copy of that report was placed in the Library.

On general procurement, the then Secretary of State my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and the then Chief Secretary of the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) who is now the Secretary of State for Health, commissioned a review of NHS procurement by a team from the Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit as part of the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review settlement. The team reported to Ministers in November 1999. Copies are available in the Library.

The Department has not commissioned or undertaken any reports during the last five years on the management or administration of the NHS payroll service.

In November 1999 the Department commissioned a fundamental review of arrangements for the supply of generic medicines to National Health Service community pharmacies and dispensing doctors. The review was carried out by Oxford Economic Research Associates (OXERA) and their final report was submitted in September 2000. As a next step the Department intends to issue proposals for longer-term arrangements for the generics supply chain, drawing on OXERA's work, for discussion with interested parties, along with a summary report of the factual basis of OXERA's findings. A copy of the proposals and the summary report will be placed in the Library.

In relation to branded medicines the Department produced the third Report to Parliament on the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 420W.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 16 August on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Cochrane. [135786]

Ms Stuart: A reply to the right hon. Member's letter was sent on 1 November 2000.

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to answer the questions tabled on 17 July by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, on the subject of the Alder Hey inquiry, to which he gave holding answers; and when he will reply to the letters of 3 August and 20 September, on the same subject, from the hon. Member. [136183]

Mr. Denham: I shall let my hon. Friend have a reply to his questions and letters as soon as possible.

Prescription Charges

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will set up a review of the system of prescription charges including assessment of the treatment under the scheme of *(a)* patients requiring life-long treatment for non-exempt medical conditions and *(b)* other patients who are exempted from charges; [135987]

(2) when the list of medical conditions exempt from prescription charges was last reviewed; [135988]

(3) what his policy is in granting exemption from prescription charges to patients suffering from sickle cell and thalassaemia; and what changes there have been in that policy since May 1997. [136001]

Ms Stuart: The list of medical conditions conferring prescription charge exemption was agreed with the medical profession in 1968. The list and other aspects of prescription charges were reviewed in 1998 as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. No changes were made to the list of medical exemptions. We have no plans to undertake a further review. Our policy is to give priority to helping those who may have difficulty in paying charges, rather than extending the exemption arrangements.

Suicides

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent studies he has carried out on the correlation between individual doctors and suicides. [136095]

Mr. Denham: The Department commissioned a research project on suicide in high-risk occupational groups, conducted by Professor Keith Hawton and colleagues at the Centre for Suicide Research, University of Oxford. The project was funded over the period 1 December 1993 to 30 June 2000. A major component of the study has been research on suicide in doctors. The research will help to inform policy development.

Long-term Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which elements of the Government's proposals for elderly care, announced in the National Health Service National Plan, were included by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care in its estimate for free personal care. [136041]

Mr. Hutton: The Royal Commission on Long Term Care proposed that personal care should be free, with recipients of long-term care making a co-payment for living and housing costs. It did not sum a series of proposals to reach its estimate of the cost of free personal care. It used information on the costs of care and the numbers of privately funded residents. Our proposals for free nursing care fall within the Royal Commission's estimate of the cost of free personal care, as do the proposed changes to the residential charging rules—the three month property disregard, uprating the capital limits and resources to enable councils to place charges on homes.

Fruit Juice Labelling

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will extend the period for the introduction of new packaging and labelling rules under the EU fruit juice Directive from 30 months to five years. [136662]

Ms Stuart: The European Union fruit juice Directive requires member states to prohibit the sale of products which fail to comply with its provisions 30 months after the directive enters into force. The UK has no discretion to extend the transition period set out in the directive. Industry is aware of the likely timescales for the required changes.

Occupational Therapists

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Twickenham on 16 May concerning occupational therapists (ref. 122908). [136315]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 605–06W

Eye Tests

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many eye tests were carried out on people aged over 65 years since April 1999 *(a)* in Coventry South and *(b)* nationally. [136692]

Mr. Hutton: We extended eligibility for National Health Service sight tests to everyone aged 60 and over from 1 April 1999. In England and Wales, 10,030,000 sight tests were paid for by health authorities in the year ending 31 March 2000. This was 34 per cent. more than the total for the year ending 31 March 1999 (7,469,000). Figures for the numbers of people aged 60 and over who have received free eye tests in particular areas are not collected centrally. However, the increase in the total number of sight tests paid for by Coventry health authority in the year ending 31 March 2000 was

14,360. The increase in the total number of sight tests paid for by all health authorities in England in the year ending 31 March 2000 was 2,407,080. It is fair to assume that the majority of these increases was due to newly eligible people aged 60 or over obtaining NHS sight tests.

Children in Care

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to raise the standards of care for looked after children. [136687]

Mr. Hutton: We have already taken steps to improve the standard of care received by looked after children, and we are committed to a clear programme of action to turn around the experience of this vulnerable group.

The Government Response to the Children's Safeguards Review, in November 1998, set out a detailed programme to ensure good quality care for looked after children. The Quality Protects programme was introduced in 1999–2000, to improve the services provided to and the outcomes of vulnerable children, particularly looked after children. Councils receive special grant funding to help them make the changes required, and councils have been set clear targets which they are expected to achieve. In particular, the funding has been directed at improving the quality and range of placements available and at raising levels of educational achievement for looked after children. We recently announced the extension of this programme from three to five years.

From 1 January 2001, small private children's homes will be brought into regulation. This will mean that, for the first time, these homes will have to meet the requirements of the Children's Homes Regulations 1991 and will have to be registered with council inspection units.

The Children (Leaving Care) Bill will ensure that young people do not leave care before they are ready to do so. From 2002 the National Care Standards Commission will inspect children's homes, local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies. Inspection will be against national minimum standards for the particular organisations which will ensure that the quality of care received by looked after children will be acceptable throughout England.

NHS Walk-in Centres

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to develop further the number and range of NHS walk-in centres. [136589]

Mr. Denham: No decisions have been made about the number or range of further walk-in centres which might be developed in the future.

We will consider this in the context of improving primary care services in general.

Clinical Error

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce an early warning system of clinical error. [136694]

Ms Stuart: We agreed all recommendations set out by an expert group on learning from adverse events in the National Health Service in the report "An Organisation with a Memory". We are planning, by the end of 2001, to introduce a new mandatory reporting system to log failures, mistakes, errors and near-misses in health care and ensure that lessons learned in one part of the NHS are properly shared with the whole of the health service.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made on the development of primary care trusts. [136588]

Mr. Denham: Excellent progress continues to be made in developing primary care trusts (PCTs) with 44 primary care groups forming 40 PCTs in this first year. Over 130 further PCT proposals are now being assessed against national criteria. Final decisions on these proposals will be made shortly with a view to establishing the PCTs in January for an operational start date of 1 April 2001. At least a further 190 PCGs are also considering movement to trust status for 2002.

NHS Beds

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the number of beds in the NHS. [136688]

Mr. Denham: As a result of the National Health Service Plan there will be 7,000 extra beds by 2004. Of these, on current assumptions, 2,100 will be in general and acute wards, the first increase of its kind in 30 years. The remaining 5,000 will be in intermediate care.

Violence against NHS Staff

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on steps being taken to protect NHS staff from violence. [136690]

Mr. Denham: A cross-government campaign "NHS zero tolerance zone" was launched on 14 October 1999, underpinned by a national target to reduce violence against staff by 20 per cent. by 2001 and by 30 per cent. by 2003. All National Health Service trusts should now have systems in place to record incidences of violence to staff, and also to have local reduction strategies in place.

Phase II of the "NHS zero tolerance zone" campaign was launched on 3 October 2000. It is aimed at reducing violence in the high risk settings, namely mental health, ambulance, community and primary care.

By April 2003, NHS employers are expected to be accredited as putting an improving working lives standard into practice, which includes applying zero tolerance to violence against staff.

Institutional Racism (NHS)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to tackle institutional racism in the NHS. [136691]

Mr. Denham: Activity to mainstream race equality in the National Health Service is occurring on a number of fronts, including within policy making in the Department, service delivery and the NHS workforce. In January 2000

the Department published "The Race Equality Agenda of the Department of Health", which set out a programme of action on race equality. "The NHS Plan: a plan for investment, a plan for reform", published in July 2000, recognises the need for a modern NHS to respond to the needs of our diverse, multi-cultural society. This is reflected in the core principles of the new NHS and in a number of the commitments made in the NHS Plan. The NHS Plan also makes clear that every member of staff in the NHS is entitled to work in an organisation which is committed to improving diversity and tackling discrimination and harassment (including racial discrimination and harassment). The Department has also launched an Equalities Framework for the NHS, "The Vital Connection", in April 2000, which includes clear requirements for the NHS to promote race equality and introduces a package of standards, indicators and monitoring arrangements. Significant progress has also been made in implementing "Tackling Racial Harassment in the NHS—a Plan for Action", published in March 1999. All these documents have been placed in the Library.

Cataract Services

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on cataract services in the NHS *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Coventry. [136581]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in July that we are investing £20 million to modernise cataract services. This will ensure quicker and more efficient services for patients and increase the number of cataract operations performed from 170,000 in 1998–99 to 250,000 by the year 2003.

A total of £2.1 million has been allocated from this money to improve cataract services in the West Midlands region. Of this, £630,000 has been awarded to a consortium that includes Coventry and Warwickshire Health Authorities.

NHS Doctors

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doctors *(a)* work and *(b)* worked in 1996 in the NHS. [136689]

Mr. Denham: The number of doctors working in the National Health Service as at 30 September 1999 (latest available figure) was 93,980. The comparable number working in the NHS in 1996 was 86,580. This represents an average annual increase of 2.8 per cent. per annum.

Adoption

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children are awaiting adoption, broken down by age in years. [136854]

Mr. Hutton: The available information for the past five years to 1999 (latest year available) is given in the table.

Estimated number of children looked after by local authorities who were placed for adoption at 31 March by age, England 1995–99

	Year				
Age at 31 March	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
0	160	140	110	180	160
1	230	260	320	370	460
2	240	250	300	350	430
3	190	240	280	250	350
4	180	220	260	260	350
5	190	180	220	270	270
6	190	170	190	200	240
7	180	150	150	130	190
8	140	150	140	130	130
9	120	120	120	90	100
10	100	90	90	70	70
11	70	70	70	30	40
12	80	60	40	30	30
13	30	50	40	10	20
14	20	20	30	10	[1]—
15	20	20	10	20	0
16	10	10	10	[1]—	30
17	[1]—	10	10	[1]—	[1]—
All ages	2,200	2,200	2,400	2,400	2,900

[1] Estimate less than five

Notes:

1. Table excludes children looked after under a series of short-term placements
2. Columns may not add to totals due to rounding

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he plans to improve the system of adoption. [136855]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to ensuring the best use of adoption as an option to meet the needs of looked after children. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced in February this year that we would conduct a thorough review of adoption services. As a first step towards this, we asked the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit to carry out a study of adoption practice during the summer to assess the evidence, explore the options for action and make recommendations to the Government. The Performance and Innovation Unit Report was published for consultation in July.

The Prime Minister has announced that we will publish a White Paper before the end of the year setting out our new approach to adoption, building on the review and the results of the consultation. The White Paper will include proposals for new legislation to be introduced next year. In the meantime we are taking forward a programme of work to improve adoption services, including setting up a National Adoption Register and drawing up new National Standards for adoption services. In addition, we have announced an adoption and permanence task force to spread best practice and improve local council performance.

We are also committed to improving intercountry adoption services and to putting in place effective measures to protect children. Regulations under the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 are being prepared which will shortly be subject to a public consultation exercise. The Act enables the United Kingdom to ratify the 1983 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. We hope to be able to present the regulations to Parliament early next year.

Drug-related Deaths

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaths were caused by *(a)* heroin, *(b)* crack/cocaine and *(c)* ecstasy in each year from 1990 to 1999; and what his projection is for the number of deaths in each category for 2000. [136573]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is given in the table, and is for England and Wales.

Deaths where drug mentioned on death certificate

	Heroin	*Heroin and/or morphine*	*Ecstasy/MDMA*	*Cocaine*
1993	67	187	8	12
1994	127	276	27	24
1995	162	355	10	19
1996	241	464	16	18
1997	255	445	11	38
1998	407	632	15	65

Figures prior to 1993 have not been provided as they are not directly comparable to post-1993 data due to changes in the way data are collected and recorded. Data prior to 1993 are included in series DH4, available in Library. Detailed figures for the period 1993 to 1998 are available in Health Statistics Quarterly Editions 5 and 7, which can be found in the Library of the House. Data for 1999 will be available in 2001.

It is difficult to make accurate predictions for the number of deaths in these categories for 2000, as the numbers are small and highly variable.

Heroin and/or morphine is listed because heroin breaks down in the body into morphine, meaning the latter may be detected in the body at post-mortem and recorded on the death certificate. Therefore both figures are listed.

Community Nurses (Mileage Allowance)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what mileage allowances community nurses can claim in rural areas; and if these have been increased since 1997. [136500]

Mr. Denham: Mileage and travelling entitlements for National Health Staff, including community nurses, on national terms are determined by an agreement of the General Whitley Council. These rates were increased with affect from 1 July 2000, under cover of advance letter GC 2 /2000 A copy of this advance letter, setting out the new rates, has been placed in the Library.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the average waiting time in accident and emergency departments by health authority for *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [135848]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* Although the information requested is not currently collected centrally, the NHS Plan states that by 2004, no patient will wait more than four hours in accident and emergency departments from the time of arrival to admission, discharge or transfer, and that the average wait will be 75 minutes.

Operation Cancellations

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what redress will be available to patients when operations are cancelled on the day they are due to take place under the National Plan. [135849]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* In the National Health Service Plan we have pledged that from 2002, when a patient's operation is cancelled on the day of surgery for non-clinical reasons, the hospital will have to offer another binding date within a maximum of the next 28 days or fund the patient's treatment at the time and hospital of the patient's choice.

TREASURY

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1023–4, regarding monthly outturns on sickness absence, if directors in his Department submit monthly or other regular reports on sickness absence; what unpublished statistics on sickness absence in his Department he holds; and if he will make a statement. [134829]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Incidences of sickness absence are reported by managers and collated centrally. Procedures for recording, monitoring and tackling sickness absence were reviewed in 1999 in line with the work on reducing absence following the July 1998 report on "Managing Attendance in the Public Sector".

Tax and Benefits Confidential Helpline

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have contacted the confidential telephone line set up on the advice of Lord Grabiner's report on the informal economy; and how much *(a)* tax has been received and *(b)* benefit expenditure has been saved as a result. [134553]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of calls received up to the end of October 2000 by the Tax and Benefits Confidential Helpline is 12,633. The amounts of tax recovered and benefits expenditure saved as a result of the line are not available and cannot be estimated. The phone line gives people the opportunity to find out where they stand on a no-names basis, so the numbers that have put their tax and benefits affairs in order as a result of the advice they were given are unknown.

PIA Ombudsman

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many decisions were made by the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman in each of the last two years; [135275]

(2) how many decisions were made by the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman in each of the last two years in favour of the complainant. [135274]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information is published in the annual report for 1999–2000 of the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman Bureau, a copy of which is in the Library.

ICS

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases were referred to the ICS *(a)* Independent Investigator and *(b)* Board of Directors in each of the last two years under the ICS Complaints Procedure; and how many of these referrals resulted in an amended decision. [135270]

Miss Melanie Johnson: *(a)* None between 1 October 1998 to 30 September 1999 and two between 1 October 1999 and 30 September 2000; *(b)* none between 1 October 1998 and 30 September 1999 and three between 1 October 1999 and 30 September 2000; none of these resulted in an amended decision.

Inland Revenue Officers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place the technical note on the review of Inland Revenue Officer powers in the Library. [135893]

Dawn Primarolo: Proposals arising from Inland Revenue's review of officer powers were published as chapter 3 of a technical discussion paper entitled "Simplifying National Insurance Contributions for Employers". This was published on 7 June 2000 and is available on the Inland Revenue's website. A copy has also been placed in the Library.

Construction Industry

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times the joint working group on review of the construction industry scheme has met; and if he will place the text of its recommendations and deliberations in the Library. [135895]

Dawn Primarolo: The joint working group met eight times. It discussed a number of the industry's concerns. The group did not set out to produce a text of its recommendations and deliberations.

Intellectual Property Taxation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish the technical note relating to the review of intellectual property taxation concerning intangibles and good will. [135901]

Dawn Primarolo: A technical note entitled "Reform of the taxation of intellection property, goodwill and other intangible assets" was published by the Inland Revenue on 23 June 2000.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the average cost of petrol was accounted for by VAT and duty in each of the last seven years. [136005]

Mr. Timms: The proportion of the cost of petrol accounted for by duty and VAT is published in the Treasury publication "Tax Benefit Reference Manual", a copy of which is held in the House of Commons Library.

FSA Inquiries (Human Rights)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance is given to Financial Services Authority investigators on procedures to be followed to ensure that inquiries do not breach human rights. [136105]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) currently provides staff, including investigators, to all the main bodies responsible for the regulation of financial services in the UK. All investigators receive training specifically tailored for the types of inquiry they carry out. Such training covers procedures to ensure that inquiries are conducted lawfully, fairly and with sensitivity to those involved.

Departmental Policies

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136173]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Manchester, Gorton parliamentary constituency, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,812, or 37 per cent. youth unemployment is down by three-quarters, and long-term unemployment has been cut by more than half.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of the August 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,817 young people in the Manchester, Gorton constituency gain valuable skills and experience—755 (42 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The working families tax credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In May 2000, 2,200 families in Manchester, Gorton were benefiting from WFTC.

Mr. Emlyn Wynne

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place a copy of the Financial Services Authority's Complaints Commissioner inquiry into the case of the late Mr. Emlyn Wynne in the Library. [136097]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The report of the FSA's independent Complaints Commissioner on his investigation into the complaint from the family of the late Mr. Emlyn Wynne contains information confidential to the firm and to the family, and has not therefore been made public.

Political Donations (Tax)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to tax donations to *(a)* political parties and *(b)* the offices of individual hon. Members. [136413]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have no plans to introduce such a policy.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the percentage of GDP which is represented by public expenditure. [136195]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government's fiscal policy is guided by two fiscal rules first set out in the Financial Statement and Budget Report in July 1997 (HC85). This fiscal policy is underpinned by the Code for Fiscal Stability laid before Parliament under section 155 of the Finance Act 1998.

Budget Letter

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to submit his next Budget letter for independent adjudication before it is publicly distributed. [136191]

Dawn Primarolo: There is no Budget letter. All Budget documents will continue to provide an accurate and balanced account of the Budget.

Single Currency

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will *(a)* commission and *(b)* publish independent assessments of whether his five economic tests are being met. [136411]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the non-economic factors which will be taken into account in determining the timing of a decision to replace the pound with the euro. [136263]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision to join the single currency is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last discussed constitutional issues raised by the euro with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. [136404]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer meets with his Cabinet colleagues on a regular basis and discusses a wide range of issues.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy in the event of UK membership of the eurozone to negotiate a right to withdraw unilaterally from the zone. [136190]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Any decision by the UK to join EMU would be made by the British people in a referendum and would be on the same treaty basis as applies to existing members.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the causes of the fluctuations in the exchange rate between the euro and the pound in 1999–2000. [136009]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Exchange rates are determined by global markets and are influenced by a wide range of factors.

Post Office Closures

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of the closure of post offices since May 1997 on his objective of reducing financial exclusion. [136711]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Bringing those who are currently unbanked into the mainstream banking system will make a major contribution to reducing financial exclusion. The Government—through its £500 million investment in automation of the Post Office network, and its support for Universal Banking Services at post offices—is enabling the Post Office to make banking services more accessible to the financially excluded.

Pension Funds (Tax Credit)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of the abolition of the tax credit on dividends on the size of UK pension funds. [136417]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's package of corporation tax reforms included not only the withdrawal of payable tax credits on dividends but also cuts in corporation tax rates. These and other measures will help to improve investment performance. The effect of these changes on the size of UK pension funds will vary depending upon many factors, such as: the type of scheme; the take-up of private pensions; the level of future contributions and the investment policy adopted by fund managers.

Tax System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the role of the Paymaster General in tackling unfair tax contributions. [136415]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The responsibilities of Treasury Ministers are set out in the "List of Ministerial Responsibilities", copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families benefit from the working families tax credit in each constituency in Wales. [136616]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 515W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the future of the Working Families Tax Credit. [136473]

Dawn Primarolo: The introduction of the WFTC was the first step in a continuing programme of integration of tax and benefits, to make work pay better and improve support for families with children. In Budget 2000, the Chancellor announced the introduction, from 2003, of two new tax credits which will build on and extend the principles of the WFTC.

Labour Market Trends Survey

Mr. Allan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list (1) for *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales and *(e)* each region (as defined in the Labour Market Trends Survey) the economic activity rate for (i) men, (ii) women and (iii) men and women, for age groups (A) 16 to 17, (B) 18 to 24, (C) 25 to 34, (D) 35 to 49, (E) 50 to 59, (F) 60+ and (G) all aged 16 and over, for each of the years available from 1979 to 2000; [136749]

(2) for *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales and *(e)* each English region (as defined in the Labour Market Trends Survey) employee jobs by industry, for (i) men, (ii) women and (iii) men and women, for each of the years available from 1979 to 2000; [136748]

(3) for *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales and *(e)* each region (as defined in the Labour Market Trends Survey) the ILO unemployment rate for (i) men, (ii) women and (iii) men and women, for age groups (A) 16 to 17, (B) 18 to 24, (C) 25 to 34, (D) 35 to 49, (E) 50 to 59, (F) 60+ and (G) all aged 16 and over, for each of the years from 1979 for which figures are available; [136747]

(4) for *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales and *(e)* each local area (as defined in the Labour Market Trends Survey) the claimant count, for (i) men, (ii) women and (iii) men and women, for age groups (A) 16 to 17, (B) 18 to 24, (C) 25 to 34, (D) 35 to 49, (E) 50 to 59, (F) 60+ and (G) all aged 16 and over, for each of the years available from 1979 to 2000. [136750]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Richard Allen, dated 6 November 2000:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions regarding a variety of labour market statistics for men and women in different regions in Great Britain. I am replying in his absence. (136747/136748/136749/146750)

Information on the number of employee jobs by region and industry for recent dates is published quarterly in table B.16 of *Labour Market Trends*. A back series of employee jobs, along with the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits (the 'claimant count') by age and region are available through the Nomis database at the House of Commons Library. Information on computerised claims, by age, for regions and for a range of local area geographies is available monthly from June 1985.

Estimates of economic activity and International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployment by age and region are available from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), National Statistics' major source of labour market data on individuals. The information requested is also available through the House of Commons Library.

The ONS preferred measure of unemployment is the ILO unemployment rate, derived from the LFS. It is defined on an internationally recognised basis. It counts as unemployed people who are a) without a paid job b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. This measure has been used in the LFS since 1984. LFS estimates of economic activity, defined as people in employment or ILO unemployed, are also available from 1984 onwards on a consistent basis.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) currently uses Government Office Regions (GORs) as the primary categorisation for regions. LFS estimates based on GORs are only available from 1992 onwards. LFS estimates based on the Standard Statistical Region categorisation are available from 1979, but only from 1984 onwards on the consistent ILO definitions of economic activity and unemployment.

Low Earnings

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in *(a)* Greater London and *(b)* the Sutton and Cheam constituency earn *(a)* £3.60 per hour, *(b)* £3.61 to £3.80 per hour, *(c)* £3.81 to £4 per hour and *(d)* £4 to £4.50 per hour; and what percentage of total employees this constitutes in each case. [134892]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 6 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on earnings in Greater London and the Sutton and Cheam constituency. (134892)

The following table shows the percentage of employee jobs earning within specified hourly pay bands in Greater London and Sutton and Cheam. The table is based on data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) for April 2000. NES answers are given as percentages earning below specified thresholds, rather than numbers. This is because appropriate grossing factors for the NES sample are not available at very detailed levels.

Percentage

	Greater London	*Sutton and Cheam*
£3.60 exactly	0.2	0.7
£3.61-£3.80	0.6	1.3
£3.81-£4.00	1.0	0.7
£4.01-£4.50	3.2	6.0

However, the NES underestimates the number of low paid jobs since it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the lower end of the earnings distribution. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) best estimates of the number of jobs in the UK with hourly pay less than national minimum wage rates were published in the NES press release on 26 October available in the House of Commons Library. These estimates are based on a new methodology that combines information from the NES and the Labour Force Survey. Further tables, including estimates for Government Office Regions, will be published on the National Statistics website (www.statistics.gov.uk) on 10 November.

Government Accounts

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the Government's practice to require the production of both an invoice and a receipt for accounting of expenditure in Government Departments; and if he will make a statement. [136558]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The rules on the authorisation by Government Departments of payments made by them are set out in Section 21.2 of Government Accounting (GA). Of particular relevance are GA paragraphs 21.2.1 and 21.2.19–22.

There is a copy in the House of Commons Library.

Mapeley Limited

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date the contract between his Department and Mapeley Limited was concluded for the strategic transfer to Mapeley Limited of the ownership and management of the combined estate of the Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise; and if he will place a copy of the contract in the Library. [136957]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise are working with Mapeley to finalise the details of the STEPS contract.

Statistics (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were unemployed in the Sutton and Cheam constituency in each year since 1979 according to the International Labour Organisation definition. [134983]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 6 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of people unemployed in the Sutton and Cheam constituency in each year since 1979 according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition. (134983)

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). However, estimates for the number of people ILO unemployed are not available for small areas such as the constituency of Sutton and Cheam.

The measure of unemployment derived from the LFS is defined on a consistent and Internationally recognised basis set out by the ILO. It counts as unemployed people who are (a) without a paid job (b) available to start work within the next two weeks and (c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. This measure has been used in the LFS since 1984.

ONS also publishes the monthly numbers of people who are claiming unemployment-related benefits, also known as the Claimant Count. Comparable figures (based on the 1995 boundaries) are available since 1996. The attached table gives the annual average levels of claimants in the Sutton and Cheam parliamentary constituency since 1996.

Information on the unadjusted claimant level by parliamentary constituency ward based on the 1981 wards are available monthly from June 1983 to January 1996 and can be obtained from the Nomis database in the House of Commons Library.

The annual average levels of claimants in the Sutton and Cheam parliamentary constituency

Year	*Number*	*Rate*
1996	2,053	5.2
1997	1,315	3.5
1998	990	2.8
1999	881	2.4

Note:

Average for the nine months January to September 2000 is 701 (1.9 per cent.).

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the infant mortality rates were in each of the last 10 years for *(a)* Sutton and Cheam constituency and *(b)* Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority. [134989]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 6 November 2000:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking for the infant mortality rates in the last 10 years for Sutton and Cheam constituency and Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority. I am replying in his absence. (134989)

The figures are shown in the attached table. The rates for Sutton and Cheam constituency (which are calculated from fewer than 20 deaths) may be unreliable due to the small number of events and should be treated cautiously. Any variation they show over time, or difference from National or health authority rates are likely to be due to chance.

Infant mortality numbers and rates for Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth HA and Sutton and Cheam parliamentary constituency, 1990–99

Registration year	*Number*	*Rate*[1]
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth HA		
1990	78	9.3
1991	49	5.4
1992	57	6.2
1993	67	7.3
1994	33	3.6
1995	59	6.5
1996	51	5.5
1997	40	4.4
1998	39	4.3
1999	42	4.6
Sutton and Cheam constituency		
1990	9	8.3
1991	2	1.7
1992	6	5.2
1993	3	2.6
1994	1	0.9
1995	8	7.0
1996	5	4.4
1997	3	2.8
1998	3	2.9
1999	4	3.6

[1] per 1,000 live births

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many suicides there have been in *(a)* Greater London and *(b)* the Sutton and Cheam constituency in each year since 1980, broken down by age; and if he will make a statement. [134891]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 6 November 2000:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on the numbers of suicides in Greater London and the Sutton and Cheam constituency in each year since 1980 broken down by age. I am replying in his absence.

Figures for Greater London are presented in the attached table for years up to 1999, the latest available. Boundary changes to the Sutton and Cheam constituency mean that figures are not available for years prior to 1988. Figures for Sutton and Cheam are therefore presented in the attached table only for years 1988 to 1998, based on the 1999 constituency boundary.

Suicides and undetermined deaths[1], registered in years 1980–99, for usual residents of Greater London

	All ages	10–14	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49
1980	888	1	34	76	72	70	63	83	73
1981	986	2	35	65	89	98	79	69	64
1982	882	7	21	73	77	87	78	62	75
1983	890	1	27	61	70	79	67	74	77
1984	864	2	30	59	70	63	80	66	66
1985	836	0	31	69	73	71	72	67	74
1986	786	1	28	68	79	66	63	62	54
1987	801	3	24	88	79	80	86	64	61
1988	855	4	31	84	84	78	87	62	56
1989	774	1	31	77	89	88	64	64	62
1990	756	0	25	74	91	84	71	56	74
1991	737	3	14	75	88	87	67	78	65
1992	723	3	16	75	94	89	70	64	55
1993	726	3	15	68	97	93	69	68	68
1994	706	3	17	63	104	88	68	63	51
1995	674	4	17	67	89	86	83	66	57
1996	631	2	17	49	75	93	69	69	63
1997	667	2	26	55	89	81	72	44	70
1998	782	3	22	65	103	123	97	68	65
1999	682	0	14	55	81	104	78	69	55

	50–54	55–59	60–64	65–69	70–74	75–79	80–84	85+
1980	64	100	66	64	47	41	25	9
1981	87	89	89	81	61	41	25	12
1982	75	69	63	64	51	43	24	14
1983	74	78	64	74	62	53	19	10
1984	84	80	70	46	51	58	27	12
1985	62	71	76	53	52	36	18	11
1986	67	59	49	46	50	56	26	12
1987	47	58	63	51	50	21	13	13
1988	55	66	52	48	48	54	24	22
1989	49	50	46	27	36	42	29	19
1990	52	42	35	50	25	30	30	17
1991	54	41	40	26	31	27	25	16
1992	49	40	39	33	37	24	22	13
1993	43	38	29	34	28	25	28	20
1994	46	45	36	24	29	17	19	33
1995	47	38	26	20	15	24	16	19
1996	39	32	25	16	28	16	19	19
1997	55	39	35	19	25	19	15	21
1998	57	45	29	30	21	19	13	22
1999	50	37	31	21	24	25	20	18

[1] International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision, codes E950–959 and E980-E989 excluding E988.8.

Suicides and undetermined deaths[1], registered in years 1988–99, for usual residents of Sutton and Cheam constituency

	All ages	10–14	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49
1988	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1989	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1990	13	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	3
1991	6	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	0
1992	6	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
1993	5	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1

Suicides and undetermined deaths[1], registered in years 1988–99, for usual residents of Sutton and Cheam constituency

	All ages	10–14	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49
1994	7	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
1995	8	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0
1996	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
1997	8	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	0
1998	7	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0
1999	6	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1

	50–54	55–59	60–64	65–69	70–74	75–79	80–84	85+
1988	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
1989	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
1990	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
1991	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
1992	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
1993	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
1994	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
1995	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	0
1996	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1997	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
1998	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
1999	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0

[1] International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision, codes E950-E959 and E980-E989 excluding E988.8

VAT (Fuel)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the level of VAT receipts received in the current financial year to date from petrol and diesel sales and *(b)* the level of sales projected by his Department for that period. [136316]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 410–11W.

Forestry

Mr. HomeRobertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what additional funding is being made available for *(a)* that section of MAFF responsible for forestry in England, *(b)* the Scottish Executive and *(c)* the National Assembly for Wales in respect of (i) the decision not to proceed with the sale of cutting rights in Forestry Commission forests and (ii) the consequences of falling world timber prices on Forest Enterprise; and if he will make it his policy to ensure that the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales are given access to support from the UK Treasury on a basis equivalent to what is proposed for the English part of the Forestry Commission, and that the extent of forestry in each country is taken into account. [137093]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Forestry Commission in England is a Government Department distinct from MAFF. Spending Review 2000 set provision for the Forestry Commission in England and its Great Britain core functions. The allocation of Spending Review 2000 provision for Scotland and Wales is a matter for the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales.

The Statement of Funding Policy published in July 2000 sets out the funding policies for the devolved Administrations.

The implications of the current income shortfall are being reviewed with the Forestry Commission, the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales.

Employment Rates

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the contribution to GDP which would result from employment rates in each of the age groups *(a)* 45–50, *(b)* 50–55, *(c)* 55–60, *(d)* 60–65, *(e)* 65–70 and *(f)* over 70 years being the same as the employment rates in the age group 40–45 years. [136076]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 6 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on estimates of the contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which could result from employment rates in certain age groups being the same as employment rates in the age group 40–45 years.

This information is not available. In order to make this calculation it would be necessary to make assumptions about the characteristics of those entering employment and the jobs they would be doing. In particular predictions would have to be made as to what the hours worked and earnings would be of people moving from inactivity to employment. While simplistic assumptions could be made it might prove misleading to assume, for example, that these factors would be the same as for those already in employment.

Public and Voluntary Sector Funding (Walsall)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what total additional funding has been allocated for use by public and voluntary sector organisations in the Walsall borough since May 1997; and if he will list the Government Departments from whose budgets such funding was paid. [136847]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Figures giving total funding across all public and voluntary sectors in the borough are not readily available, and would involve disproportionate cost to acquire.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what checks are made to ensure the validity of claims for backdated winter fuel payments. [134561]

Angela Eagle: The administration of winter fuel payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Willetts, dated 6 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what checks are made to ensure validity of claims for backdated winter fuel payments.

As with all claims to benefit, checks are made to validate any claim before payment is considered. This is completed by various means, including but not restricted to, reference to existing Departmental records and National Insurance data.

For making Winter Fuel Payments in respect of previous years, use has been made of address matching software. Before validating any payments for retrospective claims, records have been cross-matched with previous years Winter Fuel Payments to ensure that payments are made only to those entitled and at the correct amounts.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households will benefit this winter from the winter heating allowance in each county in Wales. [135991]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available because forecasts of winter fuel payment recipients and the number of households in which they live are only produced for Great Britain as a whole. For each unitary authority in Wales, the estimated number of people (rather than households) who benefited from the winter fuel payment in the winter—1999–2000 is shown in the table.

Estimates of the number of recipients of winter fuel payments for winter 1999–2000 by unitary authority in Wales

Thousand

	Number
Wales (total)	548.4
Isle of Anglesey	14.1
Gwynedd	25.3
Conwy	27.9
Denbighshire	20.0
Flintshire	24.4
Wrexham	21.5
Powys	26.4
Ceredigion	13.5
Pembrokeshire	22.7
Carmarthenshire	36.8
Swansea	45.0
Neath Port Talbot	26.1
Bridgend	22.7
The Vale of Glamorgan	22.0
Rhondda Cynon Taff	41.3
Merthyr Tydfil	10.2
Caerphilly	27.8
Blaenau Gwent	12.8
Torfaen	16.3

Estimates of the number of recipients of winter fuel payments for winter 1999–2000 by unitary authority in Wales

Thousand

	Number
Monmouthshire	17.3
Newport	23.8
Cardiff	50.5

Note:

The table is based on 5 per cent. samples of administrative information and therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

Household Incomes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* children in each of the past five years have lived in households with less than 60 per cent. of median income. [134558]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the tables.

Number of pensioners living in households below 60 per cent. of contemporary median income

Million

	Including self-employed		*Excluding self-employed*	
Year	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*
1994–95	2.0	2.5	1.9	2.3
1995–96	2.1	2.4	2.0	2.3
1996–97	2.0	2.5	1.9	2.4
1997–98	2.1	2.6	2.0	2.5
1998–99	2.2	2.6	2.0	2.4

Number of children living in households below 60 per cent. of contemporary median income

Million

	Including self-employed		*Excluding self-employed*	
Year	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*
1994–95	2.9	4.0	2.3	3.3
1995–96	2.7	4.0	2.2	3.4
1996–97	3.3	4.4	2.7	3.9
1997–98	3.2	4.3	2.7	3.8
1998–99	3.1	4.2	2.6	3.7

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set which is derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland, and 1998–99 is the latest year for which data are available.

2. The estimates are sample counts, which have been adjusted for non-response using multipurpose grossing factors that control for region, Council Tax band and a number of other demographic variables. Estimates are subject to both sampling error and to variability in non-response. All numbers are rounded to the nearest 100,000.

3. The income measure used is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say income that is adjusted to reflect the composition of the household). While the number of individuals below various income thresholds may be sensitive to the precise way in which incomes are equivalised, changes shown over time generally are not.

4. The estimates are presented on both a Before Housing Costs (BHC) and an After Housing Costs (AHC) basis in line with HBAI conventions. Figures are also provided including and excluding the self-employed, as research suggests that, for self-employed people, income as reported in surveys is often a poor indicator of living standards.

Source:

Family Resources Survey

We have pledged to halve the number of children living in poverty in 10 years and eradicate child poverty in 20 years and we have already made significant progress. Estimates of the impact of the last four budgets are that the tax and benefit measures announced will lift 1.2 million children above the 60 per cent. median threshold after housing costs.

Also, past changes in pensioner incomes reflect the fact that many pensioners have simply lost out on the opportunity for all people of working age to build a second pension. We are also determined to provide security for all of today's pensioners. The minimum income guarantee provides that security for pensioners with low incomes and our national take-up programme will encourage those entitled to claim.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the basis of his calculation of the number of people who will be taken off Housing Benefit as a result of the Working Families Tax Credit. [135262]

Angela Eagle: Estimates of the numbers of households taken off Housing Benefit as a result of the Working Families Tax Credit were produced using the Department of Social Security's Policy Simulation Model (PSM). The PSM is based on the Department's annual Family Resources Survey, which is a sample of around 23,000 households in Great Britain. Individuals' and households' income tax and national insurance liabilities, and entitlements to tax credits and social security income-related benefits, are modelled according to the prevailing tax and benefit rules and rates. The numbers in receipt of particular benefits are then calibrated to the forecasts for those benefits, published in the departmental report, or underlying the Pre-Budget Report.

The effects of Working Families Tax Credit on the number of Housing Benefit recipients was determined by modelling two different benefit systems—one with Working Families Tax Credit, and one as if Family Credit had continued in existence, with appropriate uprating of benefit rates. All other tax and benefit rules were kept the same in the two systems. Adjustments were then made to ensure coherence with other forecasts. Comparison of the two modelled systems then gives the effect on the number of Housing Benefit recipients.

Benefit Expenditure

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the calculations behind the Government's statement that expenditure on contributory benefits will increase as a proportion of total benefit expenditure by 1.2 per cent. over the present Parliament. [135263]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Contributory benefits expressed as a percentage of total benefits

	1996–97	*2001–02 Departmental Report*	*2001–02 Spending Review*
Contributory Benefits	42,159	49,958	50,061
Total Benefits	92,212	106,479	106,367
Contributory percentage of total	45.72	46.92	47.06

Notes:

1. The contributory benefits are Retirement Pension, Widow's benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Statutory Sick Pay, Incapacity benefit, Maternity Allowance, Statutory Maternity Pay, Guardian Allowance.

2. Total benefits include all local authority spending on Housing benefit and Council Tax benefit in addition to the money funded directly from Central Government.

Sources:

Departmental report 2000. Spending Review 2000

The rise in contributory benefits as a proportion of total benefit expenditure over the present Parliament is the proportion for 2001–02 of 46.92 per cent. less that for 1996–97 of 45.72 per cent. which gives 1.2 per cent. This was calculated using figures from the Departmental Report 2000. The table also shows the latest figures for 2001–02 published in the Spending Review 2000. The increase using these figures is 47.06 per cent. less 45.72 per cent. giving 1.3 per cent.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many additional staff have been moved into frontline positions in his Department and its agencies since April. [135265]

Angela Eagle: 1,037 staff have moved, or are planned to move, from central and support services to the frontline under the organisational changes, announced in February, to focus the Department's resources on service delivery. It is expected that 2,500 posts will have moved by the end of this financial year, with a further 500 posts moved in the following year.

Benefits (Special School Pupils)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what benefit entitlement there is for 16 to 18-year-olds in education in special schools in respect of *(a)* the pupil and *(b)* the pupil's parents; and if he will make a statement. [135537]

Angela Eagle: Child Benefit is normally payable to the parents of all young people who remain in relevant education until they leave school or until their 19th birthday if this comes first. For the purposes of benefit entitlement relevant education means non advanced education, usually up to A level standard and includes special schools.

Entitlement to other benefits for 16 to 18-year-olds in relevant education, (whether or not they are in special schools), and their parents, will depend on their circumstances.

Those parents entitled to one or more of the income related benefits of Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Housing Benefit, or Council Tax Benefit, may include the young person in their claim as a dependant, and the relevant child personal allowance and premiums will be included in the assessment.

In certain instances, young people may claim Income Support, in their own right, while continuing with their studies at school. These include those who are lone parents, young people who are severely mentally or physically handicapped, those who necessarily live away from their parents, and those who are estranged from their parents. Child Benefit ceases to be paid for young people who claim in their own right.

Young people who, because of a severe mental or physical disability need help with personal care or mobility for at least three months, and are likely to continue to need help for a further six months or more, may qualify for Disability Living Allowance, regardless of their parents' circumstances. In addition they may also qualify for Severe Disablement Allowance.

A parent who spends at least 35 hours a week caring for a young person who gets Disability Living allowance may claim Invalid Care Allowance.

Benefits Agency Staff

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what consultations he has held on the working practices and conditions of Benefits Agency staff; and if he will make a statement. [135527]

Angela Eagle: Benefits Agency (BA) management recognises and values the importance of obtaining the views of staff and their elected representatives.

BA has a formal Partnership Agreement with the Public and Commercial Services Union, the union who represent the majority of staff working for BA. The principles enshrined in this document are, for example allowing the unions the widest possible scope for influencing decisions prior to resolution, followed in consultation and negotiation when discussing any changes to staff's terms and conditions of employment.

Benefits Agency Doctors

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the review of fees and expenses payable to doctors working on behalf of the Benefits Agency will be concluded. [135547]

Mr. Bayley: The third report of the Social Security Select Committee looking at the standards of service provided by Sema Group Medical Services states that the question of doctors pay is an issue for Sema Group Medical Services to address.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list in date order the Housing Benefit regulations and amendments to them issued since 1 May 1997. [135719]

Angela Eagle: The information has been placed in the Library.

Central Recovery Group

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason the Central Recovery Group failed to meet its estimates of revenue recovery in each of the last three years. [135479]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 6 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your Parliamentary Question asking for what reason the Central Recovery Group failed to meet its estimates of revenue recovery in each of the last three years.

The table below sets out the Central Recovery Group's overpayment recovery targets for the past three years, as set by the Department on behalf of the Secretary of State, and their achievement against those targets.

£ million

Year	*Target*	*Performance*
1997–98	10.3	10.4
1998–99	12.8	15.3
1999–2000	16.9	19.1

You will note that they have exceeded their target each year.

I hope this is helpful.

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to abolish Severe Disablement Allowance. [135538]

Mr. Bayley: The reform of Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) will refocus benefit on people disabled early in life who have never had the opportunity to work and gain entitlement to incapacity benefits through the payment of contributions.

At present, the poorest 70 per cent. of those receiving SDA also receive Income Support (IS). The IS rules require every pound of their SDA to be deducted from their IS so, in practice, they receive no benefit from SDA.

From April 2001, young disabled people under 20 (or 25 if they were in education or training that continued beyond their 20th birthday) will be given access to Incapacity Benefit without having to satisfy the normal contribution conditions. Based on current rates, they will gain up to £26.70 a week. No new SDA claims will be accepted but existing recipients will be protected and will continue to receive SDA for as long as they continue to satisfy the conditions of entitlement. In addition there are special linking periods of eight weeks, one year and two years for people who leave SDA before April 2001 to try work or training which would allow them to return to SDA if they are still within their linking period.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* new claims and *(b)* awards of Severe Disablement Allowance there were in each of the last 18 months. [136304]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Severe Disablement Allowance, new claims and awards

	New claims received (Number)	*Spells commencing*
December 1998	2,896	1,900
January 1999	3,527	1,100
February 1999	3,857	1,100
March 1999	4,227	1,300
April 1999	3,342	1,100
May 1999	3,318	600
June 1999	3,916	800
July 1999	4,228	800
August 1999	3,910	700
September 1999	4,064	1,300
October 1999	4,354	1,000
November 1999	4,377	1,100
December 1999	3,016	1,300
January 2000	3,548	1,000
February 2000	4,155	600
March 2000	4,692	1,200
April 2000	3,481	1,100
May 2000	3,913	800

Notes:
1. New claims figures are a 100 per cent. count from Central Data Unit.
2. Awards figures are taken from a 5 per cent. scan of the benefit computer system and excludes a small number of cases held clerically. These figures are shown in thousands and have been rounded to the nearest hundred.
3. Awards in a particular month do not necessarily relate to claims received in that month.

Widowers' Benefits

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the implications for recently widowed men are of last year's out-of-court settlement with Mr. Christopher Crossland on widowers' benefits; and what new help will be offered to men who are widowed before the new benefit rules come into force next year. [135721]

Angela Eagle: The friendly settlement reached with Christopher Crossland has no implications for Widows' Benefits.

Fathers who are widowed before Bereavement Benefits are introduced will be able to claim Widowed Parent's Allowance from 9 April 2001 as long as they satisfy the qualifying conditions.

Benefits Agency Reorganisation

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with trade unions regarding the planned changes to the Benefits Agency leading to the establishment of a working age agency and a pensions agency. [135525]

Angela Eagle: A working age agency joint trade union forum has been established which represents staff from Employment Service, Benefits Agency and other parts of the Department of Social Security and all the constituent unions (Public and Commercial Services, First Division Association and Institute of Professional Managers and Specialists). This joint forum has met twice to date and arrangements have been made for regular monthly meetings with senior management within the working age programme on behalf of my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Social Security and for Education and Employment. These monthly meetings will be supplemented by additional meetings with the appropriate programme managers to discuss issues of detail.

Union representatives from this forum are also due to meet with Ministers from this Department and from the Department for Education and Employment on 11 December 2000.

Similar arrangements have been put in place with the DSS Trade Union side to discuss matters relating to the setting up of the pensions organisation.

ONE Pilot

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the ONE pilots. [135526]

Angela Eagle: The ONE service is designed to change the culture of the benefits system by providing an integrated, work-focused service for all people of working age. Pilots commenced in twelve areas of the country in 1999 and are due to run until April 2002.

The ONE pilots are the subject of rigorous evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the new service compared to the present one. They will be evaluated using a range of standard evaluation techniques, and data will be compared from the different model pilots to assess their relative effects.

When robust and reliable research findings are available, they will be published. We expect to be in a position to publish the first findings from the preliminary phase of the pilots by the end of the year.

CSA

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if voluntary payments made by non-custodial parents directly towards their children's maintenance are deducted by the CSA from the calculation of maintenance that it requests from the non-custodial parent. [135827]

Angela Eagle: Many non-resident parents want to, and do, provide financial support for their children while their maintenance liability is being calculated by the Child Support Agency. Voluntary payments of child maintenance paid before liability has been calculated can be offset against that liability. However, voluntary payments are not currently provided for in legislation and the Child Support Agency follows guidelines to determine which payments should be set-off against arrears of maintenance.

The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 gives statutory recognition to voluntary payments made before maintenance has been assessed. In the new child support scheme, payments in cash, either direct to the parent with care or via the Agency, and payments by the non-resident parent of household bills for mortgage repayments, gas/electricity or water bills can be offset as voluntary payments.

Once maintenance liability has been calculated, there is no provision for voluntary payments to be taken into account and maintenance liability can only be discharged if payments are made to a specified person, usually the parent with care, directly, or through the CSA. The

amount of debt which arises through non-payment of child maintenance will not be offset by any amounts the non-resident parent has paid to the child, such as for pocket money or presents.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the new child support scheme indicates the categories of expenditure covered by the CSA maintenance payment. [135852]

Angela Eagle: Maintenance calculations under the new child support scheme are intended to provide a reasonable level of support for children while leaving non-resident parents with sufficient income to meet their other responsibilities.

The new rates do not reflect an assessment of levels of expenditure in specified categories and it will be for the parent with care to decide how best to spend the money in the interests of her children.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost to his department of adopting Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights; and if he will make a statement. [135570]

Angela Eagle: None. The charter will be a political declaration and is not legally binding. It is addressed to the EU institutions, and to member states only when they are implementing Union law (Article 51(1)). It does not establish any new power or task for the Community or the Union or modify powers and tasks defined by the Treaties (Article 51(2).

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow carers to keep their invalid care allowance money on receipt of their state pension. [135528]

Mr. Bayley: On 3 October we announced, as part of a package of measures for carers, plans to give people aged 65 and over the right to claim Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) for the first time. This entitlement will be subject to existing rules governing the receipt of ICA, including abatement where state retirement pension is paid.

We estimate 40,000 pensioners will gain access to ICA or the carer premium for the first time as a result of this change.

Vaccine Damage Victims

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the sums due to victims of vaccine damage he will pay to the families concerned; and if he will make a statement. [135996]

Mr. Bayley: In his statement on vaccine damage of 27 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 719–27, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that top-up payments would be made in all cases where a vaccine damage award had been made prior to that date. About 900 awards had been made between 1978 and the date of the statement. So far 129 top-up payments have been paid amounting to £8,696,500. Another 122 cases are nearing completion. In general cases are being paid in date order, that is to say, those customers who received their original payment the longest time ago will be paid first. The Vaccine Damage Payment Unit has recruited additional staff and arrangements are in place to progress the remaining payments as soon as possible while ensuring the interests of the intended beneficiary are protected.

Benefit Fraud (Local Authorities)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities have been subject to a review by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate; and in which cases he has used the powers in section 139D of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 to direct a local authority. [136159]

Mr. Rooker: As at 3 November 2000, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate had completed inspections on 73 local authorities and was in the process of inspecting a further 30 authorities. Directions under section 139D of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 have been given to one local authority, Northampton Borough Council, in August 2000.

Benefits (Sutton)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in *(a)* the Sutton and Cheam constituency and *(b)* the London borough of Sutton have been in receipt of (i) Income Support, (ii) Disability Living Allowance, (iii) Incapacity Benefit, (iv) Unemployment Benefit and (v) Housing Benefit in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [134890]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 6 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people in (a) the Sutton and Cheam constituency and (b) the London Borough of Sutton have been in receipt of (i) income support, (ii) disability living allowance, (iii) incapacity benefit, (iv) unemployment benefit, and (v) housing benefit in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement.

The data is not available in the requested format, however the information that is available is supplied in the attached tables.

I hope this is helpful.

(i) Income Support

Year	*Sutton and Cheam constituency*	*London borough of Sutton*
May		
1990	—	8.1
1991	—	8.8
1992	—	8.9
1993	—	12.7
1994	—	12.8
1995	—	12.7

(i) Income Support

Year	Sutton and Cheam constituency	London borough of Sutton
1996	—	12.3
1997	—	8.6
1998	—	8.2
1999	2.8	8.0
2000	3.1	7.9

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
3. Income Support for the unemployed was replaced by Income Based Jobseekers Allowance in October 1996. Figures up to and including May 1996 included the unemployed on Income Support.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, 1990–2000

(ii) Recipients of Disability Living Allowance

Year	Sutton and Cheam constituency	London borough of Sutton
May		
1993	1,200	2,700
1994	1,400	2,600
1995	1,300	2,600
1996	1,400	2,900
1997	1,400	3,300
1998	1,329	3,414
1999	1,418	3,548
2000	1,505	3,707

Notes:

1. Figures up to 1997 are based on 5 per cent. data and are rounded to the nearest hundred. For later years the figures are based on 100 per cent. data and are unrounded.
2. Figures not available for 1992 owing to incomplete regional data.
3. Yearly figures are given at 31 May.

Source:

DSS Information Centre

(iii) Incapacity Benefit

Year	Sutton and Cheam constituency	London borough of Sutton
May		
1995	—	2.6
1996	—	2.5
1997	—	2.5
1998	1.0	2.3
1999	1.0	2.2
2000	0.9	2.3

Notes:

1. Incapacity Benefit figures by Parliamentary Constituency are unavailable before 1998.
2. Figures taken from 5 per cent. samples of the benefit computer system, and exclude a small number of cases held clerically. A rating factor has been used on figures for the London borough of Sutton from May 1996 to May 1999, to account for missing postcodes.
3. Figures are expressed as thousands and are rounded to the nearest hundred.
4. Yearly figures are given at 31 May.

(iv) Unemployment Benefit

No figures are available, for Unemployment Benefit by either parliamentary constituency or Local Authority however figures for Jobseekers Allowance are provided in the table below.

Unemployment benefit ceased in 6th October 1996 and Jobseekers Allowance began from 7th October 1996.

Jobseeker's Allowance

	Sutton and Cheam constituency	London borough of Sutton
August 1997	—	2.5
May 1998	—	2.3
August 1998	0.9	—
May 1999	1.1	2.4
May 2000	1.7	1.7

Notes:

1. Claimant figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
2. Sample size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Jobseeker's Allowance replaced Income Support for the unemployed in october 1996.
4. Figures are for all claimants including those with nil benefit.

Source:

Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1997 to May 2000

(v) Housing Benefit

Year	London borough of Sutton
May	
1992	9,470
1993	10,170
1994	10,280
1995	10,610
1996	10,880
1997	10,690
1998	9,980
1999	9,650
2000	8,870

Notes:

1. The figures supplied are for May each year from 1992 to May 2000.
2. The figures have been rounded to the nearest ten cases.
3. If the Local Authority failed to return any data, this will have been estimated.
4. The data for the years prior to 1992 are unavailable. The data for the Sutton and Cheam constituency are unavailable as the lowest level that the data are collected for is by Local Authority.

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System, Quarterly 100 per cent. caseload inquiries taken in May 1992 to 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of whether the Metropolitan police are institutionally racist. [134999]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made clear his assessment of institutional racism in the Metropolitan police service as well as in other public institutions in his statement to the House on publication of the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry on 24 February 1999, *Official Report,* columns 389–93. The action plan he published in March 1999 sets out a major programme of reform, the implementation of which is overseen and audited by the steering group set up for this purpose, which he chairs. The first annual report on progress in implementation of the action plan was published in February 2000.

Nice Inter-Governmental Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what issues within the remit of his Department are to be the subject of negotiation at the Nice Inter-Governmental Conference. [134785]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has overall responsibility for Inter-Governmental Conference issues, which are expected to be concluded at the European Council in December in Nice.

The scope of the conference and the Government's position on the main issues was set out in the Government's White Paper—"IGC: Reform for Enlargement", in February 2000. The Home Office has a direct interest in several of the treaty changes which are being proposed, in particular some of those related to any extension of qualified majority voting.

Violent Crime

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will commission an independent study of the possible reasons for the increase of violent crime in 1999–2000 and publish its findings. [134782]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have no plans to commission such a study.

Action to reduce violent crime, based on research by the Home Office as well as from other sources on the causes of and trends in violent crime and crime overall, is ongoing. Police forces are aware of the increase in violent crime and are carrying out proactive operations to tackle it.

EU Judicial System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to support the principle of the establishment of an EU-wide system of jurisdiction; and if he will make a statement on proposals under discussion thereon. [134797]

Mrs. Roche: We do not favour the establishment of a single European Union-wide jurisdiction, nor are there any current proposals to establish one. The United Kingdom fully supports the Tampere conclusion that mutual recognition should be the cornerstone of judicial co-operation in the European Union.

Police Recruitment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were recruited in the last 12 months having previously served in forces outside Great Britain. [135822]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, inquiries made with the Northern Ireland Office have established that in the last 12 months three officers from the Royal Ulster Constabulary have been recruited by forces in England and Wales.

"Voices"

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department spent on advertising space in the recent Government publication, "Voices". [135588]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Home Office has spent £5,477.85 including VAT on advertising space in "Voices". This expenditure covered in 1999 an advertisement featuring information about the "Break the Chain" initiative on domestic violence and this year a police recruitment advertisement.

Merseyside Police

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much funding has been allocated to Merseyside police since May 1997 in annual budgetary settlement and in special programmes; and how much of that funding was additional to the formulae aid programmes in operation before that date. [135832]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The amount of funding allocated to Merseyside in annual budgetary settlement since 1997 is shown in the table.

£ million

Year	*Government funding*[1]
1997–98	207.5
1998–99	213.2
1999–2000	215.3
2000–01	220.7

[1] Includes Home Office Police Grant, Revenue Support Grant and National Non-Domestic Rates grant.

Provision for 1996–97 was £203.4 million.

In addition the force has received:

£ million

Year	*Capital grant*
1997–98	3.8
1998–99	2.3
1999–2000	2.0
2000–01	2.5

£

Year	*Loan charges grant*
1997–98	414,488
1998–99	340,380
1999–2000	351,136
2000–01	[1]318,450

[1] Full year figure

Home Office accounts records show that the force has also received the following individual payments:

August 1997 Police Firearms Grant—£66,556

August 1999 Police Beacon Scheme—£83,000

March 2000 Police Beacon Scheme—£8,880

June 2000 Crime Fighting Fund—£664,195

September 2000 Crime Fighting Fund—£430,216

October 2000 Anti-robbery grant—£1,800,000.

"Casework Information Needs within the Criminal Justice System"

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a formal response to the report, "Casework Information Needs within the Criminal Justice System", undertaken jointly by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, HM Inspectorate

of Constabulary, HM Magistrates' Courts Service Inspectorate, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and the Social Services Inspectorate; and if he will make a statement. [135580]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government welcome the joint inspectorates' report, and the way the six separate inspectorates collaborated together in reporting jointly on casework information flows right across the criminal justice system (CJS). This joint approach fits in well with the Government's development of joint planning for the CJS as a whole and in particular with the CJS Integrating Business and Information Systems (IBIS) initiative. There are no plans to publish a formal response to the report but it will be a useful aid to CJS departments, services and agencies in improving the way they currently handle casework information and its findings are being taken forward in ongoing work by CJS departments, including the points raised about the IBIS model of information flow in the criminal justice system. The inspectorates have indicated that, in their future inspections, they will be seeking confirmation that the recommendations of this report are being addressed and will commission a review of the implementation of the recommendations in two years' time.

Dorset Police Authority

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the numbers of *(a)* operational police officers and *(b)* total staff employed by the Dorset Police Authority in (i) May 1997 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [135535]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on operational police numbers is collected in March of each year by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. Total staffing numbers are collected twice a year in March and September. The latest available information in both cases are those for March 2000.

The information is set out in the table.

Dorset Police

	Year (as at 31 March)	
	1997	*2000*
Total number of operational police officers	1,081	1,223
Total police numbers	1,284	1,306
Total number of civilian staff[1]	615	686
Total number of staff employed	1,899	1,992

[1] excludes traffic wardens

Between March 1997 and March 2000 the number of operational police officers in the Dorset Police increased by 13 per cent. The total increase in police service personnel for the same period was nearly 5 per cent.

Ball-bearing Guns

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ban ball-bearing guns; and if he will make a statement. [135533]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are no plans to ban ball-bearing (BB) guns. These weapons generally have muzzle energies much lower than that required to inflict an injury more serious than superficial bruising. Because of this they do not fit the definition of a firearm contained in the Firearms Act 1968 and do not come under the control of the Act. However, as the Home Affairs Committee (HAC) recognised in its recent report on "Controls Over Firearms", there is a danger of armed police being called out to deal with youngsters brandishing these weapons in the street.

In its response to the HAC, the Government accepted the recommendation that the sale of these weapons to young people by mail order, telephone and the internet be banned and extended to include sales through any outlet, including face to face. The Government are therefore now considering how the sale of these and other replica firearms to people under 18 years of age might be restricted.

Kray Brothers

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what files the Metropolitan police hold of material assembled by the Kray brothers; what their policy is on public access to those files; and if he will make a statement. [135715]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This is a matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police but I understand that nine files concerning the Kray brothers have been deposited in the Public Record Office. At the time of the last review the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council agreed that all but one of these should be withheld from public inspection for a period of at least 50 years from the date of the last action on the papers. The one other file is subject to the 30 year rule.

Criminal Record Checks

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what consultation there has been with voluntary organisations on the cost of criminal record checks by the Criminal Records Bureau; and if he will make a statement; [134677]

(2) if his Department has issued guidance to local authorities on whether the cost of criminal record checks by the Criminal Record Bureau should be paid for by the local authority or the new employee; and if he will make a statement. [134678]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* We have had frequent contacts over many months with voluntary sector organisations on a wide variety of issues concerning the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). There have been ad hoc meetings at both ministerial and official levels with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), with individual bodies such as the Scout Association and with groups of organisations such as national sports bodies. The NCVO represents the sector on the board which oversees and advises Ministers on the programme as a whole, and several voluntary organisations are represented on the Customer Forum, which provides a bridge between the CRB and its future clients. Before making regulations prescribing such matters as the fees to be charged by the CRB, we shall carry out a regulatory impact assessment in consultation with affected bodies, including representatives of voluntary organisations. This will provide a thorough and up-to-date assessment of the implications.

The cost of certificates will be charged to the individual on whom the check is sought, although there is nothing to stop an employer such as a local authority or any organisation reimbursing the individual if they so wish.

Organ Donation Forms

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to require local authorities to send out organ donation forms with their electoral registration forms; [136037]

(2) if he will list those local authorities which send out organ donation forms with their electoral registration forms. [136834]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is the responsibility of each electoral registration officer (ERO) to decide whether to include additional literature with the electoral registration form. I have no plans to change that arrangement. The Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary wrote jointly to the professional associations of electoral administrators to seek their help in encouraging EROs to include organ donation literature with the electoral registration forms which were sent out this year. I have no substantive information about those EROs who have done so in the past.

Lord Lieutenants

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer of 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 216W, regarding lord lieutenants, if he will provide a full breakdown of expenses incurred during the financial year 1999–2000 for the lord lieutenant of *(a)* Greater Manchester and *(b)* the West Midlands; and what mechanisms are in place to ensure that expenses claimed by lord lieutenants are appropriate and provide value for money. [136712]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Costs for the Lord Lieutenancies of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands are higher than those for other Metropolitan Lieutenancies because they include more significant staffing and accommodation costs.

All claims for expenses and other costs incurred by the Lieutenancies in England are carefully considered by the Home Office before payments are made.

Pursuant to this, it may be helpful if I give some further information to put the figures previously provided on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 216W, into their proper context.

Lord Lieutenants are appointed under current legislation by The Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister, following consultations locally and, where appropriate, with the First Minister or Secretary. Lord Lieutenants are much appreciated in their counties and areas, particularly as a link with the Royal Family and for their support of a wide range of local voluntary and community work.

Lord Lieutenants are unpaid. They may however claim expenses from central Government for certain items such as travel and other reasonable non-entertainment expenses incurred in carrying out their official duties. Amounts claimed will clearly vary according to, for example, levels of activity in each county and area, size and dispersal of populations, and the personal circumstances of each Lord Lieutenant. Some choose not to claim any expenses.

In addition, counties and areas provide varying levels of administrative support, as do some Government Departments in respect of functions carried out by Lord Lieutenants on their behalf. The Home Office meets the cost of administrative support for Metropolitan counties in England.

Marsham Street

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir W. Spicer) of 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 452W, on the future of the three tower blocks in Marsham Street SW1, if the evaluation of the two private sector consortia involved in the public private partnership project to provide offices for his department and Prison Service staff has been completed; and if he will make a statement on his Department's latest position with regard to the future of the tower blocks. [136714]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend, the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington North (Ms Buck), on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1167W.

Home Detention

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners have been released in Cumbria under the home detention curfew scheme to date; and if he will make a statement; [136436]

(2) how many of the prisoners released in Cumbria under the home detention curfew scheme have reoffended; and for what offences they have been convicted. [136437]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not available centrally. Data on releases under the Home Detention Curfew scheme are broken down by contract region, and not by county.

However, I will make further inquiries of the electronic monitoring contractor for the Northern Region and write to the hon. Member with this information as soon as it is available. A copy will be placed in the Library.

Sai Baba

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many representations requesting that Her Majesty's Government take action against Sai Baba he has received in the last 12 months; [136849]

(2) if he will make a statement on the activities of Sai Baba involving UK citizens in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* India. [136848]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: During the last 12 months the Home Office has received eight representations from members of the public about Sai Baba, of which seven were from overseas. In addition four representations have also been made by my hon. Friend.

The Government's position is that the members of this, and any other religious organisation, are free to follow their own doctrines and practices provided that they remain within the law.

Fingerprint Evidence

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance is available for chief police officers in standardising procedures for assessing fingerprint evidence; how frequently have standards been changed since a standardised system was first introduced; and what standards are used by police forces of *(a)* other European Union member states and *(b)* the United States. [134881]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The current requirement for presenting fingerprint evidence in court is based on at least 16 points of comparison. This dates from 1935. In 1988 the Home Office commissioned a review of this requirement. A report was published in *Fingerprint World* and the *Journal of Fingerprint Identification* and was placed in the Library. In 1994 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) initiated a review which concluded that fingerprint evidence should in future be based upon the expert testimony of fingerprint officers rather than any particular fixed number of points of comparison. ACPO are planning to introduce a non-numerical standard in the new year, once they are satisfied that the appropriate quality assurance standards, inspection, training and competency testing regimes that will underpin the new standard are in place within force fingerprint bureaux.

There is no single common standard in Europe. Norway has a non-numerical standard while others have numerical standards varying between eight and 16 characteristics. Europol are considering moving to a non-numerical standard.

The United States uses a non-numerical fingerprint standard.

Telecommunications (Records)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines and safeguards govern access to the records of *(a)* mobile telephone service providers, *(b)* cell phone relay masts and transmissions and *(c)* individual subscriber call records; and what body has responsibility for oversight. [134991]

Mr. Boateng: Communications data may be supplied voluntarily for specified purposes (eg investigation of crime) under section 29 of the Data Protection Act 1998 and section 45 of the Telecommunications Act 1984. It may additionally be supplied in obedience to court orders.

A more tightly controlled regulatory regime will be provided for under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Chapter II of part I of the Act regulates access to communications data, explains the duties and responsibilities placed upon each party involved in the process, and creates a system of safeguards.

The overall regime will be subject to oversight by the office of the Interception Commissioner. We aim to consult on a draft code of practice early next year, and to implement the chapter II provisions by April 2001.

Racial Discrimination

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which representatives of the Government attended the August 2000 session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discriminations hearing the UK Periodic report made under the Convention; what were the recommendations of the Committee; and what response will be made to each recommendation. [134880]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government were represented by Sara Marshall, head of the Race Equality Unit at the Home Office, and Henry Steele, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Legal Department. They were supported by Warwick Maynard, Julie Clouder, Brian Quaife and Tim Woodhouse from the Home Office, and Nia James and Paul Bentall from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Copies of the committee's recommendations have been placed in the Library.

A 16th update report, which will respond to all the recommendations, is currently being drafted. It is due to be submitted to the United Nations Committee by April 2001; copies will then be placed in the Library.

New City Creation

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the decision on the creation of a new city will be published. [136309]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No date has yet been set for the announcement of the result of the competition for the millennium grant of city status, but we are aiming for an announcement before the end of the year. City status is a rare mark of distinction granted by the Queen on the advice of Ministers.

Offshore Taxation

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers Her Majesty's Government have in respect of international agreements to require taxes to be levied in the *(a)* Channel Islands and *(b)* Isle of Man. [136781]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The report of the Royal Commission on the Constitution (Command Paper 5460) sets out in paragraphs 1497 and 1513 the limited circumstances in which, in its view, the United Kingdom would be justified in using its paramount powers in respect of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. As indicated in paragraph 1503, and also in paragraph 1535, these include the fulfilment of the United Kingdom's international responsibilities and obligations. Taxation in the islands has always been on the basis of laws enacted by the island legislatures.

Illegal Entrants

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fines have been imposed on transport operators carrying illegal entrants to the UK since the scheme of fines was introduced. [136762]

Mrs. Roche: Since 3 April 2000, when the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 were introduced, and 31 October, 552 penalties have been imposed on persons found to have carried between them a total of 3,127 clandestine entrants to the United Kingdom in their vehicles.

Police Stations (Counter Closures)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police station front-counters have closed in England and Wales, excluding the Metropolitan police area, since 1 January; and if he will make a statement. [136576]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not centrally collected.

Electoral Register

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place a copy of his Department's study into the establishment of a central electoral register in the Library; when the study was commissioned; what the cost was; and if he will make a statement. [136208]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IdeA) was asked in April of this year to consider how access to the separate electoral registers maintained at a local level could be made easier for the purpose of checking that those making political donations were on the register. I will place in the Library a copy of the paper presented by IdeA to a steering group established by them to consider the issues. This group includes representatives of those who have responsibility for the registers and the Home Office. IdeA has undertaken this work as part of its general remit to improve the electronic delivery of services and there has been no charge to the Department.

Discussions are continuing with IdeA and representatives of electoral registration officers. An arrangement for making access to the registers easier and quicker would involve a considerable IT project and is unlikely to be completed before next October. We are considering with IdeA as a matter of urgency what interim arrangements could be made for when the controls on donations set out in the Political Parties, Election and Referendums Bill come into force.

Emergency Planning

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has issued to *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* other bodies regarding emergency planning procedures to be put in place in the event of a further disruption of fuel supplies; and if he will make a statement. [136313]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Organisations likely to be involved in responding to any future disruption to fuel supply have been briefed on the planned arrangements. This includes, for example, the list of designated petrol stations, and the list of Priority Purposes together with guidance on how to implement it.

Local Authorities have been kept updated through established liaison links and by the involvement of the Local Government Association in work carried out for the Fuel Task Force.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* actual and *(b)* planned spending on emergency planning in (i) each of the last five financial years, (ii) 2000–01 and (iii) each of the next five financial years; and if he will make a statement. [136312]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table. The figures are for Home Office expenditure on emergency planning and include grants, which the Home Office allocates to local authorities in England and Wales as a contribution towards their emergency planning activities. However, it is worth noting that other Government departments also have an interest in emergency management, and provide funding that supports recruitment of specialist staff, equipment purchase and academic research.

The Spending Review 2000 exercise, recently completed by Her Majesty's Treasury, has looked forward to the three years 2001–02, 2002–03 and 2003–4. Budget allocations for these years have not yet been finalised within the overall Home Office settlement.

Figures for 2004–05 and 2005–06 will be established in subsequent spending round reviews.

Home Office gross expenditure on emergency planning

£ million

	Actual	*Planned*
1995–96	33	36
1996–97	34	33
1997–98	31	29
1998–99	29	29
1999–2000	38	36
2000–01	[1]36	36

[1] Estimate

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons his Department's grant for emergency planning in Shropshire was reduced between 1999 and 2001. [136836]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The reorganisation of local government necessitated the introduction of a new distribution mechanism for Civil Defence grant which was announced to local authority chief executives in May 1999. The three-tier system includes a basic allocation, a sum for County Councils in respect of Shire Districts and a final element based on population size.

The allocation to Shropshire County Council has fallen between 1999–2000, and the proposed allocation for 2001–02. However, part of this reduction is offset by an increase in funding to the unitary authority of Telford and Wrekin which was formerly part of the county.

Prisoners (Voting Rights)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the law to allow convicted prisoners to vote at local and national elections; and if he will make a statement. [136559]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have no plans to change the law. Neither the Home Affairs Committee report on electoral law and administration in 1998 nor the working party on electoral procedures in 1999 recommended any change to the current provisions prohibiting convicted prisoners from voting.

Fuel Crisis

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* arrests were made and *(b)* charges have been brought in relation to the recent fuel crisis; and if he will make a statement. [136311]

Mr. Straw: In England and Wales, 32 people were arrested as a result of the fuel protests in early September. In addition, 62 people were reported for summons, predominantly drivers of vehicles wilfully obstructing the highway. Information on the number of charges brought is not centrally available.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what emergency procedures his Department put in place during the recent fuel crisis; what reporting requirements were placed on local authorities and others in relation to the disruption and availability of fuel supplies; how the reports were *(a)* delivered and *(b)* distributed; and if he will make a statement. [136314]

Mr. Straw: Ministers and officials across Departments met regularly as the Civil Contingencies Committee. The Home Office Emergency Operations Centre was opened, and other Departments involved activated their own special arrangements. All of these were coordinated by operations based in the Cabinet Office.

Regular situation reports on all aspects of the situation, including from local authorities, were commissioned and distributed as appropriate by email or fax.

Bingo

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to deregulate the bingo industry. [137030]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am publishing today a consultation document which sets out proposals for an order under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act, 1994, to deregulate certain aspects of the bingo industry. Our consultation document makes three specific proposals.

First, we propose the abolition of a requirement for licensed bingo clubs to notify the licensing authority of changes in their charges to players 14 days in advance. This part of our proposals will also have a small benefit for licensed casinos.

Second, we propose to change the law so as to allow bingo clubs to have a mixture of jackpot and lower prize gaming machines.

Finally, we propose to amend the law on multiple bingo—also known as the 'National Game'—so that it can offer more than one national, regional, and house prize.

The Government believe that these reforms will benefit both the industry and its customers. The consultation document asks for responses by 16 February 2001. I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Library.

CRE (Annual Report)

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to publish the Commission for Racial Equality's 1999 annual report; and if he will make a statement. [137031]

Mr. Straw: The Commission for Racial Equality's annual report 1999 is published today and copies have been laid before Parliament.

Exceptionally this year the report goes beyond the 12 calendar months stipulated by the Race Relations Act 1976 and covers a 15 month period thus encompassing both the calendar year 1999 and the financial year 1999–2000.

The Commission for Racial Equality have produced a report which they believe meets both the requirements of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Commission's own need to report on achievements against targets which are based on the financial year.

However, since the Race Relations Act 1976 requires reports to be made in relation to the calendar year, and as soon as practicable after the end of the year, we have advised the Commission that future reports need to follow these requirements until such times as Parliament may decide to amend the Act.

Copies have also been placed in the Library and they have been sent to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 7 November 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

CPS Documents

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will list the conditions to be met for material found in the archives of foreign intelligence agencies to be regarded by the Crown Prosecution Service as of evidential value in legal proceedings. [136231]

The Solicitor-General: Any statement in a document found in the archives of a foreign intelligence agency will be hearsay and inadmissible if the reason for tendering the evidence is to prove the truth of the content of the document, unless the document can be brought within one of the exceptions to the hearsay rule. The most important of these, as regards statements in documents, are found in a number of statutes, for instance the Criminal Justice Act 1988.

Cyclists

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Solicitor-General what the Crown Prosecution Service's policy is on prosecution of cyclists for *(a)* riding on pavements, *(b)* failing to display lights at night, *(c)* riding without warning bells or horns and *(d)* ignoring red signals at traffic junctions. [136257]

The Solicitor-General: Pedestrians and road users should be able to travel safely. Cyclists must take responsibility to ensure the safety of others and where the facilities are available make use of designated cycle lanes and at other times use the roadways. When cyclists have failed to act in a safe way thereby causing or potentially causing danger to others, offences arising out of this behaviour (such as riding on a pavement, failing to display lights, and ignoring signals) will be considered for prosecution.

Where cases referred to the Crown Prosecution Service pass the evidential and public interest tests set out in the Code for Crown Prosecuters, a prosecution will be brought. There is no law stating that pedal cycles must be ridden with warning bells or horns and the Crown Prosecution Service cannot prosecute such cases.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Steele Report

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to publish the report of the review of the proposal for a new police fund to assist the widows and families of RUC officers murdered as a result of terrorist action; and if he will make a statement. [137114]

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 20–21W, what the recommendations are of John Steele's report on implementation of recommendation 87 of the Patten report; how he plans to respond to each of the recommendations proposed; and what estimate he has made of the cost of implementing each recommendation. [135792]

Mr. Mandelson: I received the report from John Steele on 27 October. It is being published today, and copies are being placed in the Library of both Houses. Copies are also being sent to all those parties with whom Mr. Steele had meetings.

The Government are grateful to Mr. Steele for taking on this sensitive review of the recommendation (recommendation 87) by the Independent Commission on Policing and for concluding his review so promptly. We welcome his comprehensive and thorough report. The Government are undertaking a detailed assessment of each of the specific proposals and these will form the basis on which the Government take forward implementation of this very important Patten recommendation.

In particular, the Government agree that a new fund should be established covering in scope deaths and injuries caused directly by terrorist violence against members of the police in Northern Ireland. The fund would help seriously injured police officers, and retired officers and their families, as well as police widows. The Government will establish a Trust to administer the fund, on the basis proposed, as soon as possible.

The Government also accept the key recommendation that widows of police officers who were killed as a result of terrorist activity prior to 25 November 1982 should receive lump sum payments. We will look to see how these payments, along the lines proposed in Mr. Steele's report, can be made without undue delay.

The Government have already implemented the related recommendation, recommendation 88, that the Widows' Association should be given premises and a regular source of finance to run their organisation. The Widows' Association moved into new premises, and funding began, in September.

DEFENCE

Joint Exercise (Oman)

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the armed forces to undertake a joint exercise in Oman in Autumn 2001. [137361]

Mr. Hoon: Exercise Saif Sareea 2 will take place in Oman in September and October 2001. This will be a major Joint and Combined exercise with the Sultan's Armed Forces. The exercise will demonstrate the Joint Rapid Reaction Force concept, which was a central pillar of our Strategic Defence Review by deploying, sustaining and recovering a Joint Task Force at medium scale to conduct an Out of Area Operation. It sends a very clear signal about our commitment to the Gulf region and will show Britain's ability to deploy rapidly a considerable force, with real punch, over large distances. The UK contribution will include a Naval Carrier Task Group, Armoured and

Commando Brigades and around 50 combat aircraft. The exact number of personnel taking part has yet to be finalised, but our contribution will be in excess of 20,000.

Sponsored Reserves

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of Sponsored Reserves. [137548]

Mr. Spellar: The first agreement for the use of what are familiarly known as "Sponsored Reserves" was signed on 27 October 2000 on behalf of the Meteorological Office and the RAF's HQ Strike Command. Introduced by the Reserve Forces Act 1996, this new form of reserve service extends the ability of the private sector and Government agencies to provide specialist support on operations as well as in peacetime. More properly known as special members of a reserve force, sponsored reservists are employed as civilians in peacetime and as volunteer members of a reserve force when deployed to support operations.

The Mobile Meteorological Unit (MMU) provides meteorological support to the RAF in peacetime and to UK and Allied Forces when these forces are operating away from their fixed bases. Some 60 staff of the MMU form a unit of the RAF Reserve. Members will be routinely called out on a rotational basis under the terms and conditions of employment developed from the abroad consultation process with Industry that followed the Reserve Forces Act's coming into force in April 1997. This agreement represents the first use of the SR concept by my Department and builds on the established working pattern of the MMU which has supported operations since 1962 with great distinction.

Departmental Building Costs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 160W, regarding his Department's headquarters in Whitehall, which companies or consortia other than Modus Services plc were *(a)* invited to apply for the public-private partnership contract and *(b)* applied for the public private-partnership contract; what independent assessment was made of his Department's office requirements prior to the contract being signed; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract between his Department and Modus Services plc. [136673]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* As a result of advertisements requesting Expressions of Interest in December 1996, over 30 companies were issued a Preliminary Information Memorandum (PIM) in February 1997. Eight consortia responded to the PIM and six consortia were invited in mid 1997 to submit outline proposals for the public-private partnership project for the redevelopment of the Ministry of Defence Main Building in Whitehall. These were:

Amey/Kvaerner consortium led by Kvaerner Corporate Development (this consortium became Modus Services plc);

British Land, Pell Frischmann and Royal Bank of Scotland led consortium;

Horseguards Group led by Ove Arup and Partners, Dresdner Kleinwort Benson Ltd. and Innisfree Management Ltd.;

MoDeM consortium led by the Bucknall Group;

Mapeley Defence led by Nationsbank;

Paladin Property Partnership led by Trevor Osbourne Property Group Ltd.

In late 1997, invitations to negotiate were issued to three consortia as follows:

Amey/Kvaerner (Modus);

MoDeM;

Mapeley Defence.

The project represents a long-overdue modernisation and rationalisation of the MOD's Headquarters in Whitehall. The building dates from the 1950s, its infrastructure is inefficient, the offices fall well short of modern standards and are close to becoming a health hazard. The requirement was subject to the usual extensive scrutiny within Government and a number of alternatives were considered. I am withholding a copy of the contract under Exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

ALSL

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will publish the bids received for construction of the four vessels under the ALSL performance; indicating how successful and unsuccessful bidders *(a)* met and *(b)* failed to meet his Department's selection criteria; [136744]

(2) what reasons underlay the increase in the budget for ALSL vessels from two to four ships; [136818]

(3) what the final bid prices were for tenders for the ALSL design and build contracts received from *(a)* Appledore/BMT, *(b)* Swan Hunter and *(c)* BAe Systems, Govan. [136819]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Four new Alternative Landing Ships Logistics (ALSL), replacing four LSLs, therefore represents a significant increase in capability. The current Landing Ships Logistic (LSLs) are mostly over 30 years old and of decreasing utility. The new ships will each have double the capacity of the old versions, and be able to offload troops into a potentially hostile environment twice as quickly, at a safer distance, in significantly worse sea conditions. We have always known that the LSLs would need replacing at some point; buying four ALSLs in this manner represents better value for money that running a fleet of two ALSLs and three LSLs and then buying more ALSLs closer to the LSLs' Out of Service Dates.

The bids received, the assessment markings and the prices are commercially sensitive and I am therefore withholding these details under Exemption 7 (effective management and operations of the public service) and Exemption 13 (third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Navy Training Budget

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the budget for training all ranks of Royal Navy personnel in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000, *(d)* 2000–01 and *(e)* 2001–02. [136939]

Mr. Spellar: The figures provided are the training budget in cash terms for the delivery of training at all the shore establishments of the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency. This encompasses initial training (i.e. new recruits) and aspects of career training and Pre-Joining Training, i.e. courses immediately prior to a particular draft/appointment. These figures do not include costs of projections for Royal Marines or Naval Reserves but does include the NRTA HQ costs as these are considered to be a training overhead cost or projection.

The following are the actual expenditure figures for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000, the cash allocation figure for 2000–01 and the Short Term Plan (STP 01) projected Cash Control Total (CCT) for 2001–02:

Naval recruiting and training agency (NRTA)

£ million

Year	*Actual expenditure*	*Cash allocation*	*Project CCT*
1997–98	179.902	—	—
1998–99	192.263	—	—
1999–2000	192.990	—	—
2000–01	—	200.342	—
2001–02	—	—	196.133

AWE Stewardship Programme

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the stewardship programme at AWE Aldermaston and indicate its annual budget. [135406]

Mr. Spellar: The stewardship programme at AWE comprises work, including research, necessary to ensure the continued safety and operational effectiveness of the Trident warhead. The current annual cost is broadly £120 million at 2000–01 prices.

Ordnance Safety

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the ability of bombs and missiles currently in service to withstand repeated take-offs by the aircraft carrying them. [136235]

Mr. Spellar: An initial assessment of the life of a weapon, taking into account all operational factors including take-offs and landings, is made by the Design Authority when the weapon enters service. Further testing and evaluation is carried out while the weapon is in-service to identify any requirement to extend air carriage life.

Overarching Personnel Strategy

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy. [137068]

Mr. Spellar: Copies of the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy were placed in the Library of the House on 14 April.

Rights of the Child

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he will take to ensure compliance with the United Nations Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child. [136954]

Mr. Spellar: We are currently considering detailed administrative guidelines within the armed forces to implement the Optional Protocol. These guidelines will reflect the practical position set out in the UK's declaration on signing the Protocol.

TREASURY

Tax Statistics

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people paid more than £1 million in tax in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [134724]

Dawn Primarolo: There are around 500 and 550 people who had income tax liabilities greater than £1 million in 1997–98 and 1998–99 respectively. These estimates are based on the Self Assessment computer system. I regret that information for 1999–2000 liabilities is not yet available.

Tobacco

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much contraband rolled tobacco was seized by HM Customs in each of the past 10 years for which figures are available. [134411]

Dawn Primarolo: Prior to this year, separate figures for seized rolled tobacco have not been kept centrally. The figures for revenue on all types of tobacco detections for 1993–94 to 1996–97 were given in my answer to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) on 16 February 1998, *Official Report*, column 478W; similar figures for 1997–98 are contained in HMCE Cross Channel Excise Smuggling 1998, a copy of which is in the Library.

For 1998–99 and 1999–2000, the amounts seized were £60.6 million and £297.8 million respectively.

Tax (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax was raised in Wales broken down by *(a)* income tax, *(b)* VAT, *(c)* corporation tax and *(d)* other tax in the last year for which figures are available. [135237]

Dawn Primarolo: For 1998–99: *(a)* the figure for income tax liability from people living in Wales will be included in the next edition of "Inland Revenue Statistics 2000", a copy of which will be placed in the Library of the House;

(b) VAT is a centrally collected tax and the figure for receipts is available only for the UK as a whole (HM Customs and Excise Annual Report, Table A1). However it is possible to estimate tax shares using figures for household expenditure (published by ONS in "Family Expenditure"), apportioned by the number of households (published by ONS in "Regional Trends", or available from the DETR);

(c) corporation tax figures are not available; and

(d) all other Customs and Excise taxes are collected centrally, and figures for receipts are available only for the UK as a whole (HM Customs and Excise Annual Report, Table A1). It is possible to estimate tax shares using household expenditure figures and household numbers (see *(b)*), or per capita of the adult population.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much *(a)* value-added tax, and *(b)* income tax was collected in each tax office in Wales in each year since 1995. [135238]

Dawn Primarolo: Meaningful figures are not available.

Self-assessment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1022W, concerning tax returns, if he will publish the monthly number of self assessment forms *(a)* issued, *(b)* received, *(c)* sent back, *(d)* waiting to be processed and *(e)* processed for each month since the introduction of self assessment. [135872]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 412–13W. The figures for 1999–2000 are as follows:

Tax year 1999–2000

Date	*Issued*[1]	*Received*[1]	*Sent back*[1]	*Processed*[1]	*Waiting to be processed*[1]
April 2000	8,763,125	202,063	3,170	0	202,063
May 2000	111,723	450,747	7,156	33	652,777
June 2000	80,792	668,360	21,613	536,927	784,210
July 2000	48,707	689,542	17,589	575,802	897,950
August 2000	50,490	875,041	18,526	739,180	1,033,811
September 2000	41,072	1,314,559	27,309	740,604	1,607,766

[1] Monthly SA returns

Tax System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publicise the proportion of the purchase price of *(a)* a pint of beer, *(b)* a bottle of wine, *(c)* a bottle of whiskey, *(d)* a packet of 20 cigarettes and *(e)* a litre of unleaded petrol that is represented by tax and excise duty. [136391]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is available in Customs and Excise factsheets on *(a)* beer, *(b)* wine, *(c)* spirits, *(d)* tobacco and *(e)* hydrocarbon oil, copies of which are in the Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish an estimate of the impact of direct and indirect taxes on households in all main income deciles since May 1997. [136419]

Dawn Primarolo: The latest available figures are contained in the article "The effects of tax and benefits on household income, 1998–99" in the April 2000 edition of *Economic Trends*. It should be noted that the detailed results in this article are freestanding, since the underlying statistics do not support direct comparison with articles from earlier years.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the loss to the Inland Revenue in 1999–2000 resulting from *(a)* tax avoidance and *(b)* tax evasion. [136390]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue does not identify these elements separately in their statistics. Figures are published in the Board of Inland Revenue's Annual Report, copies of which are in the Library of the House, and updates will be published in the next edition.

Excise Duties

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of increased excise duties on the Retail Prices Index since May 1997. [136192]

Dawn Primarolo: The impact of changes in excise duties on the Retail Prices Index are published by the Office for National Statistics each year on the Internet. The latest of these can be found at http://www.statistics.gov.uk.

Fuel Taxation

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason aviation fuel utilities on *(a)* UK domestic flights and *(b)* EU internal flights is exempt from fuel taxation. [136544]

Mr. Timms: The relevant EC Directive provides a compulsory exemption for commercial aviation fuels reflecting long-standing international agreement.

Illegal Fuel Imports

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much road fuel has been seized by Customs and Excise in Northern Ireland because it was being illegally imported into the United Kingdom in each of the last five years. [137088]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) on 5 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 201W.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what additional resources Customs and Excise in Northern Ireland have received to deal with increases in the illegal importation of road fuel from the Republic of Ireland. [137089]

Mr. Timms: From within their existing resources Customs and Excise have increased by a factor of four the resource devoted to tackling oils fraud in Northern Ireland, complemented by additional mainland resource for specific exercises.

Petrol Duty

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the current level of petrol duty on the Retail Prices Index. [137105]

Mr. Timms: An assessment of the impact from petrol duty on retail prices is made when producing the twice-yearly economic forecast. An updated inflation forecast will be published in the pre-Budget Report, on 8 November.

Floods (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ensure the deadlines normally applicable for VAT and other tax returns by businesses are relaxed for businesses seriously affected by the recent flooding in Lewes. [136566]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Both Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue will deal sympathetically with any business in serious difficulty as a result of an unforeseeable event such as severe flooding. Deadlines applicable to the submission of VAT and other tax returns are prescribed in law but there is no liability to a penalty where the business has a reasonable excuse for failing to meet its obligations.

Tax (Married Couples)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidelines are issued by the Inland Revenue regarding the tax treatment of married couples where a business partnership exists between husband and wife; if, in these circumstances, an investigation into the tax affairs of either husband or wife automatically triggers an investigation into the financial circumstances of the spouse; and if he will make a statement. [135158]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The tax treatment of a business partnership between husband and wife is the same as the tax treatment of any other business partnership.

The Inland Revenue may open an inquiry into the partnership return and any or all of the partners' personal returns. The official guidance is that before they issue a notice of an inquiry into the partnership return, staff should review the returns of all relevant partners. Where staff decide that they need to check whether the partnership return is fundamentally incorrect, they will normally need to inquire into all of the individual partners' returns as well. This is to ensure that all risks of error or evasion in the partnership are looked at properly.

Where a partner's personal return is selected for inquiry on its merits, without an inquiry into the partnership return, then an inquiry into the spouse's return is not triggered automatically.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the annual cost to the Exchequer would be of disregarding the working mother's allowance in respect of the working families' tax credit. [136831]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I am not aware of a working mother's allowance.

Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, if he will make a statement on the introduction of ultra low sulphur diesel. [137609]

Mr. Timms: The Government are today publishing "Using the Tax System to Encourage Cleaner Fuels: The Experience of Ultra-Low Sulphur Diesel". Copies are available in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office.

Barnett Formula

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes have been made to the English comparator that forms the basis of the Barnett formula in each year since 1997; what consequential changes in allocations to *(a)* Northern Ireland, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales were made as a result; and what the cumulative effect of all such changes was in the current financial year. [137027]

Mr. Andrew Smith: With regard to changes which have been made to the English comparator since 1997, the departmental comparability factors in the Barnett formula which were used in the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review were set out in Annexe C of the Statement of Funding Policy published in March 1999. The factors which were used in the 2000 Spending Review were set out in Annexe C of the updated Statement of Funding Policy in July 2000.

The changes in allocations to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales depend on changes in UK Government Departments' departmental expenditure limits, the relevant departmental comparability factor and the appropriate population share. Increases in the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales budgets were announced in the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review and 2000 Spending Review.

Spending in the current financial year determined in the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review was based on comparability factors used in that review.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the Federation of Small Businesses and *(b)* the Forum of Private Business about Government policy towards the euro. [134379]

Ms Hewitt: I have regular meetings with both the Federation of Small Businesses and the Forum of Private Business to discuss a range of issues regarding the single currency.

US Business Regulation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the operation of sunset regulation in the United States; and if he will make a statement. [136409]

Ms Hewitt: This Department is well aware of the use of sunset regulations in the United States and elsewhere. It is one of the many techniques available to improve

regulatory processes and we are already committed to using it in appropriate circumstances. For example, Part I of the Electronic Communications Act 2000—which received Royal Assent on 25 May this year—is subject to a 'sunset clause'.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the impact of the United States Regulatory Flexibility Act 1980 and the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act 1996. [136408]

Ms Hewitt: David Irwin, the Small Business Service Chief Executive, and I visited the US in March this year.

In addition, a delegation of the Small Business Council visited the US in October and is currently assessing the impact of that legislation. It will make recommendations on the merits of this type of approach to David Irwin in due course.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the impact of the Family and Medical Leave Act in the United States. [136399]

Mr. Alan Johnson: As part of the review of maternity pay and parental leave, I visited the US in July to learn about existing and proposed provision in the US and best practice in US companies. This included discussions with the Department of Labor on the Family and Medical Leave Act. The Department of Labor is currently undertaking an assessment on the Act's impact in the US, but data are not yet available.

Employment-related Litigation

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the cost to business of employment-related litigation in the last year for which figures are available. [136455]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This information is not available.

Universal Bank

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of *(a)* the setting up costs and *(b)* the annual running costs of the Universal Bank. [136708]

Mr. Byers: The Post Office and the High Street banks are working together to develop Universal Banking services. An announcement on costs will be made in due course.

Overhead Power Lines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research he has recently commissioned on the possible link between overhead power lines and cancer. [137199]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department of Health is currently funding both epidemiological and laboratory studies on power lines and cancer. The Department of Health also contributes to the World Health Organisation International Electromagnetic Fields Project and has supported the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study. The electricity industry is supporting high-quality, independent research.

The Department of Trade and Industry has not recently commissioned any research into the possible link between overhead power lines and cancer as it is believed that there is sufficient on-going research sponsored by Government and by other agencies.

The Government also rely on the independent advice from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) for guidance on all forms of hazard to health from radiation, including electromagnetic fields. That advice to date is that, while the possibility of an association cannot be dismissed, there is insufficient evidence of any adverse health effect from the fields from power supplies to which the general public may be exposed.

Postal Services Act

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to bring the Postal Services Act 2000 into force; and if he will make a statement. [137485]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have made the first Commencement Order under section 130 of the Act to set the dates for the coming into force of many of the principal provisions of the Act. In accordance with the Order, these provisions will be brought into force in three phases.

As announced in the pursuant answer given on 6 November 2000, *Official Report,* column 18W, the Postal Services Commission became a statutory body on that date, with many of its new powers, including the power to prepare for the licensing regime. I can confirm that Mr. Graham Corbett CBE has been appointed as Chairman. Mr. Robin Aaronson, Mr. Tony Cooper, Ms Julia Kaufmann OBE, Ms Janet Lewis-Jones, and Mr. Ken Olisa have been appointed as members. The Commissioners have with the approval of the Secretary of State appointed Mr. Martin Stanley as their Chief Executive and he will under the provisions of the Act be a member of the Commission.

Also on 6 November the powers which will pave the way for the establishment of the Post Office company and the transfer of the Post Office's business to this company were commenced (though the transfer will not take place until next Spring).

On 1 January 2001, the provisions relating to the new Consumer Council for Postal Services will be commenced.

On 26 March 2001, the requirements for the full licensing regime will be commenced; and (as this is the day on which it is planned to vest the business of the Post Office in the new Post Office company) the repeal of much of the existing Post Office legislation will take effect.

A further Commencement Order will be made in due course covering the provisions not contained in the first Order. It is expected that most of the remaining provisions will be commenced on 26 March 2001.

Post Office Network

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Post Office regarding the proposals contained in the Performance and

Innovation Unit report on the Post Office Network sub-post offices for a new role for Government general practitioners. [137256]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There have been extensive discussions between my Department and the Post Office on the development of proposals and of a business case for a Government General Practitioner role for the Post Office Network, including sub-post offices.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures his Department is taking to protect suburban post offices from closure in the Sutton and Cheam parliamentary constituency. [136442]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to implementing all 24 of the recommendations in the Performance and Innovation Unit report on modernising the post office network. Many of the measures being undertaken, such as development of Universal Banking services, of a Government General Practitioner role as one stop shop for electronic access to public services and of e-commerce opportunities, will be relevant to all parts of the post office network, whether urban, suburban or rural.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how funds announced in this year's Spending Review for the maintenance of the post office network will be divided between areas defined as rural and areas defined as urban; and to publish the criteria used to define an area as rural or urban. [136716]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* As some of the measures for the modernisation and maintenance of the post office network for which funding was allocated in the Spending Review relate to the network as a whole, it is not possible to give a precise division between rural and urban areas. The Government definition of a rural post office is one located in a community of less than 10,000 inhabitants.

Internet Chat Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the self-regulatory approach in dealing with undesirable and illegal Internet content in the specific case of Internet chat rooms and their use by paedophiles to contact children. [136216]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Illegal content in chat rooms is covered by existing law, and is dealt with by the police in the same way as illegal content in the off-line world.

The Internet Crime Forum sub-group on chat recently published its interim findings (http://www.internetcrimeforum.org.uk/chatwise.html). This group looked at potential means of addressing the problems with chat rooms. Their recommendations were that the best way forward was to educate users and increase awareness of the risks. They suggested further measures on reporting mechanisms and advice to users that service providers should take.

The self-regulatory approach employed by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has proved successful at regulating relatively static Internet content such as web pages and newsgroups. The IWF is generally regarded as a model internationally. However, Internet chat is ephemeral, and the IWF's remit does not specifically cover it. The IWF passes reports that it receives about chat rooms directly to the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS).

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department was represented on the inter-departmental Internet Crime Forum sub-group on Internet chat services; when he will receive the report; and if he will make a statement. [136219]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Both the DTI and the Home Office are represented on the main Internet Crime Forum panel. The Home Office is represented in the sub-group on Internet chat services, although the DTI is not.

The preliminary findings of the sub-group have been published on the Internet Crime Forum website, at: http://www.internetcrimeforum.org.uk/chatwise.html. I understand the full report will be published shortly.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he last met *(a)* Internet service providers and *(b)* web hosting services to discuss guidelines for the provision of Internet chat services with special reference to the protection of children. [136217]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* DTI Ministers discuss matters of concern with ISPs and others involved with web hosting on a regular basis. As Minister responsible for e-commerce, I last met a group representing the ISP industry on 25 May.

I also met representatives of children's charities earlier this year to discuss issues related to the safety of children on the Internet. As a result of this meeting, Government and outside bodies including the charities and the Internet Watch Foundation have developed a set of safety messages for children and their parents on the use of the Internet. These can be found on the Government's UK Online portal at: http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/sub—safety.htm#children.

In addition, representatives of the ISPs attend the Internet Crime Forum, a body that includes representatives from Government, industry and the police. This body, which covers Internet safety issues for children, last met on 26 September.

Robert Maxwell

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 156W, on Robert Maxwell, what arrangements are in place to ensure that the inspectors appointed on 8 June 1992 under the Companies Acts to investigate the affairs and membership of Mirror Group Newspapers plc are providing value for money. [136713]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The inspectors act independently of Government and are

"masters of their own procedure".

However in all Companies Act inspections (including this case) the inspectors maintain regular contact with departmental officials regarding the progress of the inspection and provide detailed analyses in support of claims for costs and expenses.

Off-shore Wind Farms

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future prospects for offshore wind farm development. [136310]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The development of wind energy, both onshore and offshore, will make a significant contribution towards meeting our targets for renewable energy. Energy generated from both onshore and offshore wind installations will benefit from the proposed Renewables Obligation to be placed on electricity suppliers.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced last month a total of £89 million from the Government and the New Opportunities Fund for capital grants for electricity generation from offshore wind and energy crops.

My Department, in consultation with other Departments and potential developers, is working to introduce a streamlined consents procedure for proposed offshore wind energy projects.

Construction of the UK's first offshore wind project at Blyth is now complete, and the turbines are expected to start generating electricity soon.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Birds (Shooting and Trapping)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussion he has had with other EU countries regarding the shooting and trapping of birds during the migration season. [134520]

Mr. Mullin: On 18 September 2000, officials from my Department met with their counterparts from the European Commission and other member states as part of a regular forum to discuss issues concerning the EC Birds Directive, including the hunting of migratory birds.

The Government fully support the Commission in its aim to ensure that member states fulfil their obligations under with the provisions of the Wild Birds Directive and that hunting is carried out only on a sustainable basis.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if there will be a Single Regeneration Budget round seven in 2001–02. [134566]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Following the announcement on 21 July by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that the Regional Development Agencies' funding will be brought together in a single budget from April 2002, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions is considering what arrangements should apply during the transitional year 2001–02. A detailed announcement will be made in due course.

During 2001–02, RDAs will continue to deliver regeneration activity, particularly in the most deprived communities, through the programmes they manage including existing commitments under SRB, the land and property budget, the rural development programme and the skills development fund.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his proposals to finance half-fare travel for senior citizens; and how much he expects each local authority to contribute. [135213]

Mr. Hill: We have said that local government will be reimbursed for the overall additional cost of the statutory minimum concessionary fare scheme, for which provision is made in the Transport Bill at present before Parliament. The Local Government Finance settlement will include an appropriate sum within the Environmental Protection and Cultural Services block, which will be distributed according to the relevant Standard Spending Assessment formula. The implications for individual authorities will depend on whether any concessionary fare scheme which they already provide meets the new statutory requirements, or if it does not what expenditure will be involved in bringing it up to the necessary standard.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he has made to ensure that funding arrangements for the new concessionary fares *(a)* are affordable and *(b)* are sufficiently flexible to operate in rural areas. [137259]

Mr. Hill: Our estimate of the overall annual extra cost in England of the statutory minimum scheme provided for in the Transport Bill is in the order of £47 million. That amount is therefore being added to the lower tier of the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services (EPCS) Standard Spending Assessment (SSA), which is taken into account in the calculation of revenue support grant allocations. An authority's SSA will increase by a share of the £47 million that is broadly in proportion to its current share of the EPCS lower tier. The financial implications of the minimum standard will clearly vary from one local authority to another, according to whether an existing scheme is operated and if so what it provides.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will investigate different models of operation of concessionary fares in order to ensure that the available network is created between urban and rural areas. [137260]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Bill provides for a statutory minimum local authority concessionary fares scheme which will ensure travel for pensioners and disabled people on local buses at half fare or better, with a free bus pass. It is open to local authorities to act jointly to provide a concessionary fare scheme which applies across their combined area, and to provide concessionary travel on modes of transport other than bus.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will launch national and local campaigns to ensure that there is maximum take-up of new concessionary fares. [137262]

Mr. Hill: I certainly hope that there will be a high take-up of the new statutory minimum concessionary fare scheme. The effect will vary from place to place, according to what scheme each local authority does (or does not) provide already; I am sure that local authorities will draw the attention of their residents to local improvements.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the timetable for the full implementation of new concessionary fares. [137263]

Mr. Hill: We do not expect the new statutory minimum local authority concessionary fares scheme to come into operation before 1 April 2001.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Local Government Association regarding the introduction of new concessionary fares arrangements, with particular reference to rural areas. [137258]

Mr. Hill: My officials have had several discussions with representatives of the Local Government Association (LGA) regarding the introduction of the statutory minimum local authority concessionary fares scheme.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of taxis under the new arrangements for concessionary fares. [137261]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Bill provides for a statutory minimum local authority concessionary fares scheme for travel on local bus services. However, it is open to local authorities to offer schemes which provide for travel by taxi as an addition or an alternative to the statutory minimum scheme. In particular, schemes based on tokens, which can be used on taxis, can continue to be offered by local authorities, as an alternative to the statutory minimum. The necessary provision is contained in clause 145(6) of the Transport Bill, at present before Parliament.

Labour Party Conference

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which of his Department's *(a)* paid employees and *(b)* press officers attended the Labour party conference in Brighton. [135155]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Consistent with the terms of their contracts, all Special Advisers attended the Labour party conference. No other officials attended in an official capacity.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135764]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Following publication of the Cabinet Office report "Working Well Together—Managing Attendance in the Public Sector" the Department has been implementing a programme of action with the aim of reducing the level of sickness absence in the Department. Initiatives include new guidance for line managers and staff and improved sick absence monitoring so that a more accurate picture of trends can be identified and clearer understanding of the factors involved appreciated. Health promotion activities have complemented this approach with lifestyle screening, displays, in-house magazine articles and proactive events.

Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for the years 2001 and 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its Service Delivery Agreement. This is to be published shortly.

Recycling (Organic Waste)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what support he plans to give to encourage the development of techniques for the recycling of organic materials in household waste. [136286]

Mr. Meacher: Waste Strategy 2000 set tough statutory targets for the recycling and composting of household waste, to be achieved by 2003–04 with higher targets in later years.

Waste Strategy 2000 also announced the establishment of the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to tackle the barriers to increased re-use and recycling and to create stable and efficient markets for recycled materials and products.

WRAP will co-ordinate and commission research into new or improved processing techniques for recycled materials, including organic household waste, and provide advice, guidance and technical support to people involved in recycling and composting.

Urban Deprivation

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure small pockets of deprivation outside cities receive Government support for regeneration. [136526]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are committed to tackling deprivation and main spending programmes, which are seen as the key for achieving the greatest impact, have been set new targets through the Spending Review 2000, so that the outcomes they achieve in deprived areas improve. They have also received substantial increases from the Spending Review for the next three years. The Action Plan for implementing the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy, which will be published shortly, will set out further proposals for tackling deprivation wherever it occurs, in line with our objective of narrowing the gap between deprived areas and the rest of the country. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit will take this forward cross-departmentally.

Air Service Agreements

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which non-UK and non-US carriers have received further fifth freedom rights from the UK in the last year; and which applications are still outstanding. [136703]

Mr. Mullin: Fifth freedom rights are often the subject of discussion during air service negotiations. In the last year the UK has granted, as part of a balanced exchange of rights, new or additional fifth freedom traffic rights to the designated airline or airlines of the following countries:

Argentina
Azerbaijan
Chile
Colombia
Greece
Grenada
India
Luxembourg
Namibia
Pakistan
Turkey
Turkmenistan
Uganda.

No applications are currently awaiting a decision.

Thameslink 2000

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of the proposed Thameslink 2000, indicating how many passengers the link is expected to carry. [136535]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack's Thameslink 2000 proposals are currently being considered at a public inquiry under the Transport and Works Act. Following the inquiry, the Inspector will make a report to the Secretary of State. It would be inappropriate for me to comment at this stage on the merits or otherwise of the proposals as this would prejudice the inquiry proceedings and the Secretary of State's eventual decision on whether or not to approve the proposals.

Regional Development Agencies

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Regional Development Agencies. [136268]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A report on the performance of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) is currently being finalised for consideration by Ministers. My Department has also commissioned research into the RDAs' Regional Strategies, partnership working, and their monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The results will be disseminated in due course.

Scottish Airports and Air Services Review

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that Scottish airports' consultative committees are involved in the Scottish airports and air services review. [136422]

Mr. Mullin: Scottish airports consultative committees will be formally consulted on the Scottish Regional Air Services Consultation Document when it is published and invited to attend public events during the consultation period which offer the opportunity for further discussion of the document.

Scottish Air Traffic Control Centre

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Scottish Air Traffic Control Centre. [136423]

Mr. Mullin: The New Scottish Centre project is proceeding smoothly. Award of the detail building design contract was made to Gibb Developments on 2 November. The main construction contract will be awarded early next year. Planning applications for site preparation works will be submitted to the local authority soon and initial site preparations are expected to begin early next year. In addition, local surveys on transport, land drainage, topography and soil characteristics have been completed. NATS have already signed an agreement with Lockheed Martin for provision of much of the centre software. NATS have now informed us that the revised forecast date on which the centre will come into operation may now be in the winter of 2007–08 rather than 2006–07. This is because NATS is considering the incorporation of additional software into the centre's systems. It is only because NATS are confident that the existing centre will be able to cope until this later date that they have the option of putting back the forecast operational date to allow the incorporation of these new functions.

Red Routes

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of red route roads there are in England; what steps are taken to enforce the regulations which apply to them; and if he will make a statement. [136671]

Mr. Hill: There are a total of 320 miles of red routes, all of which are in London. The enforcement of the regulations is a matter for the Metropolitan police.

Driving Tests

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have *(a)* passed their driving test and *(b)* progressed to Pass Plus since the introduction of Pass Plus in 1995. [136670]

Mr. Hill: Pass Plus was introduced in February 1995, since when 3,138,795 people have passed the practical car driving test and 108,549 people have successfully completed the Pass Plus course.

Rail Investment

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 173W, on rail investment, if he will set out the advantages and disadvantages of taking an equity stake in Railtrack. [136283]

Mr. Hill: Were the Government to bring forward proposals to increase their current 0.2 per cent. equity stake in Railtrack, we would set out the advantages and disadvantages at that time.

Road Noise

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what sift criteria will be used to determine which trunk roads are priorities for resurfacing to reduce noise levels. [136285]

Mr. Hill: The criteria for prioritising the trunk roads for resurfacing with quieter materials are being developed by the Highways Agency. The Agency will be seeking the views of local authorities on these criteria early in the new year with a view to finalising them in the spring.

Regional Airports

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to regulate the cost of air travel from regional airports. [136280]

Mr. Mullin: On routes within the European Economic Area (EEA), air fares are governed by EC Regulation 2409/92, under which there is a presumption that airlines are free to charge the fares they wish. However, the Secretary of State may require the lowest fully flexible fare to be withdrawn if it is excessively high to the disadvantage of users, taking into account airline costs, the whole fare structure for the route, and the competitive market situation.

In addition, EC Regulation 2408/92 allows a member state to impose a public service obligation (PSO) to protect services, which would otherwise not be provided on a purely commercial basis, on routes serving airports in peripheral regions and thin routes to any regional airport which is vital to the economic development of the region. The Regulation allows for PSO routes to be restricted to a single carrier, subject to an open competitive tender, and for the remuneration of operating losses incurred by carriers selected to operate these routes. PSOs may include a tariff obligation limiting fare levels or requiring concessionary fares for certain categories of passenger.

On routes outside the EEA, it is the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) which has the power to regulate air fares. The CAA's intervention is limited primarily to circumstances where passengers are being substantially overcharged as a result of an airline abusing a position of market power, normally because bilateral government imposed restrictions are preventing free market entry. The CAA's aim is to ensure that flexible on-demand travel is available at a price reasonably related to the cost of its provision, including a return on capital.

Planning Applications

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the guidance given to planning inquiry inspectors on the degree of attention which should be given to local community opinion on planning applications. [136292]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under the provisions of the relevant inquiries procedure rules (the Town and Country Planning (Inquiries Procedure) (England) Rules 2000 (S.I.2000 No. 1624) and the Town and Country Planning (Determination by Inspectors)(Inquiries Procedure) (England) Rules 2000 (S.I.2000 No. 1625)) local views and any other written or oral representations received on a proposed development must always be taken into account by Planning Inspectors in handling a planning appeal or case called-in by the Secretary of State. Like any other material consideration, the precise weight an Inspector gives to such views is a matter for his or her judgment. An Inspector will make a decision (or recommendation in those cases called-in or appeals recovered by the Secretary of State for his determination) on the basis of all the facts presented to him or her, taking into account all the relevant policy guidance.

Quarry Excavations

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what environmental protection measures are in place to mitigate the effects on groundwater of water run-off from quarry excavations. [136291]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency has powers under the Water Resources Act 1991, the Groundwater Regulations 1998 and the Anti-Pollution Works Regulations 1999 to take action where pollution is threatened or occurring. Under the Groundwater Regulations, for instance, it can prohibit, or place conditions upon, an activity such as quarrying where groundwater could be threatened. The exact measures which it might take would depend upon the circumstances of the individual case. Local authorities have a statutory duty to consult the Environment Agency when considering planning consents for quarries and are able to impose conditions to protect groundwater. Minerals Planning Guidance 2 "Applications, permissions and conditions" (1998) contains advice on this.

Advertising Controls

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the regulations relating to areas of special control of advertisements; and if he will make a statement. [135333]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* At the end of June, following consultation on a range of measures to improve the control of outdoor advertisements, I published a proposal to limit the geographical scope of Areas of Special Control of Advertisements (ASCAs) to land within National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Broads, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and conservation areas. We are carefully considering the representations received about ASCAs since the June announcement before coming to a final decision.

Operation Stack

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to be able to announce alternative arrangements to Operation Stack. [136439]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* A feasibility study was commissioned by the Channel Road Transport Group in August 1999 to consider the economic and operational requirements for alternatives to Operation Stack. The Group is chaired by Kent County Council and includes, among others, the Highways Agency and

Government Office for the South East. The Group is currently considering its report and will make recommendations to Ministers for consideration in due course.

Waste Incinerator, Shrewsbury

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed waste incinerator in North Shrewsbury. [136833]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This is a matter for Shropshire County Council as the waste planning authority. I understand that the County Council is currently investigating a number of sites for possible waste transfer stations and civic amenity (recycling) facilities, none of which are in Shrewsbury and Atcham district. Land at Battlefield in North Shrewsbury was provisionally earmarked by the County Council earlier this year for a range of waste facilities, but this location is no longer considered viable. I understand that the County Council has no plans at present for a waste incinerator.

Playing Fields

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Sports Council is a statutory consultee on planning proposals affecting playing fields. [136754]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The English Sports Council, now Sport England, was made a statutory consultee on 5 August 1996 for planning applications involving the development of playing fields. Details of the consultation requirements, including the definition of "playing field", are set out in The Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure)(Amendment) Order 1996 (Statutory Instrument No. 1817).

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many planning applications have been referred to his Department by Sport England since the Town and Country Planning and Playing Fields England Directive 1998. [136756]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Since The Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields)(England) Direction 1998 came into effect on 23 December 1998, 37 planning applications have been referred to the Secretary of State.

Earnings

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 405–06W, on New Earnings Survey data, if he will publish data for hourly wages for the smallest area covering South Gloucestershire Local Authority which does not breach his confidentiality agreement. [136305]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Part A of the ONS publication 'New Earnings Survey 1999' lists the average hourly wage (excluding overtime) in South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority as £9.95. This incorporates employees in all occupation groups.

The Area Cost Adjustment (ACA) methodology only uses occupation groups that are considered relevant to local authority employment. Applying the ACA methodology to the 1999 New Earnings Survey data produces an average hourly wage (excluding overtime) in South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority of £9.72. As indicated in my reply of 31 October, this value for South Gloucestershire contributes to the 'Rest of England' average hourly wage (excluding overtime) figure of £9.91.

Local Authority Wage Information

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 405–06W, on local authority level wage information, for what reason the provision of data for the City of London Authority does not breach confidentiality rules. [136501]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The figure provided for the City of London in my answer of 31 October does not breach the ONS confidentiality agreement, as it is the average figure for the City of London. It therefore does not reveal the disaggregate data which is covered by the confidentiality agreement.

Rural Areas

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide the latest Government or Government recognised figures for the percentage of parishes in England that have *(a)* no shops, *(b)* no post office or sub post office, *(c)* no GP surgery, *(d)* no primary school, *(e)* no secondary school, *(f)* no village hall or similar community centre, *(g)* no dispensing chemist, *(h)* no police station, *(i)* no pub, *(j)* no working church, *(k)* no daily bus service and *(l)* no bank; and if he will give comparable figures for 1997. [136729]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The most recent comprehensive survey of rural services was undertaken by the Rural Development Commission in 1997. It showed:

Percentage of parishes without:	*Percentage*
Permanent shop (of any kind)	42
Post Office	43
GP (based in the parish)	83
School (for 15 year olds)	93
School (for 6 year olds)	50
Village Hall/Community Centre	28
Chemist (of any kind)	79
Police Station	92
Public House	29
Church/chapel	[1]61
Daily Bus Service	75
Bank/Building Society	91

[1] Percentage of parishes which either have no church/chapel or are without a resident minister.

The Countryside Agency is undertaking a further survey of the level of service provision in rural areas this year. I understand that this will be published in the spring of 2001.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the latest available figures for the level of use of public bus services in rural areas; and what the comparable figures were in each year since 1995. [136677]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The data collected by my Department on the number of bus passenger journeys does not specifically identify journeys in rural areas.

However, information provided separately to my Department by local authorities on the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant introduced in 1998 shows that journeys on the 1,800 services funded by the grant have risen from 10 million in 1998–99 to 16 million in 1999–2000.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the formulae used to allocate central Government funds to local authorities have been changed since May 1997. [136725]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Yes. I refer the hon. Member to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), on 13 July 2000, *Official Report,* columns 626–27W.

Area-based Initiatives

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action is being taken to ensure that area based initiatives target money to areas with the greatest need. [136700]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Action Plan for implementing the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, which will be published shortly, will set out how the Government's main spending programmes and its area-based initiatives can best contribute to the target of narrowing the gap between areas with the greatest need and the rest of the country. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit will take this forward cross-departmentally. The £800 million over the next three years for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund will provide extra resources for the 88 most deprived authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships will ensure local people play a part.

Waste Disposal Authorities

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if individual waste disposal authorities are permitted to export some or all of their waste to the areas of other waste disposal authorities within the same region. [137245]

Mr. Mullin: The proximity principle is one of the criteria required to underpin all decisions of waste disposal authorities. However, the precise location for waste disposal is a matter for those authorities and their contractors.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the guidance given by his Department to waste disposal authorities on the regional content for their activities. [137244]

Mr. Mullin: Guidance on the planning for waste at the regional level and its implications for waste local plans and waste disposal authorities is contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note No. 10 "Planning and Waste Management" and in PPG 11 "Regional Planning". They require regional and local plans to be developed in line with the national waste strategy set out in Waste Strategy 2000: England and Wales (Cm 4693) published in May.

Local Authority Reorganisation

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he will make available to local authorities that were reorganised on 1 April 1998 in respect of reorganisation costs incurred by them in 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [137358]

Ms Armstrong: On 14 July I invited authorities that reorganised on 1 April 1998 to submit estimates of the amount of expenditure they expect to incur on transitional costs of reorganisation in 2000–01. On the basis of the information provided by authorities, I have decided the revised maximum amounts that it would be appropriate to allocate towards such costs in 2000–01.

The amounts are as follows:

£000

Authority	*Amount*[1] *2000–01*
1998 Reorganisations	
West Berkshire Council	3,740
Reading Borough Council	3,628
Slough Borough Council	1,894
Wokingham District Council	2,237
County of Hertfordshire District Council	1,711
Worcestershire County Council	4,471
Plymouth City Council	3,515
Torbay Borough Council	2,910
Thurrock Borough Council	3,213
Nottingham City Council	1,095
Halton Borough Council	3,759
Telford and Wrekin District Council	670
Medway Borough Council	2,085
Peterborough City Council	472
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	765
Blackpool Borough Council	980
Total	37,145

[1] Maximum amounts: £000s rounded

Windsor and Maidenhead, Bracknell Forest, Malvern Hills, Southend on Sea and Warrington did not submit bids for SCA.

Needs Indices (Housing Capital)

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the results of the consultation exercise on the needs indices to be used in the allocation of 2001–02 housing capital resources to local authorities and registered social landlords. [137364]

Mr. Raynsford: I am pleased to be able to announce that the needs indices for the 2001–02 allocations have now been finalised after careful consideration of the responses to the Consultation Paper we issued in summer and a number of other representations we have received.

We have, with one exception, made the proposed changes to the local authority stock condition indicator in the Generalised Needs Index (GNI)—the index used in allocation of resources to local authorities. These were supported in nearly all responses. The exception is on the relative weights given to the renovation and improvement elements where we have decided to base these on the relative costs of the work as suggested in a number of responses.

Several of the responses raised concerns over authorities' ability to fund either private sector renewal activity or provision of new affordable housing following the transfer of resources into the new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA), which is ring-fenced for use on council housing. In the light of these responses, I have decided to increase the shares of the private sector stock and new provision indicators in the GNI to 45 per cent.—up from 35 per cent. and 40 per cent. respectively in the Consultation Paper. These increases involve reducing the share of the local authority stock indicator to 10 per cent. but we intend to increase this in the next two years to reflect the extra resources in these years which are expected to be spent largely on improving council housing. The other significant issued raised in the responses concerned the overall reduction in the targeting of resources to deprived areas resulting from the introduction of the MRA. Specific targeting of resources to deprived areas is not appropriate in the MRA but I have decided to increase the level of targeting within the GNI from 20 per cent. to 30 per cent.

The introduction of the MRA and the related GNI changes lead to shifts in the distribution of resources. We will ensure that all authorities with housing stock receive a 2001–02 allocation (housing capital plus estimated MRA) which is at least 10 per cent. above their 2000–01 allocation unless there has been a significant fall in their relative performance or the number of council houses they own has fallen substantially through partial stock transfers or demolitions.

No changes were proposed or are being made to the Housing Needs Index used in allocation of resources to registered social landlords, beyond the usual annual data updating.

A list of the respondents to the Consultation Paper is available in the House Library and Members can view individual responses in the Department's Library. I am arranging for details of the 2001–02 indices for each authority to be placed in the Library of the House.

Green Ministers

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the last meeting of green ministers took place; what was discussed; and which Departments were represented by *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials. [137484]

Mr. Meacher: Green Ministers held their final meeting of this year on 2 November. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Green Minister for that Department, spoke about directing development and promoting agricultural practices to protect and enhance the countryside and wildlife. The meeting also received a presentation on the Work-Life Balance campaign by the Green Minister for the Department for Education and Employment, and discussed how this initiative had implications for many departments.

The Committee also reviewed the handling of sustainable development considerations in the Spending Review 2000 and environmental aspects of Government procurement. The purchase of renewable energy was discussed, with considerable progress noted.

The next meeting will be held in the new year.

The Departments represented by Ministers were: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; Department for Culture, Media and Sport; Department of Health; Department for International Development; Law Officers' Departments; Department of Social Security; Home Office; Ministry of Defence; Chancellor's Departments; Cabinet Office; Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Department for Education and Employment; the Welsh Office; and Northern Ireland Office.

Those represented by officials were: Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Flooding (Shrewsbury)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the performance of local partnerships in coping with emergency planning during the floods in Shrewsbury. [136950]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Partnerships between the Environment Agency, local authorities and the emergency services worked very well in the recent bout of flooding. It is encouraging that the exercising of emergency plans in many areas played an important part in achieving a good response.

SCOTLAND

Small Businesses

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the First Minister on the level of regulations on small businesses. [136479]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with the First Minister on a range of issues affecting business in Scotland.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the National Lottery funding was to *(a)* the English Sports Council, *(b)* UK Sport, *(c)* the Arts Council of England and *(d)* the Heritage Lottery Fund in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000; and what the forecast level is for the current year in each case. [134592]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The amount of Lottery funding (including interest[1]) to *(a)* the English Sports Council, *(b)* UK Sports Council, *(c)* the Arts Council of England and *(d)* the Heritage Lottery Fund in 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 and the forecast level for 2000–01 based on our most recent Lottery income forecast is set out in the table. For the purposes of comparison, the table includes a column (6) which shows the annual share of Lottery proceeds which it was originally thought that each distributing body would receive over the lifetime of the licence. These figures have been adjusted to reflect changes in functions when the UK Sports Council and Film Council were established.

£ million

(1)	*(2) 1997–98*	*(3) 1998–99*	*(4) 1999–2000*	*(5) 2000–01 (forecast)*	*(6) Share of annual projected lottery proceeds as anticipated at the start of the current licence*[2]
English Sports Council	307	256	211	202–244	[3]194
UK Sports Council	—	—	[3]19	22–25	n/a
Arts Council of England	298	235	201	182–203	183
Heritage Lottery Fund[4]	371	315	288	290–319	[4]257

[1] Interest has been included in the data in columns *(2)* and *(5)*, but not in the anticipated income figures in column *(6)*. Also, the amount of interest earned by the distributing bodies varies according to the level of their balances in the NLDF. This explains why some distributors' income has diverged from projections more than others.

[2] This is based on the originally projected Lottery proceeds of £9 billion evenly spread over the seven years of the licence. The figures for individual bodies reflect their notional annual share of total projected Lottery proceeds based on the original allocation of 20 per cent. to the original five good causes adjusted to take into account the establishment of the Film Council and UKSC as Lottery distributing bodies.

[3] UK Sport became a Lottery distributor with effect from 1 July 1999, taking 1.53 per cent. of Lottery income. As a consequence, the share allocated to the English Sports Council was reduced from 13.88 per cent. to 12.6 per cent.

[4] The Film Council became a Lottery distributor with effect from 1 October 1999, taking 2.03 per cent. of Lottery income. As a consequence, the share allocated to ACE was reduced from 13.88 per cent. to 11.85 per cent.

Sydney Olympics

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the dates of attendance of *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials of his Department at the Sydney Olympic Games and the total cost of attendance in each case. [134846]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* As Minister for Sport, I visited the British Olympic Team Holding Camp on the Gold Coast and attended the Sydney Olympic Games between 9–29 September 2000. I was accompanied by a Private Secretary. The total cost of this visit is not currently available as some invoices have yet to be received, but the flight costs for both of us totalled £8,021.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State attended the Games in Sydney on 15–17 September 2000 as part of a wider trip which also included official Government visits in Auckland, Wellington and Canberra. He was accompanied by his Principle Private Secretary. Again, the total cost of these visits is not currently available as some invoices have yet to be received, but the flight costs for the entire visit totalled £11,022.20

The Permanent Secretary of the Department was in Australia on Departmental business from 13–17 September 2000. He attended the Olympic Games with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State from 15–17 September 2000 and accompanied him on official engagements in Sydney and Canberra. His flight costs were £5,946.

In addition, I also attended the Paralympic Games between 14–22 October 2000 accompanied by my Assistant Private Secretary. The flight costs for this visit were £10,670.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the design companies which have secured contracts from the New Millennium Experience Company together with the number of contracts in each case. [135411]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 23 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 622W.

Sports Lottery Fund

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure that funding from the Sports Lottery fund is targeted on the communities that need it most. [135219]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State has issued directions to Sport England under the National Lottery Acts requiring it to take into account a range of issues in formulating its criteria for Lottery funding and in assessing applications for such funding. In particular, the directions require Sport England to take into account the scope for reducing social and economic deprivation, and the promotion of sport for people from all sections of society. All of the requirements of these directions were taken into account by Sport England in the development of its Lottery Strategy published last year. The Strategy commits Sport England to allocating at least 50 per cent. of its Community Capital Projects Fund to areas of greatest need. Projects in these areas may also be eligible to receive higher proportions of Lottery funding. All projects submitted for Lottery funding must be of benefit to the local community and must show a demonstrable need for the facility.

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which regions of the United Kingdom have received Government funding for the tourism industry in each of the last two years. [136537]

Janet Anderson: All the regions of England have received Government funding for the tourism industry in each of the last two years. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport provides funding, through the English Tourism Council, for the Regional Tourist Boards. Other sources of funding for tourism-related projects received by the regions include the National Lottery, the Single Regeneration Budget and the Assisted Areas Programme.

Responsibility for regional funding of tourism in the other countries of the United Kingdom rests with the devolved administrations.

Swimming (Tourism)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Government funding Merseyside metropolitan borough councils received for tourism projects in connection with swimming recreation for *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* the current year to date. [136538]

Janet Anderson: We have contacted a number of organisations to request the information required, and I will write to the hon. Member as soon as it is available, placing copies of my letter in the Libraries of both Houses.

Wembley Stadium

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the reasons for permitting the demolition of the twin towers at Wembley Stadium. [136241]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Approval for the demolition of the twin towers was given by the London Borough of Brent following an application for planning and listed building consent made by Wembley National Stadium Ltd. As the stadium has Grade II listed status, the application for listed building consent was accompanied by a full Heritage Study which considered the question of whether the stadium was capable of adaptation and the feasibility of retaining the twin towers. The new stadium will extend to the north of the existing stadium, and will be considerably higher than the towers if they were reconstructed and incorporated in the new design. In view of these considerations, and having taken into account the merits of the proposed replacement stadium, and wider community benefits, English Heritage, who are a statutory consultee for such applications, did not raise any objections to the application for listed building consent.

National Art Collections

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of works of art and other items from national collections that have been hired out to *(a)* public and *(b)* private sector organisations in the last year; and if he will make a statement. [136612]

Mr. Alan Howarth: DCMS holds precise figures for the number of loan venues, both home and overseas, to which its sponsored national museums and galleries loaned items in 1999–2000. However, the actual number of loan items involved is not held centrally. We have therefore contacted those institutions to request the information for a reply to my hon. Friend. I will write to him as soon as this is available, placing copies of my letter in the Libraries of both Houses.

Museum Appointments

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to alter the arrangements for appointing *(a)* the chairman and *(b)* the trustees of national museums; and if he will make a statement. [136851]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have issued a consultation paper proposing a number of alternative options for changes to the arrangements for appointing the trustees and chairman of national museums and galleries and I am considering the various responses. I have made clear in the consultation paper that I wish to maintain a flexible, consultative approach but one which provides an effective basis for deciding which changes are appropriate.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with chairmen, trustees and directors of national museums regarding an extension of Prime Ministerial patronage in the field of senior museum appointments; and if he will make a statement. [136852]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been consulting the chairmen, trustees and directors of national museums on a number of alternative proposals to improve the process of public appointments to national museums and galleries. I am carefully considering the responses I have received.

Small Businesses (Tourism)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what Government funding is available for advertising by small tourism businesses. [136536]

Janet Anderson: The Government do not provide funding for advertising by tourism businesses of any size. This is a commercial matter for the businesses themselves. However, all tourism businesses benefit from the activities of the British Tourist Authority, whose funding in 2000–01 to promote Britain overseas has been increased to £37 million. They may also benefit from the over £5 million made available via the English Tourism Council to support tourism in the regions. Small tourism businesses, like all businesses, also have access to the full range of business support services available through the Small Business Service.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the potential cost to operators of *(a)* small hotels, *(b)* guesthouses and *(c)* bed and breakfast businesses of the cost of complying with Phase III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and if he will make a statement. [136853]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will provide disabled people with better service and facilities and it will also boost one of tourism's under-developed markets. It is not possible to estimate the cost of complying with the requirements of the DDA by type of property because each case will be different. I recognise the concern among small hoteliers about the potential costs of complying with the Act, but they are only required to make "reasonable" changes to their properties, which means the costs will be reasonable. There is a need for sector specific guidance on the sort of adjustments which are likely to be necessary and my Department is discussing with the English Tourism Council and other bodies how to meet this need.

Paralympiad

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the compliance with public service broadcasting requirements of coverage on television of the 11th Paralympiad. [136434]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* None. Responsibility for ensuring compliance with public service broadcasting requirements rests with the independent regulators.

Hotel Stars

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the operation of the star system for hotel accommodation; and what plans he has to make proposals for its improvement. [136947]

Janet Anderson: The new quality assurance system for hotels and guest accommodation was introduced in September 1999 by the English Tourism Council (ETC), the AA and RAC. Hotels that meet the quality standard are awarded from one to five stars, based upon a mixture of quality and facilities. (Guest accommodation is rated on quality alone and is awarded diamonds).

Take up of the scheme has been steadily increasing since its introduction and we want as many providers as possible to join. We believe that this will help drive up quality standards in accordance with the aims of "Tomorrow's Tourism" and make selection of accommodation easier and more reliable for visitors. The ETC are responsible for encouraging and measuring take up of the scheme and advising Ministers upon its effectiveness. There are no current plans to change the scheme, but we will continue to monitor its progress with care.

Looted Exhibits

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the research recently published by the National Museum Directors' Conference on works in British galleries and museums which may have been looted by the Nazis; and if he will make a statement. [136941]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I welcome the publication by The National Museum Director's Conference on 26 October of the results of the continuing research into the provenance, between 1933 and 1945, of works in their collections. In addition, the plans for similar research into four of the important non-national collections in England were announced. This research demonstrates the sector's commitment to play its part in addressing the issue of spoliated art. An unknown provenance between the dates mentioned does not, in itself, indicate that the item was misappropriated and, to date, only one claim has been made.

Regional Tourist Councils

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the arrangements for distributing funds to the regional tourist councils in the UK. [136770]

Janet Anderson: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for funding the English Tourism Council (ETC). In the current financial year the ETC is making over £5 million of its £10 million grant-in-aid available to support tourism in the English regions. Most of this is being passed to the 10 Regional Tourist Boards under individual funding agreements with the ETC, following a competitive bidding process. The remainder of this regional money is used by the ETC, for instance, for delivering regional services such as inspections under the national accommodation scheme (which have been contracted out to a single provider). Future levels of funding for tourism in the English regions will be decided during negotiation of the next three-year funding agreement between the Department and the ETC and in the light of any further bidding competition run by the ETC.

Responsibility for funding the national tourism bodies in the other countries of the United Kingdom rests with the devolved Administrations, who also make decisions about their own regional structures and funding.

Millenium Dome

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for the future of *(a)* the building, *(b)* the site and *(c)* the contents of the Millennium Dome. [134824]

Janet Anderson: The Government are currently in discussion with Legacy plc, in relation to Legacy's proposal for a high technology business campus at the Greenwich site. The Legacy proposal is currently being analysed by the Competition team in advance of any decision on preferred bidder status. An announcement will be made in due course. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is preparing plans for decommissioning the Millennium Experience from January 2001. That includes returning various assets in the exhibitions that are on loan or hired to their owners, removing any other items of value for sale, and preparing the Dome for its subsequent use. Legacy plc is in discussion with NMEC regarding the scope of decommissioning it would require if negotiations are successful.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Post Office Network

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the funds announced in this year's Spending Review for the maintenance of the Post Office network require approval by the European Union. [136799]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

The European Commission has been notified of the broad outline of the measures to modernise and maintain the Post Office network proposed in the Performance and Innovation Unit report. In developing individual measures in detail, including any funding arrangements, we are consulting with the Commission to ensure compliance with state aid provisions.

Flood Defence (Shrewsbury)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps the Environment Agency has taken to improve flood defence systems around Shrewsbury since October 1998; and if he will make a statement. [136795]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Agency has repaired and maintained upstream floodbanks that provide flood protection to the town. Proposals for a scheme in the town were rejected in 1994 by the borough council. The Agency has since been working with the borough council and the residents to investigate more innovative solutions and identify a scheme that would be both practical to develop and acceptable to the town's people if it meets the Ministry's criteria within which the Agency has to operate.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much the budget of the Environment Agency was each year since 1996 for flood defence systems around Shrewsbury; and if he will make a statement. [136794]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* No capital funds have been allocated for a scheme in Shrewsbury following the rejection of the earlier proposed scheme by the local planning authority in 1994. However, considerable revenue expenditure has been made—more than £1 million since 1996—to repair and maintain upstream floodbanks that provide flood protection to the town.

Agri-Compensation

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Government last made a claim for agrimonetary compensation from the European Commission; and what was the outcome. [136962]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is regarding the arable agri-compensation that will be available by 31 October. [135674]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W.

Dairy Cattle

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he plans to take to address the dairy cattle health and welfare problems associated with further intensification of the dairy industry and a rise in the number of dairy cattle housed indoors throughout the year, in the Government's response to the Farm Animal Welfare Council's report on the welfare of dairy cattle. [136035]

Mr. Morley: The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2000 (SI 2000 No 1870), which came into force on 14 August this year, regulate the conditions in which all cattle and calves should be kept, covering such things as accommodation, ventilation, lighting, feed and water, and inspections. Similar regulations will shortly enter into force in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Revision of our Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Cattle is nearly complete and will reflect FAWC's advice on best practice on all-year housing; we shall shortly consult with all stakeholders on our draft. We have also commissioned a research project involving behavioural studies relating to the welfare of intensively managed dairy cows. And, through the agricultural consultancy ADAS, we run an extensive programme of guidance for dairy farmers.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the *(a)* gross incomes and *(b)* net incomes of farmers were in each year from 1990 to 1995; and what average total subsidy was paid in each of those years. [136571]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information is given in the table.

Average farm output, net farm income and subsidies for full time farm business in England (real-terms, 1999 prices, average year end February)

£000/farm

	Total farm output[1]	*Net farm income*	*Subsidies and grants*
1990–91	161.6	21.3	3.5
1991–92	155.6	21.4	4.1
1992–93	155.9	26.5	7.3
1993–94	158.5	28.0	17.1
1994–95	168.4	33.2	19.2
1995–96	184.8	42.4	23.9

[1] This is broadly equivalent to the concept of gross farm income

Source:
Farm Business Survey

GM Trials

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made by the Government since 31 July in reaching a final agreement with the European Commission on the two metre rules for field margins; when he expects this issue to be resolved; and if he will make a statement. [136220]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 233W, referred to a recognition by Commissioner Fischler of the importance of traditional

landscape features, such as hedges, in implementing aid schemes. This recognition stems from the frequent and intensive contacts that MAFF Ministers and officials have had with the Commission over recent months and, as part of the initiative to simplify the administration of the Common Agricultural Policy, a change to the rules of the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) has now been proposed which would give it practical effect. The proposed rule change would allow United Kingdom farmers to continue, on a permanent basis, to treat field margins in the same way as they have done in the past so far as their inclusion in IACS claims is concerned and would remove the risk of environmental damage that might have resulted from strict application of "two metre rule". This change would also avoid imposing extra burdens of "red tape" on farmers or any adverse impact on their returns under the IACS schemes. The Government welcome this proposal and will press for its rapid adoption.

Arable Farmland

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes there were in the average value of arable farmland in England from 1990 to 2000. [136591]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* MAFF's agricultural land prices series are derived from returns made to the Valuation Office Agency of the Inland Revenue. Arising from changes in the manner in which the data were transmitted and compiled last year, there were some changes in definitions occasioning a break in the series. This break occurs in 1993; hence it is not possible to have a comparable series before and after that year. The latest available data refer to the year 1999 (and figures for this and the two preceding years are still provisional). The MAFF series are not defined directly for arable farmland but there is a categorisation by predominant grade of land. It is probably the case that Grades 1 and 2 land would be closest to arable land for most situations and this general assumption is made for the purpose of these valuations. The average price of Grades 1 and 2 farmland in England rose from £3,617 per hectare in 1993 to £7,172 in 1999, representing an increase in current (nominal) price terms of 98.3 per cent. The increase was not continuous and peaked in 1997 when the price was £7,339 per hectare; it declined to £6,941 in 1998, before rising somewhat again last year. In real (constant 1995 price) terms the overall increase for the period 1993 to 1999 amounted to 68.8 per cent.

ERDP

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the total funding for the ERDP in each of its seven years broken down by *(a)* source of funding and *(b)* component scheme. [136724]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The table shows the planned expenditure and sources of funding for each measure under the ERDP over the period 16 October 1999 to 15 October 2006.

£ million

	FEOGA years							
Measure	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*2003*	*2004*	*2005*	*2006*	*Total*
Investment in Agricultural Holdings								
Total	0.0	1.0	1.5	2.3	3.3	3.7	4.8	16.6
Of which:								
EU Contribution	0.0	0.5	0.8	1.1	1.6	1.8	2.4	8.3
Exchequer Contribution	0.0	0.5	0.8	1.1	1.6	1.8	2.4	8.3
Training								
Total	0.0	2.1	2.5	3.6	4.0	4.0	5.7	22.0
Of which:								
EU Contribution	0.0	1.1	1.3	1.8	2.0	2.0	2.9	11.0
Exchequer Contribution	0.0	1.1	1.3	1.8	2.0	2.0	2.9	11.0
Less Favoured Areas								
Total	42.4	43.8	40.9	37.4	34.8	27.2	27.2	253.8
Of which:								
EU Contribution	11.4	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1	54.0
Exchequer Contribution	31.0	36.7	33.9	30.3	27.8	20.1	20.1	199.8
Agri-environment								
Total	83.6	111.3	122.1	137.6	153.5	169.2	183.8	961.1
Of which:								
EU Contribution	34.8	34.5	29.1	23.7	18.3	16.2	13.7	170.3
Exchequer Contribution	48.8	64.6	71.5	80.6	90.0	99.8	108.8	564.1
Modulation Receipts	0.0	12.2	21.5	33.3	45.2	53.2	61.3	226.7
Improving Processing and Marketing of Agricultural Products								
Total	0.0	2.2	6.3	8.0	8.0	8.0	11.4	44.0
Of which:								
EU Contribution	0.0	1.1	3.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.7	22.0
Exchequer Contribution	0.0	1.1	3.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.7	22.0
Afforestation of Agricultural Land								
Total	15.5	20.3	23.9	26.1	27.1	29.1	30.1	172.0
Of which:								
EU Contribution	5.3	5.7	6.6	6.9	7.3	8.0	6.6	46.4
Exchequer Contribution	10.2	13.0	15.4	17.2	17.8	19.1	19.7	112.3
Modulation Receipts	0.0	1.6	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.8	13.3

£ million

Measure	FEOGA years[1] 2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Other Forestry Measures								
Total	7.8	8.5	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7	64.9
Of which:								
EU Contribution	0.2	0.8	1.4	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0	10.2
Exchequer Contribution	7.6	7.7	8.3	7.8	7.8	7.7	7.7	54.7
Adaption and Development of Rural Areas								
Total	0.0	4.3	9.5	17.5	28.6	33.2	47.2	140.3
Of which:								
EU Contribution	0.0	2.2	4.8	8.7	14.3	16.6	18.7	65.3
Exchequer	0.0	2.2	4.8	8.7	14.3	16.6	28.5	75.0
Total expenditure	149.3	193.5	216.6	242.1	269.1	284.0	320.0	1,674.7
Of which:								
EU Contribution	51.7	52.9	54.1	55.3	56.5	57.7	59.1	387.4
Exchequer Contribution	97.7	126.8	139.0	151.6	165.3	171.1	195.8	1,047.2
Modulation Receipts	0.0	13.8	23.4	35.3	48.2	55.2	65.1	240.0

[1] FEOGA years run from 16 October to 15 October

BSE

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence his Department has obtained that links new variant CJD in humans with BSE in cattle. [135915]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 31 October 2000]*: I have been asked to reply.

We are advised on all matters relating to Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC). At its meeting in March 1999, SEAC advised that

> BSE and vCJD were caused by a closely similar prion strain, and concluded that variant CJD was an acquired prion disease caused by exposure to BSE or a BSE like agent.

CABINET OFFICE

Drugs

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she will report progress on the Government's 10-year anti-drugs strategy; and if she will make a statement. [137184]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's second Annual Report is published today and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The report sets out progress during 1999–2000 in delivering our targets across the four aims of the Government's 10-Year Strategy which reflect the balance of our policies across all aspects of the drug misuse problem. Those aims are: helping young people to resist drug misuse; protecting our communities from drug related anti-social and criminal behaviour; increasing the numbers of drug misusers in treatment; and reducing the availability of drugs on our streets.

We have met most of our annual targets and are on track for our targets for 2002. Key achievements include: the establishment of the Drugs Prevention Advisory Service (DPAS), with nine regional teams to support the work of Drug Action Teams (DATs); establishment of a framework for a holistic approach to drug education in schools through Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) which is now in the national curriculum for the first time—Ofsted reports indicated that 93 per cent. of secondary and 75 per cent. of primary schools now have a drug education policy; targeted prevention work for young people at risk through Health Action Zones; arrest referral schemes covering all custody suites in all police forces in England and Wales expected well ahead of our 2002 target; steady increase in drug misusers attending treatment services—around 7 per cent. over six months from March 1999 to September 1999; CARATs—the Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare programme for drug misusers is now available in every prison in England and Wales; and co-ordinated law enforcement activity leading to some £1.2 billion of Class A drugs being prevented from reaching our streets—an increase of 33.5 per cent on the previous year; and an increase of 9.2 per cent. in the number of Class A trafficking groups disrupted—nearly double the target.

Good progress has been made, but there is still a lot to do. New money made available to the Anti-Drugs Strategy under the Spending Review for 2001 to 2004 will help us to do more to drive forward the Strategy's key targets for 2005 and 2008 and increase our proactive efforts to prevent and tackle drug misuse.

Focus 5000

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what the cost was in the last 12 months for which figures are available of servicing the Focus 5000 group; [136928]

(2) how many people have left the Focus 5000 group since its inception; and how joiners are recruited; [136924]

(3) how she ensures that the Focus 5000 group is representative of the UK population; [136929]

(4) if she will list the policy initiatives and options that have been tested on the Focus 5000 group. [136926]

Marjorie Mowlam: The cost of servicing the Panel over the last 12 months is £146,750, made up of:

Two top-up recruitment exercises of 500 Panel members: £49,250 each exercise.

Recruitment of a booster of 830 Panel members from ethnic minority communities: £61,500.

In addition, the contractor is paid a £9,000 quarterly management fee.

Since the Panel was set up in 1998, 450 members have asked to leave. The original members were recruited by MORI (contracted to run the Panel) using a pre-selected random sample in 714 sampling points at addresses across the United Kingdom. In order to ensure the correct number of young people joined the Panel, a booster survey was conducted among 16–24 year olds.

Since 1998, there have been two top-up recruitment exercises, both from a pre-selected ramdom sample of addressees, but stratified towards more deprived areas and those with a greater proportion of young people.

Although the proportion of original Panel members coming from ethnic minorities is representative of the UK population as a whole, it is too small to analyse their views in detail. We have, therefore, recruited 830 new members with ethnic minority backgrounds.

The Panel has a profile that is representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender, region and a wide range of other demographic indicators. Research results are benchmarked against other surveys that MORI carry out for other central Government Departments and local authorities and we have also commissioned a small study looking at representativeness of research carried out using the Panel; by comparing individual responses among those who took part in the most recent wave of research and in 1998 on service satisfaction questions.

A full evaluation of the effectiveness of the Panel in helping shape Government policy and how representative it now is will be carried out early in 2001. The results will be published.

Five major waves of quantitative research and several qualitative research projects have been carried out using the People's Panel. These have supported a number of policy initiatives. Summaries of the research results have been placed in the House Library and published on the internet. I shall send copies to the hon. Member.

Honours Unit

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people are employed in the Honours Unit. [136702]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Ceremonial Branch of my Department, which has policy responsibility for honours matters and oversees the preparation of recommendations for the Prime Minister's Honours Lists and the public honours nominations service, comprises 18 people.

Public Services Productivity

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what seminars have been organised for Government Ministers and senior civil servants on public services productivity; and if she will make a statement. [135896]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) in the Cabinet Office has organised jointly with the Public Services Productivity Panel a seminar for senior officials. More broadly, CMPS's programme of seminars for Ministers and senior civil servants addresses a range of themes with the overarching aim of improving the quality and efficiency of public services.

PRIME MINISTER

Far East Prisoners of War

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister when he will make an announcement on a special gratuity for *(a)* former Far East prisoners of war and *(b)* their widows. [137108]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the Statement given in the House today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

GMO Research

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the projects funded by her Department since 1 May 1997 that partially or wholly involve research into genetically modified organisms indicating their aggregate cost. [136621]

Clare Short: The information requested is as follows. The aggregate cost of some £5.4 million is being spent over average project lives of three to four years.

Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy

Projects Involving the Potential Release of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)[1]

Plant Sciences

Crop Resistance to the Nematodes Globodera and Naccobus in Bolivian Hillside Potato Production

University of Leeds; PROINPA, Bolivia; 1 October 1997–30 September 2000; £88,518 [R6830][2]

Development and Application of Transformation Systems in Rice

John Innes Institute; IRRI; University of Dhaka; University of Delhi; IIAR, India; 1 September 1997–31 August 2000; £288,649 [R6948][2]

Modelling Gene Flow in Pigeonpea

University of Birmingham; ICRISAT; NBPGR, India; 1 April 1999–31 March 2002; £199,276 [R7261C][3]

Durable Crop Resistance in Rice and Potato Plants to Nematodes

University of Leeds; IRRI; WARDA; PROINPA, Bolivia; 1 January 1999–31 December 2001; £289,205 [R7294][3]

Transgenic Rice with Resistance to Rice Yellow Mosaic Virus

John Innes Institute; WARDA; 1 July 1999–30 June 2002; £335,683 [R7415][3]

Transformation and Mapping of Natural Resistance to Rice Yellow Mottle Virus and Nematodes

John Innes Institute; WARDA; 1 January 2000–31 December 2002; £97,728 [R7548][3]

Crop Protection

Review of Genetically Modified Pest Management Technologies for Use in Developing Countries

NRI; CICR, India; WARDA; ODI; PROINPA, Bolivia; University of Leeds; 21 February 2000–30 September 2000; £54,943 [R7585][2]

Fish Genetics

Development and Exploitation of Transgenic Tilapia

University of Wales—Swansea; University of Southampton; 1 April 1998–31 March 2000; £219,468 [R7113][2]

Production of Improved Reversibly Sterile Strains of Tilapia, Field Testing

University of Southampton; 1 April 2000–31 March 2004; £304,000 [R7591][1]

Animal Health

Development of a Genetically Marked Rinderpest Vaccine

Institute of Animal Health—Pirbright Laboratory; 1 October 1997–31 March 2000; £119,698 [R7048][2]

Pen-side Diagnostics for the Detection of Antibodies Against a Marked Rinderpest Virus (RPV) Vaccine

Institute for Animal Health (Pirbright); IVRI, India; SVDL, Ethiopia; PARC, Kenya; 1 May 1999–30 April 2002; £223,549 [R7362][3]

Evaluation of Candidate Genes for Dominant Cytotoxic T Lymphocytes Target Antigens for Use as Vaccine Components

Institute for Animal Health (Compton); ILRI; 1 October 1999–30 September 2002; £206,877 [R7365][3]

Review Studies

Predicting Costs and Benefits to Livelihoods of the Poor in Developing Countries from "Terminator" Gene Technologies—GS Consulting; 1 July 1999–29 February 2000; £35,000 [R7573][2]

Projects Involving the Use of GMOs for Diagnostic and Research Purposes[4]

Crop Post-Harvest

Development of Low Cost and Simple Technologies for Aflatoxin Estimation in Foods and Feeds

SCRI; ICRISAT; 1 April 1998–31 March 2001; £164,754 [R7083F][3]

Investigation of Role of Pectate Lyase in Banana Fruit Ripening Using Gene Transformation Techniques

NRI; HRI; 1 April 1998–31 March 2001; £45,000 [R7160][1]

Crop Protection

Identification of Varieties with Durable Resistance to Rice Yellow Mottle Virus

WARDA; IER, Mali; INAR, Niger; 1 October 1997–30 September 2001; £208,265 [R6723H][1]

Analysis of Host Specificity Gene in Vascular Bacterial Pathogens of Banana and Plantain

NRI; 14 October 1998–28 February 1999; £18,454 [R7248][2]

Study on Diversity within Maize Bushy Stunt Phytoplasma in Central America

NRI; CENTA, El Salvador; CIMMYT; 1 January 1999–30 June 1999; £19,714 [R7318][2]

Optimisation and Dissemination of a Molecular Identification Module for Phytophthora Species

SCRI; CABI Bioscience—Egham; 15 February 1999–15 May 1999; £15,347 [R7337][2]

Management and Molecular Characterisation of Bemisia tabaci and Tomato Leaf Curl Virus Disease on Tomato in India

NRI; 1 September 1999–31 August 2002; £295,672 [R7460][1]

Study on Variation and Management Strategies for Banana Streak Virus in Uganda

John Innes Institute; 1 November 1999–31 December 2000; £64,559 [R7478][1]

Strategies for the Sustainable Deployment of Cassava Mosaic Disease-Resistant Cassava in Eastern Africa

NRI; NAARI, NARO, Uganda; 1 November 1999–31 October 2002; £492,502 [R7505][1]

Characterisation of West African Rice Blast Lineages and Resistance Sources

HRI; WARDA; SARI, Ghana; CRI, Ghana; 1 December 1999–30 November 2002; £364,334 [R7552][1]

Integrated Management of Banana Diseases in Uganda

CABI Bioscience—Egham; University of Reading; Uganda National Banana Research Programme; KARI, Uganda; IITA; 1 January 2000–31 December 2002; £329,361 [R7567][1]

Characterisation and Epidemiology of Root Rot Diseases Caused by Fusarium and Pythium spp. in Beans in Uganda

NRI; HRI; CIAT; KARI, Uganda; NAARI, Uganda; PPRI, South Africa; 1 February 2000–31 March 2003; £445,236 [R7568][1]

Investigation of Epidemiology and Management of Virus Diseases of Vegetable Crops

HRI; NRI; KARI, Kenya; CABI Bioscience—Kenya; Wye College; 1 March 2000–31 March 2003; £441,294 [R7571][1]

Animal Health

A Laboratory Animal Model for Screening of Theilerial Vaccine Candidates

Roslin Institute; ILRI; 1 April 1998–31 March 1999; £20,067 [R7163][2]

Further Information

DFID Natural Resources Project Database on the internet <www.narsis.org>

Acronyms

CENTA—Centro Nacional de Technologia Agropecuaria y Forestal, El Salvador

CIAT—Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical, Colombia

CICR—Central Institute for Cotton Research, India

CIMMYT—Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maiz y Trigo, Mexico

CRI—Crops Research Institute, Ghana

HRI—Horticulture Research International

ICRISAT—International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, India

IER—Institut Economie Rurale, Mali

IIAR—Indian Institute for Agricultural Research, India

IITA—International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, Nigeria

ILRI—International Livestock Research Institute, Kenya

INRA—Institute National de la Recherche Agronomique, Niger

IVRI—Indian Veterinary Research Institute

IRRA—International Rice Research Institute, Philippines

KARI—Kenya Agricultural Research Institute

KARI—Kawanda Agricultural Research Institute, Uganda

NAARI—Namulonge Agricultural and Animal Research Institute, Uganda

NARO—National Agricultural Research Organisation, Uganda

NBPGR—National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, India

NRI—Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich

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ODI—Overseas Development Institute

PARC—Pan-African Rinderpest Campaign, Kenya

PPRI—Plant Protection Research Institute, South Africa

PROINPA—Programma de Investigacion de la Papa, Bolivia

SARI—Savanna Agricultural Research Institute, Tamale, Ghana

SCRI—Scottish Crops Research Institute

SVDL—Sabeta Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, Ethiopia

WARDA—West African Rice Development Association, Cote d'Ivoire

[1] Projects commissioned after 1 May 1997; total commitment £2,462,594

[2] Completed projects

[3] Ongoing projects

[4] Projects commissioned after 1 May 1997; total commitment £2,924,559.

Misuse of Aid

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what measures are in place to prevent British aid being used to fund or encourage illegal activity in developing countries; [136635]

(2) what steps are taken to ensure that British aid is not misused; and if she will make a statement. [136630]

Clare Short: The Department's Office Instructions manual, a copy of which is available in the Library, contains an explicit requirement for all development assistance to comply with the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980. If there was any question regarding the legality of an activity in the country concerned, this would be addressed as part of the appraisal procedure. All expenditure is subject to subsequent monitoring, accounting and audit processes to verify that funds are used for the purposes intended. External scrutiny of the Department's expenditure is carried out by the National Audit Office on behalf of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the scope for corruption in sector-wide approaches to aid. [136637]

Clare Short: Sector-wide approaches are considered after careful appraisal of a wide range of factors which include, in particular, the robustness and integrity of financial management systems. Where such systems have inadequate controls, separate procurement, disbursement and/or audit channels are used. Technical assistance associated with a sector-wide approach can include strengthening of the expenditure management, procurement, reporting, accounting and audit capacity of the sector concerned. Thus sector-wide approaches help deliver country wide improvements in health and educational provision and improved financial management.

Publications

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her document "Fair-Trade, Overview, impact and challenges" cost to produce. [136632]

Clare Short: It cost £57,542.

Imfundo Project

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department has spent on the Imfundo project. [136633]

Clare Short: The total spend (excluding staff costs) on the Imfundo project to date is £52,957.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Carers

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers in receipt of their retirement pension do not qualify for the full amount of Invalid Care Allowance. [136446] [136595]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that up to 110,000 carers in Great Britain in receipt of retirement pension have made a claim to Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) at some point but do not currently qualify for the full amount of the allowance due to the overlapping benefit rules.

Note:

Those who have never claimed ICA due to receipt of an overlapping benefit will not be included.

Source:

ICA unit administrative data and projections of underlying entitlement cases aged over State pension age. Rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many married couples who were carers, over the age of 60 years and both in receipt of the state pension, were not entitled to Invalid Care Allowance in the last year for which figures are available. [136447] [136596]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers over the age of 65 years he expects to claim Invalid Care Allowance under the package for carers announced in October. [136444] [136598]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that 40,000 individuals aged 65 or over who are also carers will benefit by being eligible to claim Invalid Care Allowance under the extension of new claims entitlement to that age group.

Note:

Due to the difficulty of modelling entitlement to ICA from survey data and the small sample sizes used, this estimate must be treated with caution.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1997–98, 1998–99. ICA caseload forecasts. Estimates rounded to the nearest five thousand.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much additional funding he has allocated for the package of measures for carers announced in October. [136445] [136597]

Mr. Bayley: The allocation amounts to £191 million over the three years 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Pensions and Working Age Agencies

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made in establishing *(a)* a pensions agency and *(b)* a working age agency. [135524]

Angela Eagle: Project teams are in place to take work forward on the design and development of the pensions organisation and working age agency. The projects are working closely together to ensure a smooth migration to the new organisations without disrupting the existing service to benefit clients. The project teams report regularly to Ministers on progress.

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of abolishing the overlapping benefits rule for those over pension age in the case of Invalid Care Allowance in order to ensure that full-time carers over pension age could receive ICA in addition to any state pension. [135081]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that the cost of abolishing the overlapping benefits rules in the case of Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) for those over state pension age in 2002–03 would be about £400 million.

Notes:

1. Cash prices, rounded to nearest £50 million.

2. Given the limitations of modelling entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance from survey data the estimate should be treated with caution.

3. It is assumed that take-up among the entitled group will be 100 per cent.

4. An adjustment has been made for Income Related Benefits (IRB) effects.

Sources:

Family Resources Survey 1998–99, ICA quarterly extract September 1999 and ICA caseload forecasts.

In-patients Costs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what studies his Department has conducted into the everyday (out of hospital) financial costs borne by pensioners who go into hospital for six weeks or more. [136546]

Mr. Rooker: None.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people, who have previously been awarded a life award of disability living allowance at high rate, have had their disability living allowance downgraded following a review in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland. [135860]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) life awards[1] at higher rate downgraded following review[2] for the period 1 December 1993 to 31 May 2000

	Great Britain	*Scotland*
All downgradings[3,4,5]	55,500	7,200
Downgraded to lower rate[3]	11,800	1,800
Downgraded to fixed term[4]	44,600	5,500

[1] The term "life award" was removed from legislation in January 2000. Therefore figures may include a small number of indefinite awards.

[2] From October 1999 reviews were replaced by two new processes, reconsideration and supercession, which are included in these figures.

[3] Figures consist of cases where the higher rate of either the care or the mobility component has been reduced.

[4] Figures consist of cases previously awarded for life which are then awarded for a fixed period of time.

[5] Includes a small number of cases which were both downgraded to a lower rate and downgraded to a fixed term so figures will not sum.

Note:

DLA was created in 1992.

Source:

DSS Information Centre: 5 per cent. data rounded to the nearest hundred.

It is important to note that "life awards" of DLA was never intended to guarantee benefit entitlement up to death. They were always subject to change where, for example, a person no longer continued to satisfy the rules of entitlement, or where an error had been made. The criteria for changing a DLA award were, and remain, the same as those that apply to changes of almost all Social Security benefits. The Government recognised that the "life award" terminology in DLA was in this respect unsatisfactory because it created uncertainty. In the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 the terminology was changed to bring it in to line with other benefits. Awards previously termed "for life" are now termed "indefinite". The Department routinely examines cases to make sure that people are still entitled.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will publish the criteria by which sufferers from Carpal Tunnel Syndrome are determined to be in eligible occupations for the purpose of receiving benefit; [137242]

(2) if an individual diagnosed as suffering from Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is eligible for industrial injuries disablement benefit. [137241]

Mr. Bayley: Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit may be payable to people who are diagnosed as suffering from Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. To be entitled, they must have worked as an employed earner in an occupation involving the use of hand-held powered tools whose internal parts vibrate so as to transmit that vibration to the hand, but excluding those that are solely powered by hand. They must also have a disablement assessed at 14 per cent. or more.

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for Attendance Allowance have been received in each quarter of the last three years; and of those how many were *(a)* successful, *(b)* unsuccessful, *(c)* subject to appeal and *(d)* successful at appeal. [136806]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Attendance Allowance claims

		Decided[1]	
Quarter ending	*Received*	*Successful*	*Unsuccessful*
June 1997	115,334	76,484	32,119
September 1997	101,077	75,948	31,640
December 1997	98,112	69,741	27,448
March 1998	97,727	73,995	25,600

Attendance Allowance claims

Quarter ending	Received	Decided[1] Successful	Unsuccessful
June 1998	102,246	71,762	26,471
September 1998	104,411	74,384	25,440
December 1998	98,680	71,212	25,490
March 1999	108,677	75,196	26,858
June 1999	101,702	73,844	27,099
September 1999	98,377	73,132	26,725
December 1999	90,158	58,795	19,729
March 2000	104,929	75,676	23,262

[1] Figures include claims received before the quarter
Source:
DSS Information Centre: 100 per cent. data

Attendance Allowance review and appeal decisions[1]

Quarter ending	Review decisions[2] Total	Review decisions[2] Successful[3]	Appeal decisions Total	Appeal decisions Successful[4]
June 1997	26,541	15,593	1,207	725
September 1997	31,497	17,561	1,399	804
December 1997	29,922	16,939	1,360	770
March 1998	29,267	16,892	1,696	894
June 1998	24,415	13,811	1,651	873
September 1998	24,716	13,725	1,697	833
December 1998	24,122	13,571	1,494	782
March 1999	26,052	14,431	1,546	772
June 1999	23,310	12,676	1,697	796
September 1999	26,284	14,004	1,566	729
December 1999	17,895	8,722	1,257	602
March 2000	22,143	12,779	1,261	557

[1] Figures include claims received before the quarter.
[2] Figures include supersessions and reconsiderations from October 1999.
[3] Figures relate to previously unsuccessful claims where benefit is awarded, and to awards which are increased in value.
[4] Figures relate to previously unsuccessful review decisions where benefit is awarded or where the value of the award is increased.
Source:
DSS Information Centre: 100 per cent. data.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the measures that have been taken to reduce out-patient and in-patient NHS waiting lists in the last year for hospitals serving *(a)* the Greater London Area and *(b)* the residents of the Borough of Kingston upon Thames. [135778]

Mr. Denham: Within the Greater London area, specific measures to reduce in-patient waiting lists have included the provision of additional theatre lists, weekend working, the recruitment of extra staff and collaborative arrangements with the private sector.

Measures to reduce out-patient waiting lists in London include the provision of more clinics, the implementation of good practice recommendations from the National Patients Access team such as establishing booking system for out-patients, close working with primary care to develop agreed referral guidelines to ensure that the right patients are referred to the right clinics. Other measures include expanding the range of professionals who can see and manage patients health needs through learning from the beacons initiative. We have also established a work programme with National Health Service trusts in London to ensure best practice out-patient systems are put in place to reduce waiting times. All trusts have in place plans to improve waiting times for outpatients and a director responsible for implementing the plan.

These developments have resulted in a fall in the total number of London residents waiting for treatment by 29,000 from 167,000 to 138,000 (August 2000) since the General Election.

All these measures will have benefited residents of the Borough of Kingston upon Thames. In addition, local initiatives for in-patients have included Kingston Hospital running additional operating sessions including day case sessions at the weekend, the local health authority funding additional equipment and the appointment of a discharge co-ordinator. Finally Kingston and District NHS Trust has received capital funding to assist with the reduction in waiting lists. This has enabled the trust to buy additional equipment for use in out-patient clinics.

Antidepressants

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to combat the increase in the prescribing of SSRI antidepressants; and if he will make statement. [136002]

Mr. Hutton: We recognise that there has been an increase in the prescribing of Selective Serotonin Re-Uptake Inhibitor antidepressants. The Clinical Standards Advisory Group have indicated that depression still remains undiagnosed in too many cases and that treatment is often inadequate. A range of effective treatments should be available including appropriate drug therapy as well as psychological approaches. Treatment plans for particular individuals need to be developed in consultation with them and regularly reviewed.

A number of clinical guidelines and protocols for the management of depression have been developed. These include the consensus statement by the Royal Colleges of Psychiatrists and General Practitioners published in 1992.

Dentists

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists offered NHS treatment in each of the years between 1990 and 1999 *(a)* in England and Wales and *(b)* in Essex. [136079]

Mr. Hutton: The number of dentists in the General Dental Service at 30 September in each of the years 1990 to 1999 is shown in the table for *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Essex.

General Dental Service: Number of dentists

Year[2]	England and Wales	[1]Essex
1990	16,317	418
1991	16,287	441
1992	16,242	438
1993	16,616	460
1994	16,734	465
1995	16,827	472
1996	17,236	476

General Dental Service: Number of dentists

Year[2]	*England and Wales*	*Essex*[3]
1997	17,657	497
1998	18,200	526
1999	18,719	535

[1] Dentists cover principal dentists on a health authority or Family Health Services Authority (FHSA) list,' their assistants and vocational dental practitioners.

[2] Number of dentists at 30 September each year.

[3] Before April 1996 the area was covered by Essex FHSA. From April 1996 the area was covered by North Essex and South Essex Health Authorities.

Hepatitis C

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the demand for liver transplantation arising from people who have contracted hepatitis C; and how this demand will be met. [136162]

Mr. Denham: Figures supplied by United Kingdom Transplant show that, for 1998 and 1999, 82 and 99 transplants respectively were performed on patients who had contracted liver failure as a result of hepatitis C infection. As of 3 November, 23 such patients are on the waiting list for liver transplant.

Liver transplantation is limited by the supply of organs. However, new and innovative techniques such as liver splitting are helping to increase the supply. Publicity campaigns are also an important factor in increasing the supply of organs for transplantation. The current campaign encourages people to join the National Health Service Organ Donor Register, to carry the donor card and most importantly to discuss their wish to be an organ donor after death with their family and friends.

In addition, there is growing experience and success with live related liver transplantation especially in children.

Mixed-sex Wards

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received about the continuation of mixed sex wards in the last 12 months. [136465]

Mr. Denham: The number of representations about the continuation of mixed sex accommodation received by the Department in the last 12 months is 52.

Drug Addicts (GP Treatment)

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients with drug problems had treatment withdrawn by GPs in *(a)* 1999 to 2000 and *(b)* 2000–01 at the latest date for which figures are available; [136652]

(2) how many general practitioners ceased to offer treatment for drug related problems to patients addicted to drugs in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01 at the latest available date. [136525]

Ms Stuart: This information is not held centrally. However, the number of episodes of treatment for drug misuses reported by National Health Service funded general practitioners to the regional drug misuses databases in England rose from 1,341 to 1,790 between the six month periods ending 31 March 1999 and 30 September 1999. An episode starts when a drug misuser presents to a particular agency for treatment for the first time or after an interval of six months or more.

Carers

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if independent fostering agencies will be able to approve and register carers under the draft regulations recently published under the Care Standards Act 2000. [136529]

Mr. Hutton: Draft regulations to bring into effect the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000 in relation to the regulation of independent fostering agencies are currently being prepared. They will be published as part of the consultation procedure early next year. The current intention is, however, that registered independent fostering agencies will able to approve and hold their own lists of carers.

Ambulance Staff (Assaults)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* drug related assaults on ambulance staff have taken place in each of the last three years for each relevant NHS trust. [136443]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not held centrally. The National Health Service Executive conducted a survey of violence in National Health Service trusts in England in 1998–99. The survey found that, on average, seven violent incidents were recorded each month per 1,000 staff. This is equivalent to approximately 65,000 violent incidents each year. The number of violent incidents varied by trust type. The average number of incidents in ambulance trusts was over twice the average for acute trusts: seven incidents every month per thousand staff working for ambulance services compared with three for the acute sector.

The survey did not reveal the causes of violent incidents. This information would be reflected in local prevention and reduction strategies, and held locally by individual National Health Service employers through local reporting procedures and identified through appropriate risk assessment measures. Details of the survey can be found in Health Service Circular 1999/229: 'Managing Violence, Accidents and Sickness Absence in the NHS', copies of which are available in the Library.

As part of the continuing NHS zero tolerance zone campaign, the NHS Executive developed further resource sheets to support staff working in those settings we know to be most at risk—namely in Mental Health, Community and Ambulance settings, and also in primary care. A "Resource Pack Update" was issued on the 3 October 2000 to assist managers and staff working in high risk settings and included guidance on:

Managing Violence in Mental Health;

Managing Violence in the Community;

Managing Violence in Ambulance Trusts;

Primary Care—Preventing Violence and Abuse to GPs and their staff; and

Case Studies and Examples of Good Practice—Part II.

NHS Finance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much capital has been allocated to the North East and Yorkshire region as part of the national bidding processes in *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* 1999–2000; and how much each NHS trust obtained for each national priority. [137024]

Mr. Hutton: The following tables detail the capital funds that the Northern and Yorkshire Regional Office has been allocated in *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* 1999–2000 as part of the national bidding process, in totality and also detail how much each NHS trust obtained for each national priority.

2000–01 capital allocations by trust (up to October 2000)

£000

		Mod. Fund					
Trust code	*Trust name*	*Waiting list and times*	*Renal*	*Cataract*	*Pathology*	*Ambulance response times*	*Dental access centres*
RCF	Airedale	481	—	120	—	—	—
RCE	Bradford Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—
RAE	Bradford Hospitals	525	—	352	83	—	—
RGA	Calderdale Hospitals	—	—	—	—	—	—
RLG	Carlisle Hospitals	391	—	30	—	—	—
RLN	City Hospitals Sunderland	580	481	—	—	—	—
RTC	County Durham and Darlington Priority Services	—	—	—	—	—	—
RE6	Cumbria Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	14	—
RMW	Dewsbury Health Care	600	—	—	—	—	—
RR7	Gateshead Health	510	—	—	—	—	—
RCD	Harrogate Health Care	188	—	—	—	—	—
RGB	Huddersfield Health Care Services	472	—	—	—	—	—
RV9	Hull and East Riding Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	1,448
RWA	Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	333	70	—	—	—	—
RGD	Leeds Comm. and Mental Health Services Teaching	—	—	—	—	—	—
RR8	Leeds Teaching Hospitals	1,600	550	386	158	—	—
RNM	Newcastle City Health	—	—	—	—	—	—
RTD	Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals	1,100	170	258	—	—	—
RR9	North Durham Health Care	494	—	—	—	—	—
RVK	North East Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	137	—
RLF	North Lakeland Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—
RVW	North Tees and Hartlepool	495	—	—	—	—	—
RCA	Northallerton Health Services	180	—	115	—	—	—
RM6	Northgate and Prudhoe	—	—	—	—	—	—
RE8	Northumberland Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—
RTF	Northumbria Health Care	400	—	—	—	—	—
RR4	Pinderfields and Pontefract Hospitals	399	—	194	—	—	—
RLH	Priority Healthcare Wearside	—	—	—	—	—	—
RCC	Scarborough and NE Yorkshire Healthcare	430	—	—	—	—	—
RTA	South Durham Health Care	462	—	127	—	—	—
RCJ	South Tees Acute Hospitals	455	—	—	—	—	—
RE9	South Tyneside Healthcare	392	—	—	—	—	—
RVX	Tees and North East Yorkshire	118	—	—	—	—	—
RV1	Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Serv.	—	—	—	—	109	—
RGF	Wakefield and Pontefract Community Health	425	—	—	—	—	—
RE7	West Cumbria Healthcare	210	—	—	—	—	230
RGH	West Yorkshire Met. Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	109	—
RCB	York Health Services	477	30	—	199	—	—
Total		11,717	1,301	1,582	440	369	1,678

		CHD						
Trust code	*Trust name*	*Revascularisation*	*Rapid access chest clinics*	*Cardiac equipment*	*Personal dental services pilots*	*NHS Direct*	*Critical care*	*Total allocation*
RCF	Airedale	—	—	—	—	—	250	851
RCE	Bradford Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RAE	Bradford Hospitals	—	291	25	—	—	385	1,661
RGA	Calderdale Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	45	45
RLG	Carlisle Hospitals	—	—	—	—	—	113	534
RLN	City Hospitals Sunderland	—	20	—	—	—	1,041	2,122
RTC	County Durham and Darlington Priority Services	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RE6	Cumbria Ambulance Service	—	—	50	—	—	—	64
RMW	Dewsbury Health Care	—	70	—	—	—	195	865
RR7	Gateshead Health	—	300	—	—	—	209	1,019
RCD	Harrogate Health Care	—	—	—	—	—	—	188
RGB	Huddersfield Health Care Services	—	—	45	—	—	224	741
RV9	Hull and East Riding Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	1,448
RWA	Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	282	23	100	—	—	3,831	4,639
RGD	Leeds Comm. and Mental Health Services Teaching	—	—	—	—	—	—	0

		CHD						
Trust code	*Trust name*	*Revascularisation*	*Rapid access chest clinics*	*Cardiac equipment*	*Personal dental services pilots*	*NHS Direct*	*Critical care*	*Total allocation*
RR8	Leeds Teaching Hospitals	835	152	120	—	—	950	4,751
RNM	Newcastle City Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RTD	Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals	300	—	—	—	—	540	2,368
RR9	North Durham Health Care	—	—	—	—	—	57	551
RVK	North East Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	137
RLF	North Lakeland Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RVW	North Tees and Hartlepool	—	43	—	—	—	130	668
RCA	Northallerton Health Services	—	—	—	155	—	448	892
RM6	Northgate and Prudhoe	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RE8	Northumberland Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RTF	Northumbria Health Care	—	199	74	—	—	421	1,094
RR4	Pinderfields and Pontefract Hospitals	—	91	—	—	—	112	796
RLH	Priority Healthcare Wearside	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RCC	Scarborough and NE Yorkshire Healthcare	—	90	—	—	—	163	683
RTA	South Durham Health Care	—	33	—	—	—	—	622
RCJ	South Tees Acute Hospitals	—	—	153	—	—	525	1,133
RE9	Southe Tyneside Healthcare	—	—	25	—	—	—	417
RVX	Tees and North East Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	118
RV1	Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Serv.	—	—	36	—	536	—	681
RGF	Wakefield and Pontefract Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	425
RE7	West Cumbria Healthcare	—	24	—	—	—	125	589
RGH	West Yorkshire Met. Ambulance Service	—	—	269	—	—	—	378
RCB	York Health Services	—	—	40	—	—	332	1,078
Total		1,417	1,336	937	155	536	10,096	31,564

Northern and Yorkshire regional office capital allocations received under national bidding process

	£000
1999–2000	
Accident and Emergency Modernisation Fund	13,448
Waiting List Modernisation Fund	2,745
Pathology Modernisation Fund	417
Cancer Outpatients Modernisation Fund	228
NHS Direct	241
Primary Care Walk in Centres	285
Total	17,364
2000–01 (to October 2000)	
Waiting List and Times Modernisation Fund	11,717
Renal Modernisation Fund	1,301
Cateract Modernisation Fund	1,582

Northern and Yorkshire regional office capital allocations received under national bidding process

	£000
Pathology Modernisation Fund	440
Ambulance Response Times Modernisation Fund	369
Dental Access Centres	1,678
Coronary Heart Disease:	
Revascularisation	1,417
Rapid Access Chest Clinics	1,336
Cardiac Equipment	937
Personal Dental Services Pilots	155
NHS Direct	536
Critical Care	10,096
Total	31,564

1999–2000 capital allocations by trust

£000

		Mod. Fund						
Trust code	*Trust name*	*Accident and emergency*	*Waiting list*	*Pathology*	*Cancer outpatients*	*NHS Direct*	*Primary care walk in centres*	*Total allocation*
RCF	Airedale	600	—	—	—	—	—	600
RCE	Bradford Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RAE	Bradford Hospitals	300	100	—	—	—	—	400
RGA	Calderdale Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RLG	Carlisle Hospitals	410	140	—	46	—	—	596
RLN	City Hospitals Sunderland	600	55	—	—	—	—	655
RTC	County Durham and Darlington Priority Services	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RE6	Cumbria Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RMW	Dewsbury Health Care	600	—	—	—	—	—	600
RMU	East Yorkshire Community Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RF3	East Yorkshire Hospitals	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RR7	Gateshead Health	750	373	—	—	—	—	1,123
RCD	Harrogate Health Care	30	—	—	7	—	—	37
RGB	Huddersfield Health Care Services	40	160	—	—	—	—	200
RV9	Hull and East Riding Community	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RWA	Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	1,064	—	—	12	—	—	1,076
RMV	Hull and Holderness Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RGD	Leeds Comm. and Mental Health Services Teaching	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RR8	Leeds Teaching Hospitals	770	250	417	32	—	—	1,469

1999–2000 capital allocations by trust

£000

Trust code	Trust name	Mod. Fund: Accident and emergency	Mod. Fund: Waiting list	Mod. Fund: Pathology	Mod. Fund: Cancer outpatients	Mod. Fund: NHS Direct	Mod. Fund: Primary care walk in centres	Total allocation
RNM	Newcastle City Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RTD	Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals	—	177	—	—	—	285	462
RR9	North Durham Health Care	70	—	—	—	—	—	70
RVK	North East Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	175	—	175
RLF	North Lakeland Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RVW	North Tees and Hartlepool	755	660	—	54	—	—	1,469
RCA	Northallerton Health Services	600	—	—	—	—	—	600
RM6	Northgate and Prudhoe	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RE8	Northumberland Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RTF	Northumbria Health Care	1,800	—	—	—	—	—	1,800
RR4	Pinderfields and Pontefract Hospitals	815	250	—	35	—	—	1,100
RLH	Priority Healthcare Wearside	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RF2	Royal Hull Hospitals	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RCC	Scarborough and NE Yorkshire Healthcare	910	60	—	—	—	—	970
RTA	South Durham Health Care	600	410	—	—	—	—	1,010
RCJ	South Tees Acute Hospitals	312	110	—	20	—	—	442
RE9	South Tyneside Healthcare	617	—	—	22	—	—	639
RVX	Tees and NE Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RV1	Tees, East and North Yorkshire Amb. Service	—	—	—	—	200	—	200
RGF	Wakefield and Pontefract Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
RE7	West Cumbria Healthcare	600	—	—	—	—	—	600
RGH	West Yorks. Met. Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	−134	—	−134
RCB	York Health Services	1,205	—	—	—	—	—	1,205
Total		13,448	2,745	417	228	241	285	17,364

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the conventionally financed precursor scheme for the Newcastle Hospitals Trust PFI has been approved. [137026]

Mr. Hutton: Although the scheme has not yet been approved, it is expected that it will be approved in the near future. Public capital funds have been reserved to meet the full capital costs of this scheme, which will be released to the trust as soon as the remaining outstanding issues have been resolved.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the block allocation is for discretionary capital for each NHS trust in the North East and Yorkshire region in *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* 1999–2000. [137023]

Mr. Hutton: Block capital allocations to NHS trusts in the Northern and Yorkshire Region for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 are shown in the table.

Hull and East Riding Community Health NHS Trust and Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust both became operational on 1 October 1999. For comparison purposes, the block capital allocations of their predecessor constituent trusts have been aggregated and presented under the new trusts' names.

Block capital allocations to NHS trusts in the Northern and Yorkshire region

£000

NHS trust	1999-2000	2000–01
Airedale	1,644	1,678
Bradford Community Health	800	817
Bradford Hospitals	3,047	3,110
Calderdale Healthcare	1,564	1,597
Carlisle Hospitals	1,200	1,225
City Hospitals Sunderland	3,526	3,599
County Durham and Darlington Priority Services	615	628
Cumbria Ambulance Service	517	528

Block capital allocations to NHS trusts in the Northern and Yorkshire region

£000

NHS trust	1999–2000	2000–01
Dewsbury Health Care	1,490	1,521
Gateshead Health	2,077	2,120
Harrogate Health Care	1,563	1,596
Huddersfield Healthcare	1,697	1,732
Hull and East Riding Community Health	1,329	1,081
Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	4,500	4,600
Leeds Community and Mental Health	1,274	1,300
Leeds Teaching Hospitals	11,833	12,385
Newcastle City Health	2,246	2,299
Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals	7,323	7,782
North Durham Health Care	1,901	1,941
North East Ambulance Service	1,995	2,036
North Lakeland Healthcare	557	569
North Tees and Hartlepool	2,678	2,769
Northallerton Health Services	897	916
Northgate and Prudhoe	543	554
Northumberland Mental Health	271	277
Northumbria Health Care	3,891	4,045
Pinderfields and Pontefract Hospitals	3,440	3,512
Priority Healthcare Wearside	514	525
Scarborough and North East Yorkshire Healthcare	1,819	2,132
South Durham Health Care	2,327	2,398
South Tees Acute Hospital	4,050	4,140
South Tyneside Health Care	1,568	1,601
Tees, East and North Yorks Ambulance	2,196	1,984
Tees and North East Yorkshire	1,112	1,362
Wakefield and Pontefract Community Health	813	1,037
West Cumbria Health Care	1,103	1,126
West Yorks Metropolitan Ambulance Service	1,758	1,795
York Health Services	2,933	2,994
Total	84,611	87,311

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the level of capital expenditure needed at each hospital site of the Newcastle City Health Trust to ensure they comply with Heath and Safety Executive standards. [137025]

Mr. Hutton: The current estimated level of capital expenditure needed at each hospital site of the Newcastle City Health NHS Trust in relation to Health and Safety Executive standards is shown in the table.

£

Hospital	*Statutory and safety*	*Fire safety*	*Total*
Newcastle General	546,000	3,259,821	3,805,821
Hunters Moor	132,000	458,550	590,550
St. Nicholas	687,000	2,061,630	2,748,630
Sanderson	150,000	1,001,390	1,151,390
Totals	1,515,000	6,781,391	8,296,391

CJD Clusters

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* undertaken at (i) a local and (ii) a national level into potential clusters at vCJD cases in (A) Queniborough, Leicestershire and (B) Armthorpe, South Yorkshire; [137115]

(2) what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of establishing *(a)* a standardised protocol and *(b)* a dedicated core team for the investigations of potential clusters of vCJD. [137116]

Yvette Cooper: The National CJD Surveillance Unit investigate all cases of vCJD to identify common factors. All possible groupings of cases are being considered. Local health authorities are involved where localised investigations of groups of cases are appropriate. The Department is actively working with scientists from the CJD Surveillance Unit, health care specialists and others to draw up a protocol to investigate all suspected "clusters". One investigation has already been set up into the grouping of cases at Queniborough.

NHS (Routine Screening)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend routine screening in the NHS. [135847]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The National Health Service Plan made a clear commitment to extending routine screening.

Women aged 65–70 will be offered routine breast screening; cervical screening technologies will be improved; and colorectal cancer screening will be introduced should the current pilot studies demonstrate its effectiveness. The United Kingdom National Screening Committee will continue its review of prostate cancer screening.

By 2004, there will also be new screening programmes for women and children, including equitable, high quality antenatal screening, screening for haemoglobinopathies and neonatal deafness.

Children's Food

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment his Department has made of the regulations applying to *(a)* children's food and *(b)* baby food; and if he will make a statement. [136565]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Foods for children and babies are subject to the same legislation as applies to foodstuffs generally. In addition there are specific regulations controlling the composition, labelling and (in the case of infant formula only) advertising of infant formula and baby foods. These regulations are amended from time to time to take account of advances in the scientific understanding of the needs of babies.

Breast Cancer Screening

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on breast cancer screening for the over 65s in *(a)* Coventry, South and *(b)* nationally. [136693]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The National Health Service Breast Screening Programme (NHSBSP) invites women aged 50–64 to be screened by mammography every three years, and women over 65 are eligible for screening every three years on request. A total of 88,119 women over 65 were screened in England in 1998–99, of which 954 were screened in Coventry. The Coventry screening programme covers Coventry, Warwickshire and Solihull.

The NHS Cancer Plan announced that the NHSBSP will extend routine invitations for screening to women aged 65–70 by 2004. Women aged over 70 will be offered free three yearly screening on request, as women over 65 are now. It is anticipated that the first breast screening programmes in England will start inviting women over 65 in 2001–02, with all programmes starting by 2004, benefiting 400,000 women each year.

Healthy Living Centres

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the role of healthy living centres in the Government's public health strategy. [136585]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The New Opportunities Fund is responsible for funding the healthy living centre initiative. Healthy living centre applicants need to demonstrate that their projects will support national and local health strategies. Healthy living centres will have a key role to play in reducing inequalities and supporting the work of other statutory and voluntary agencies locally.

Health Inequalities

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to narrow the health gap between rich and poor areas. [136696]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The National Health Service Plan announced a stronger role in prevention for the NHS working in partnership with others. By 2003 reducing inequalities will be a key criterion for allocating NHS resources. For the first time ever we will create national health inequalities targets to narrow the health gap in childhood and throughout life between socio-economic groups and between the most deprived areas and the rest of the country. Specific targets will be developed in consultation with external

stakeholders and expert advice, as the new national statistics classification becomes available early in 2001. A copy of the NHS Plan has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are being taken to reduce health inequalities *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Coventry, South. [136695]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Prevention was identified as one of the five challenges in the National Health Service Plan that needed to be addressed. In addition, it announced a stronger role in prevention for the NHS working in partnership with others. By 2003, reducing inequalities will be a key criterion for allocating NHS resources. For the first time ever we will create national health inequalities targets to narrow the health gap in childhood and throughout life between socio-economic groups and between the most deprived areas and the rest of the country.

Coventry Health Authority's Health Improvement Programme for 2000–03 identified tackling health inequalities as a key priority and has designated six areas of the city as health action areas. These areas, including three in Coventry, South, have the greatest level of deprivation and health need. Health professionals are working with local people and partner organisations to develop health action and service plans.

The National Health Service will respond to different needs of different populations. Efforts will continually be made to reduce unjustified variations and raise standards to achieve a truly National Health Service.

Heart Disease

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to end local variations in accessing treatment for heart disease in Coventry. [136580]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Coventry Health Authority and the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust approach to access to cardiac treatment and preventative services is in line with the National Service Framework (NSF) for Coronary Heart Disease (CHD). The local health community has identified key priority areas which will further promote fair and equitable access to treatment for heart disease. Actions are under way to implement the NSF for CHD at a local level in line with the key milestones set nationally.

Walsgrave Hospital is opening a rapid chest pain clinic early next year to promote access to a specialist for all patients with new onset chest pain which their general practitioner thinks might be due to angina.

General practices in Coventry are developing CHD registers and will ensure that an increasingly equitable approach to primary care for CHD patients is adopted.

Coventry has been proactive in developing hospital based smoking cessation services in addition to those set up in the community. Referral to the hospital smoking cessation team will become an extension of the treatment package offered to patients with CHD in Coventry.

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to reduce the number of unplanned teenage pregnancies *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the West Midlands. [136697]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) on 14 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 17–18.

The Social Exclusion Unit's report on teenage pregnancy, published on 14 June 1999, sets out a 30 point action plan working across Government. It sets out a £60 million package to tackle the issue, and highlights two main goals: reducing the number of teenage conceptions, with the specific aim of halving the rate of conceptions among under 18s by 2010; and getting more teenage parents into education, training or employment to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion.

Copies of the report are available in the Library.

Following the launch of the report, every area in England now has a local teenage pregnancy co-ordinator in place, making a total of 141. Their role is to develop strategies to tackle teenage pregnancy in their area, in consultation with local communities. They will report annually on progress to the Department of Health. £7.5 million has been made available for innovative local projects in the current financial year.

The NHS Plan has set an interim target of achieving a 15 per cent. reduction in under-18 conception rates by 2004.

New guidance on sex and relationship education was issued to schools in July. A national media campaign began at the end of October, when the first adverts appeared in teenage magazines. The campaign was developed drawing on comprehensive research on what works best with young people. It is aimed as much at boys as at girls.

During 2000–01, we provided funding of over £1 million to the West Midlands to develop local services to prevent teenage pregnancy and support teenage parents. Specific initiatives include a Sexual Health and Drugs Outreach Work (SHADOW) project in Coventry that addresses sexual health, pregnancy and healthy lifestyles for young people. This will link to a one-stop shop, due to open shortly in Coventry city centre, to deliver a number of services such as Connexions, youth information and a general advice and counselling service for young people. A mobile sexual health and advice clinic has been set up in North Staffordshire, enabling young people to access services in youth and leisure facilities.

Childbirth

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the rate was of *(a)* spontaneous, *(b)* Caesarean and *(c)* instrumental births as a percentage of all births in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98 and (iv) 1999–2000. [136798]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The table shows the method of delivery in National Health Service hospitals in England for the years 1995–96, 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99. Figures for 1999–2000 are not available.

Estimated percentages

Year	*Spontaneous*	*Instrumental*	*Caesarean*	*Other*
1995–96	73	10	16	0
1996–97	72	10	17	1
1997–98	71	11	17	1
1998–99	70	11	19	1

Note:
Figures are provisional

Influenza Vaccination

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the shortfall in the national availability of influenza vaccination; what steps his Department has taken to ensure that all medical, nursing and ancillary staff working in NHS hospitals have been offered free influenza vaccination; and if he will make a statement. [136771]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* This year, we have extended the recommended groups for influenza immunisation to include everyone aged 65 and over, irrespective of their underlying health, as well as younger people in established high risk groups. This increase has led to record numbers of vaccine being made available, nearly 11 million this year compared to 7.8 million last year, an increase of 40 per cent.

Unfortunately one of the manufacturers, Solvay, has encountered problems in growing a strain of the vaccine which has led to delays in some deliveries. Solvay have been in touch with the affected general practitioners to tell them details of any delays, but have confirmed that all ordered vaccine will be delivered by the end of November, in time to protect people this winter.

As part of the winter planning process, National Health Service employers are required to offer immunisation to all staff involved in the delivery of care and/or support to patients. Offers of immunisation by NHS employers are being closely monitored by the Department to ensure that all staff have been given the opportunity to be immunised.

Responsibility for occupational influenza immunisation rests with the employer and it should be provided through an occupational health service. It is up to individual NHS trusts to determine their own programme and fund the immunisation of their staff.

Osteopaths

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many osteopaths practising before 1993 were refused registration under the Osteopaths Act 1993. [136441]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The General Osteopathic Council's records show that, at 2 November 2000, 73 practitioners who claimed to be practising as osteopaths before 1993 have been refused statutory registration under the Osteopaths Act of that year.

Naz Project

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the Naz Project; and what funding his Department has provided for the project from 1997 to 2000. [136763]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Naz Project plays a valuable role in providing the South Asian, Latin American, Irani, Turkish and Arab Communities with education and advice on HIV/AIDS issues, and care, support and prevention services. The Department provided core grant funding of £27,000 per year from 1997 to 2000, and £25,000 in 2000–01.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Cayman Islands

13. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Cayman Islands authorities on the White Paper on Overseas Territories. [135172]

Mr. Battle: There is a continual dialogue between the Governor and the Cayman Islands Government on White Paper issues. We have hosted two Consultative Council meetings in October 1999 and October 2000 when Ministers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and appropriate Whitehall Departments met elected representatives from all the Overseas Territories including the Cayman Islands. Baroness Scotland of Asthal also discussed White Paper issues with the Cayman Islands Government during her visit to the Territory in July of this year.

EU Council (Biarritz)

15. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the EU Council at Biarritz; and if he will make a statement. [135174]

Mr. Vaz: This informal European Council took stock of progress of the Inter-Governmental Conference on treaty change. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear our support for the extension of majority voting in areas where this will benefit Britain, while making clear that these areas did not include tax or social security. The European Council agreed that there was a role for enhanced co-operation in an enlarged European Union. It also agreed that the Charter of Rights should be adopted at the Nice European Council as a purely political declaration. Heads of State and Government also discussed the situation in the Middle East, and held a meeting with President Kostunica of Serbia.

BBC

16. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his funding for BBC activities. [135175]

Mr. Hain: We have provided a record £64 million increase for the World Service over the next three years.

Sub-Saharan Africa (Solar Energy)

17. **Mr. Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what solar energy projects in African sub-Saharan countries he is funding. [135176]

Mr. Hain: We are currently funding two solar energy projects in Ethiopia and one in Uganda, with one in South Africa that aims to facilitate financing for renewable energy, including solar energy, together with two other African projects funded by the Climate Change Challenge Fund.

Zimbabwe

18. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's relationship with Zimbabwe. [135177]

Mr. Robin Cook: The economic crisis in Zimbabwe continues to deepen. The economy is contracting by up to one tenth this year and receipts from tourism are down by three-quarters. Inflation is predicted to reach 80 per cent. and foreign exchange is effectively exhausted.

Britain is ready to engage with the Government of Zimbabwe, as its partner for development. But there is no realistic prospect of economic progress unless President Mugabe first restores the rule of law.

I met yesterday with Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Zimbabwe Opposition. I shared with him our strong friendship for the people of Zimbabwe and Britain's willingness to work with any of their representatives who share our commitment to the rule of law, democracy and the welfare of its people.

Recruitment

19. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent progress he has made in widening recruitment to the Foreign Office. [135179]

Mr. Battle: We are widening the FCO's recruitment base, launching marketing and outreach initiatives to encourage people from different backgrounds to join the FCO. We want to ensure that we draw on the very best of Britain's diverse society in promoting UK interests overseas.

St. Helena

20. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in the past year towards the restoration of full British citizenship for the people of the island of St. Helena. [135181]

Mr. Battle: We have consulted the Overseas Territories, have resolved the matters which need to be covered by new legislation and have produced drafting instructions for a Bill.

North Korea

21. **Mr. Willis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU, the USA, Japan and China with regard to his decision to normalise diplomatic relations with North Korea; and if he will make a statement. [135182]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed his decision to respond positively to a North Korean proposal on establishing diplomatic relations with South Korean, US and Japanese counterparts and a number of EU colleagues. Ministers in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Spain have since made similar announcements. The decision acknowledges progress in the dialogue between North and South Korea and between the US and North Korea and reaffirms British support for the engagement policy of South Korean President, Kim Dae-Jung, but it does not imply approval of the North Korean regime. We remain deeply concerned about human rights in North Korea, as well as Pyongyang's policies on weapons of mass destruction, missile proliferation and nuclear issues; and will use formal relations to continue pressing these issues.

Guatemala

22. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UK relations with Guatemala. [135183]

Mr. Battle: Guatemala has the United Kingdom's full support in the consolidation and strengthening of its democracy, adherence to the rule of law and observance of human rights.

The Government have as their objective a further deepening of the UK-Guatemala relationship. The visit to Guatemala in September of an IPU delegation, led by the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), made a helpful contribution to that objective.

Middle East

23. **Mr. Tony Lloyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the middle east peace process. [135184]

28. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the political situation in the middle east. [135189]

32. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the peace process in the middle east. [135193]

34. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in the middle east. [135195]

38. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the middle east crisis. [135199]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given earlier in the House today by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton).

Iran (Jewish Community)

24. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation of Jews in Iran. [135185]

Mr. Hain: The Jewish community in Iran is represented, as are other minorities, by a member in the Majles, and Judaism is among the religions recognised by the Iranian Constitution. Jewish Iranians are free to run businesses and enjoy their own culture, although the right to hold public office is circumscribed.

However, we remain concerned at the sentencing of ten Jews and two Muslims on espionage charges. We and our EU partners have taken every appropriate opportunity to raise our concerns throughout the trial and the subsequent appeal about the nature of the proceedings. We hope that the Iranian Judiciary will show clemency.

James Mawdesley

25. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government took to help secure the release of James Mawdesley from imprisonment in Burma. [135186]

Mr. Battle: From the moment of his arrest, we gave James every consular assistance: we visited him 14 times and sent 64 diplomatic notes. We began calling for his release after he was beaten by prison guards in October.

Immediately following the UN Working Group's decision on 10 October that James was being held arbitrarily, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary demanded James' release. Baroness Scotland repeated this demand when she summoned the Burmese Ambassador the next day. Our Ambassador in Rangoon also made representations. The Burmese Ambassador came to inform me on 16 October that James was being released.

EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

26. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives of the French Government to discuss the EU's common foreign and security policies; and if he will make a statement. [135187]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has frequent contact with the French Government over CFSP—in formal discussions, telephonically and at multilateral meetings (e.g. GAC). Since the St. Malo summit, we co-operate particularly closely on European defence, Africa, Balkans and other areas. He will address the French National Assembly on 8 November.

Latvia

27. **Dr. Whitehead:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the bilateral relations between the UK and Latvia; and what plans he has to visit Latvia. [135188]

Mr. Vaz: Our bilateral relationship with Latvia is good. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary told President Vike-Freiberga of Latvia on 26 October, during her recent visit to London, that the Baltic States were a priority for the United Kingdom and that he hoped to visit Latvia next year. I will make a visit to Latvia tomorrow.

Czech Republic

29. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about relations with the Czech Republic. [135190]

Mr. Vaz: We enjoy excellent relations with the Czech Republic. We are close NATO allies, and fully support the Czech application for EU membership. Trade and investment links are strong. The Czech Prime Minister called on my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister last month. I will be visiting Prague later this month with several ministerial colleagues.

Iraq

30. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what communication he has had with the Iraqi Government as a result of the involvement of British citizens in the recent aeroplane hijack and hostage situation in Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [135191]

Mr. Battle: We had no direct contact with the Iraqi Government before or during the hijacking of Saudi Air SV115.

Belize/Guatemala Border Dispute

31. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's position regarding the territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize. [135192]

Mr. Battle: The United Kingdom continues to support Belize's Sovereignty and Territorial integrity and will continue to provide legal assistance in Belize's efforts to demarcate its land and maritime boundaries. We are pleased that constructive discussions between the two sides have taken place in the presence of the Secretary General of the Organisation of American States and that further talks are planned. We believe it essential that these discussions continue, and that there is early progress on confidence building measures. We continue to make our views clear to both sides.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance he is giving to *(a)* Belize and *(b)* Guatemala to resolve problems relating to their common border. [137061]

Mr. Battle: In helping Belize to resolve its border dispute with Guatemala the UK:

has provided financial support for talks between Belize and Guatemala being held under the auspices of the Organisation of American States; and

is helping Belize in its efforts to demarcate its land and maritime boundaries by providing them with legal and hydrographic assistance.

The UK strongly encourages both parties to resolve the dispute through bilateral negotiation. We are pleased that the OAS-facilitated talks between Belize and Guatemala have made encouraging progress. We hope this will be taken forward in talks in Washington this week.

EU Voting Structures (Treaty of Nice)

33. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on preparations for the revision of voting structures within the EU in the forthcoming treaty of Nice. [135194]

Mr. Vaz: Negotiations on the re-weighting of votes in the Council continue in the Intergovernmental Conference.

The Government's approach remains as set out in the White Paper laid before the House on 15 February.

35. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on preparations for the EU Council at Nice as regards changes to the relationships among the EU institutions. [135196]

Mr. Vaz: The Intergovernmental Conference is about making the institutional reforms necessary to allow enlargement to proceed. The issues remain those set out at the beginning of the Conference; that is chiefly the size and composition of the Commission, the re-weighting of votes in the Council of Ministers, the extension of Qualified Majority Voting and closer co-operation between individual member states.

Sri Lanka

36. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about conflict in Sri Lanka. [135197]

Mr. Hain: We remain extremely concerned about the conflict in Sri Lanka and the effect it is having on the civilian population. We call upon the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE to cease hostilities and begin negotiations immediately.

We fully support Norway's efforts to facilitate peace talks.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

37. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Yugoslavia. [135198]

Mr. Vaz: We applaud the peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy which President Kostunica is leading in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Programmes of EU and UK assistance will contribute to the international community's efforts to help the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to overcome its immediate economic difficulties and to rejoin the family of nations.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his *(a)* European and *(b)* United States counterparts regarding developments in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [135428]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I refer to my reply to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 25 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 148–49W.

Trade (EU Market Access)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment of the impact on ACP producers of rice, sugar, rum and bananas of the European Commission's Everything but Arms initiative which seeks to extend duty and quota free access to the EU market to 48 least developed countries. [136824]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

The Government support the European Commission's initiative and recognise the need to consider carefully the potential impact of the proposal on non-Least Developed Countries Africa, Caribbean and Pacific producers. Much depends on the ability of LDCs to respond to the new incentives but the build up of exports is likely to take time. Initial reform of the EU internal sugar and rice regimes is likely to take place over the next few years under pressure from international trade liberalisation agreements.

Memorandum on EEC Negotiations 1970–72

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place the text of Sir Con O'Neill's Memorandum on the EEC negotiations of 1970–72 in the Library. [134177]

Mr. Vaz: Sir Con O'Neill's report on the negotiations of 1970–72 for the UK's entry to the EEC was published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 7 September and copies have already been placed in the Libraries of the House. The original file copy of the report is now available at the Public Record Office under reference FCO 75/1.

Burma

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage the development of democracy in Burma. [134921]

Mr. Battle: Our policy is to press the Burmese regime at every opportunity to enter into substantive dialogue with democratic parties, including ethnic minorities, and to improve their appalling human rights record. In April this year we successfully persuaded EU partners to strengthen the EU Common Position on Burma by publishing the list of regime members subject to an EU travel ban, imposing a freeze on their funds held in the EU, and banning the supply of equipment that might be used for internal repression or terrorism. We believe continued pressure forces the regime to take note of the international community's concerns, as witnessed by their recent release of the British prisoner, James Mawdsley. We will continue with this policy: forthcoming opportunities include the UN General Assembly resolution, the ILO Governing Body, and the EU-ASEAN Ministerial meeting. We also support the work of Razali Ismail in his good offices roles as the UN Special Envoy for Burma.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his EU and UN counterparts concerning multilateral investment sanctions against Burma. [136764]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We regularly discuss measures against Burma with our EU Partners but there is no consensus for multilateral investment sanctions. Nor is there consensus for such measures within the UN. We do not encourage trade or investment in Burma. We have suspended financial support for trade missions and trade promotions. In March I told Premier Oil, the largest UK investor in Burma, that we would welcome its moving out. We discourage

tourism as well. We are currently working with partners on a resolution on Burma to be adopted at the UN General Assembly.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards discussions of EU enlargement at the IGC in Nice. [135091]

Mr. Vaz: The UK is committed to a swift and successful enlargement of the European Union. In the current intergovernmental conference we are discussing the institutional issues which need to be resolved in order for enlargement to proceed. Discussions at the informal Biarritz summit indicated that we are on course for agreement at Nice on these issues. We welcome this.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effects of Article 21 of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights on his Department's employment of women in jobs requiring considerable manual strength. [135571]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for St[illegible] (Mr. Cash) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 555W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy regarding the legal status of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. [136395]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) on 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 541W.

China

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recommendations the UK Government have made to other EU member states on the future of the EU/China human rights dialogue. [135767]

Mr. Battle: The Government take an active role in the EU in determining the direction and strategy for addressing the human rights situation in China. EU partners approved a UK proposal in February 2000 to consider ways of strengthening the EU/China human rights dialogue process to make it a more effective mechanism for addressing common concerns with the Chinese authorities. EU Foreign Ministers are expected to discuss the outcome of this review at the General Affairs Council on 4 December.

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what developments there have been in the UK Government's inquiries as to the *(a)* whereabouts and *(b)* welfare of the 11th Panchen Lama. [135513]

Mr. Battle: The Government raised the case of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as the 11th Panchen Lama, during the fifth round of the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue in London between 16–18 October. We pressed the Chinese to allow access to the boy by an independent figure acceptable to the Chinese Government and Tibetans to verify his health and living conditions.

The Chinese stated that the boy was well and attending school. They said that his parents did not want international figures and the media intruding into his life. Two photographs claimed to be of Ghedun Choekyi Nyima were shown to us but not handed over.

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions are planned within the Council of Ministers concerning the future of the EU/China human rights dialogue. [135514]

Mr. Battle: EU Foreign Ministers are expected to review the EU/China human rights dialogue process at the General Affairs Council on 4 December. The Council is also expected to discuss the human rights situation in China in March 2001 following the next round of the EU/China Human Rights dialogue expected to take place in Stockholm in February 2001.

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress was made on issues concerning Tibet during the last round of UK/China human rights dialogue, held recently in London. [135515]

Mr. Battle: The situation in Tibet was a particular focus of the fifth round of the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue held in London between 16–18 October. We pressed the Chinese authorities to resume a dialogue with the Dalai Lama on a long-term political solution to the question of Tibet. We received a briefing from the Chinese on recent contacts with representatives of the Dalai Lama and urged the Chinese to take these forward as a matter of importance.

We also made clear our specific concerns about the situation in Tibet, including freedom of religion, the treatment of Buddhist monks and nuns, Han Chinese migration to Tibet, the investigation into the 1998 riots at Drapchi Prison, and the closure of the Gyatso Orphanage in Lhasa.

We also asked about a number of individual cases of concern including Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as Panchen Lama. The Chinese side displayed two photographs claimed to be of Ghedum Choekyi Nyima to substantiate their assertion that he was in good health and receiving education.

We also sought and received a commitment from the Chinese authorities to allow the proposed visit to Tibet by the All-Party Group on Tibet to be carried forward into 2001.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135467]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* In accordance with the Department's Code of Ethics, staff may raise with their line manager or with a senior member

of the Administration concerns they may have about actions they consider to be illegal, unconstitutional, improper, unethical or otherwise in breach of the Code. They may also raise such concerns with the Civil Service Commissioners or with the Diplomatic Service Appeal Board as appropriate. The Code of Ethnics is annexed to the general principals of conduct contained in Departmental regulations which are issue to all staff on their appointment.

Independent Monitor for Visa Applications

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs where the post of Independent Monitor for Visa Applications was advertised; and how many people submitted applications. [135826]

Mr. Vaz: It is not usual practice to advertise a post of this nature. A short-list of candidates was compiled, including suggestions from the Cabinet Office Public Appointment Unit's database.

Kosovo

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of civilian Serbs *(a)* resident in Kosovo at the beginning of 1999, *(b)* who left after the NATO action and the withdrawal of the Serb forces and *(c)* who have subsequently returned. [136290]

Mr. Vaz: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that before the conflict there were around 200,000 Kosovo Serbs in the province. Estimates for the number of Kosovo Serbs remaining are in the range of 100,000. Those who return frequently do so independently and usually without assistance from UNMIK; thus estimated number of Serb returns are not available.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of civilian *(a)* Roma, *(b)* Muslim and *(c)* Slav people resident in Kosovo at the beginning of 1999; how many left after the NATO action and the withdrawal of the Serb forces; and how many have subsequently returned. [136200]

Mr. Vaz: Pre-conflict population figures for Kosovo were far from exact. The 1991 census recorded some 45,000 Roma living in Kosovo, but their numbers may well have been considerably higher. The number of Gypsies (including Askali and Egyptians as well as Roma) is now estimated to be 30,000, although more may be present but unreported. The Pre-conflict Muslim population (Kosovo Albanians and Turks) was roughly estimated at 1.8 million. With the vast majority of the 860,000 refugees having returned to the province, their estimated numbers remain close to this figure. It is estimated that some 200,000 Kosovo Serbs were present pre-March 1999. In addition, Kosovo's Muslim Slave populations (Bosniacs and Gorani) stood at around 57,000 and 12,000 before the conflict and today number about 35,000 and 12,000.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of compatibility of the provisions of applicable law for Kosovo with human rights standards. [135426]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has recently published a report on the workings of Kosovo's criminal justice system, making a number of criticisms. The report has been submitted to the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) who will respond in due course.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his Department's policy is regarding the Kosovo currency. [135420]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We supported the decision of the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) to issue an UNMIK regulation on the use of foreign currencies in Kosovo in September 1999. The regulation does not preclude the use of the Yugoslav dinar and as such does not pose a threat to FRY sovereignty.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in setting up interim self-government institutions in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [135422]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Dr. Bernard Kouchner issued a regulation on 11 August 2000 concerning self-government of municipalities in Kosovo, outlining the responsibilities, rights and duties of the municipalities and those individuals elected to serve within them.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions his Department has taken following the OSCE report 'Kosovo: A Review of the Criminal Justice System'. [135424]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* This report has been submitted to the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) who will respond in due course.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the consistency of approaches to the applicable law of Kosovo's courts and authorities. [135427]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has recently published a report on the workings of Kosovo's criminal justice system, making a number of criticisms. The report has been submitted to the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) who will respond in due course.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the future of Serb military and police deployment in Kosovo. [135421]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* UN Security Council resolution 1244 confirms that an agreed number of Yugoslav and Serb military and police personnel will be permitted to return to Kosovo to

perform certain functions as defined in annex 2 to the resolution. The return of these personnel will be subject to a separate agreement. No such agreement has yet been reached.

"Everything but Arms" Initiative

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received on his Everything but Arms initiative from Caribbean Governments. [136825]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Secretary of State has not received any representations on this issue from Caribbean Governments. However we are aware of the concern of the Caribbean states with certain aspects of this proposal and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has received a letter from the President of Guyana on this subject.

Serbia

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what guidance he has given to his Department on a request by Serbian judges for urgent international assistance with the reform of the judicial system in Serbia. [135425]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Her Majesty's Government have been active in promoting the reform of the judicial system in Serbia. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has funded a number of recent initiatives including a seminar on 23–25 August on the role of the judiciary in Serbia, run by the British Association for Central and Eastern Europe's New Serbia Forum, and two seminars run by the AIRE Centre with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The UK will continue to play an active role in this field.

Ministerial Visits (Balkans)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit *(a)* Serbia, *(b)* Montenegro and *(c)* Kosovo. [135423]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Her Majesty's Government look forward to the imminent restoration of diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs hopes to visit Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo in the near future.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W, if he will list those areas in which the extension of qualified majority voting proposed for the Nice Treaty is in the national interest in respect of each of the Written Questions tabled for answer on 30 October by the right hon. Member for Wokingham. [136802]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Government's policy towards the IGC in general and the extension of qualified majority voting in particular is laid out in the White Paper published in February, to which I refer the right hon. Gentleman.

Iraq (Exports)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what goods subject to strategic export controls have recently been approved for export to Iraq. [137357]

Mr. Hain: Following consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently approved a licence to export four diaphragm vacuum pumps, controlled under the Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations, to the World Health Organisation in Iraq under the United Nations Oil for Food Programme. The export of these goods to Iraq has been approved by the UN Sanctions Committee.

Mordechai Vanunu

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the representations he has made recently to the Israeli Government on behalf of Mordechai Vanunu. [137243]

Mr. Hain: We have raised our serious concerns about Mordechai Vanunu's detention regularly with the Israeli authorities, and will continue to do so.

Foreign Affairs

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a report to the House on significant events in foreign affairs between 1 August and 23 October. [135178]

Mr. Robin Cook: We welcome the major steps towards democracy taken by the Serb people first on 24 September by voting in massive numbers for change, and then on 5 October as their determination brought on the collapse of the Milosevic regime. We and our EU partners promised in September that we would respond rapidly with a rapid revision of our policy, if they took such a step. Now we are keeping our promise: lifting sanctions, supporting the re-integration of the FRY into international organisations, and providing European and bilateral assistance.

We have all been shocked by the recent upsurge of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The most important task now is to end the violence and bring the parties back to the negotiating table. We have been working closely with all sides to get the Peace Process back on track and our engagement has been warmly welcomed. In the last month the Prime Minister has been in regular contact with regional leaders, and I have had a very constructive visit to Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

On 6 October in Warsaw the Prime Minister affirmed our strong commitment to a swift and successful enlargement of the EU. Enlargement will help make our continent more stable by integrating more countries into a Union that promotes the principles of democracy, good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The Government are determined that there should be a breakthrough on enlargement under the Swedish Presidency. We are working with EU member states to commit themselves to a specific framework leading to an early end of the negotiations and accession.

On 19 October I announced in Seoul that the UK intended to respond positively to a proposal in a letter from the North Korean Foreign Minister that North Korea and the UK establish diplomatic relations. The decision was taken in the light of a number of positive developments since the Inter-Korean Summit in June, including further progress in North/South contacts, Marshal Cho's visit to Washington, the US/DPRK joint communique and Mrs. Albright's visit to Pyongyang to prepare for a possible visit by President Clinton.

Between 6 and 8 September, at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in New York, the Prime Minister underlined the significance the UK puts on the UN and its changing role in the 21st century. We hope the Summit will constitute a turning point in strengthening the UN system and in directing its overall efforts towards specific goals on development, security and the environment. The UK was instrumental in helping guarantee the Declaration included a paragraph on keeping track of the progress of those commitments.

The UK warmly welcomed the Brahimi Panel report on UN Peace Operations as a key part of an overall agenda for UN reform. It identified key areas for action, most particularly the need for a more co-ordinated capacity for a rapid response to crises and a more integrated ability to plan and support UN missions. We look forward to working with the Secretary General and other member states on swift implementation of Brahimi recommendations.

We have provided substantial practical support for the efforts of the Government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations to secure lasting peace and stability. Our objective remains to ensure that the people of Sierra Leone are offered a realistic prospect of stability and peace; and a future free from the violence of a brutal rebel minority.

We remain very concerned about the situation in Fiji and we will continue, with our partners in the Commonwealth and the EU, to keep up the pressure on Fiji's Interim Administration for a speedy restoration of constitutional democracy.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Pupil-teacher Ratio

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the teacher-to-pupil ratio was in East Sussex *(a)* for children aged between five and seven years, *(b)* for children aged eight to 11 years, *(c)* for all primary schools in the county and *(d)* for all secondary schools in the county in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000. [135736]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The available information requested on pupil-teacher ratios and class sizes for the East Sussex region is shown in the following tables.

The latest infant class size data for September 2000 were published in a Statistical First Release "Infant Class sizes in England 2000" on 1 November, copies of which are available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed from the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics. Figures from this release showed that since September 1998 6,065 five, six and seven-year-olds in East Sussex have benefited from the Government's infant class size initiative. As few as 2.3 per cent. of the relevant age group remained in infant classes of 31 or over. Some £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations so far to East Sussex LEA amount to over £4 million. This has helped to reduce the size of the average infant class in East Sussex LEA to 25.6 in September 2000 from 27.1 in September 1998.

The Government are delivering their pledge to limit infant classes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30 or below early. When the Government came to power, there were nearly half a million children in large infant classes. By September 2000, this has been reduced to some 30,000 children.

January 2000 saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class in England, at 22, is still five below the average primary class. Secondary headteachers are receiving an average of £50,000 this year (£60,000 from April 2001) in direct grant to spend as they choose. If this were spent on recruiting teachers, the average secondary class size could be reduced by up to 0.8.

Pupil-teacher ratios (PTRs) in maintained primary and secondary schools in the local education authority area of East Sussex, 1997–2000

Position as at January

	Primary	*Secondary*
2000	22.4	17.1
1999	23.8	16.9
1998	23.2	16.6
1997	22.8	16.2

Average size of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 classes taught by one teacher in the local education authority of East Sussex, 1997–2000

Position as at January

	KS 1	*KS 2*
2000	26.1	30.2
1999	27.5	29.9
1998	27.3	29.4
1997	27.9	28.9

Average size of infant classes (5, 6 and 7-year-olds) taught by one teacher in the local education authority area of East Sussex, 1998–2000

Position as at September

	Average class size	*Number of pupils in classes of over 30 children*	*Percentage of pupils in classes of over 30 children*	*Total number of pupils*
2000	25.6	316	2.3	13,506
1999	25.9	1,813	13.3	13,662
1998	27.1	6,381	43	14,947

New Deal (Sutton)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have had their benefits stopped for failing properly to take up a New Deal option at each benefit office within the Sutton and Cheam constituency and at the Sutton office; and if he will make a statement. [134893]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Sutton Jobcentre is the only office in the Sutton and Cheam constituency. At this office no benefit sanctions have been imposed in this financial year, up to the end of September. That is the only period for which figures are immediately available.

The great majority of young people taking part in the New Deal do so to improve their employability and find a job without the necessity to impose any benefit sanctions.

Overseas Students

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding is available from his Department for overseas students studying in the United Kingdom. [136042]

Mr. Wicks: We offer scholarships through the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS) for full-time overseas postgraduate students registered as research students at British universities. For this financial year, we are providing £12.5 million. We also fund the Montserrat Emergency Award Scheme, which in the current financial year, is providing £1.6 million towards 195 Montserrat students' higher education tuition fees and living expenses.

There are also other Government schemes to support overseas students: the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, funded jointly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development which will receive £12 million this financial year; the Shared Scholarship Scheme, funded by DFID which will receive £2 million this financial year; and the British Chevening Scholarship Scheme, where FCO is providing £30 million this financial year.

Global Business Dimensions Ltd.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the investigation by the Special Investigative Unit into Global Business Dimensions Ltd. will be completed; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library. [136069]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The investigation by the Department's Special Investigation Unit (SIU) has now been completed and a final report will be produced in due course. SIU's reports are confidential to the Department and hence it would not be appropriate in this instance to place a copy in the Library.

Schools (Internet)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools which are connected to the internet allow access to unmoderated internet chat rooms. [136210]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We are determined to ensure that all pupils' use of the internet is both safe and appropriate. Although we do not collect these figures, we understand that open chat lines are rarely used in schools, to avoid any possible compromise to pupil safety. Where chat rooms are used, these tend to be educational, such as the 'chat' sessions which the Science Museum, for instance, holds with subject experts.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what reports have been received by his Department of indecent approaches towards children at school through *(a)* Internet chat rooms and *(b)* e-mail. [136211]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* My Department has not received any reports of indecent approaches towards children through Internet chat rooms or e-mails. Schools deal with the improper use of e-mail through their normal disciplinary procedures, involving the police where appropriate. The DfEE ensures that information and advice are provided to parents and teachers who have to deal with any problem directly.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department has taken to promote the safety of children who use the Internet at school. [136212]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* DfEE's and others' projects have shown that schools already implement a wide range of Internet safety measures, which we have supplemented by creating the Superhighway Safety pack. It is a comprehensive guide to the whole range of safety measures which schools and parents can adopt. It covers acceptable use policies, home-school contracts, filtering systems, walled gardens, firewalls, monitoring, advice on setting up websites and information about pupils' physical well-being when using computers. As well as advice and guidance, the pack provides contact details for a wide range of appropriate sources of further information or resources.

The pack was created with valuable help from partners including Becta, NCH Action for Children, the Parents Information Network, the British Educational Suppliers Association and Disney. It was originally produced in 1999 and revised in September 2000, to include extra information such as the advice sheet "Parents making the Internet Safer". We also launched a new Safety website in September 2000 ("http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk") which carries all the information from the pack in an easy to use format.

Polytechnic Reclassification

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the effect of the reclassification of the former polytechnics as universities on *(a)* academic standards and *(b)* vocational training. [136260]

Mr. Wicks: The Department has made no assessment relating to the reclassification of the former polytechnics.

The Department is not aware of any adverse effect on the academic standards or vocational courses and training available.

The Secretary of State called for diversity across the whole spectrum of higher education at his landmark speech at Greenwich earlier this year. The introduction of foundation degrees is an indication of the importance of vocational qualifications.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carries out reviews of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements for the management of the quality and standards of academic provision in all higher education institutions that receive public funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Individual reports are published by the QAA for the assessments it carries out.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average cost is of an adjustment made by an employer to support a disabled employee under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and what the average cost is of an employee's adjustment within the Access to Work Scheme. [136300]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* It is not possible to give an absolute cost of adjustments. We published research in March 1998 called "Integrating Disabled Employees", which reported that, where adjustments are needed, the majority cost less than £50, with only very few estimated to have cost more than £5,000. The findings were based on a small sample and are therefore not necessarily representative of all UK employers. Other research published in May 1999 entitled "Employment of Disabled People: Assessing the Extent of Participation", reported that only 11 per cent. of disabled people who are able to work (including those not currently in work) require some form of special equipment, aids or adaptations in order to work.

Access to Work pay grants towards additional costs for employing disabled people. Employers are expected to make a contribution when the person is already in work. During 1999–2000 Access to Work provided help to 20,729 disabled people in work at a cost of £24.39 million. The average cost of Access to Work help during 1999–2000 was £1,177.

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce *(a)* an element of compulsion and *(b)* the potential for withdrawal of current benefits for non-participants, in the New Deal for Disabled People. [136302]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Participation in the New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) is voluntary. We have no plans to compel people to join the NDDP or to withdraw benefits from those who do not.

Local Authority Funding Allocations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assumptions are made, in respect of central Government funding allocations to local authorities, for annual funding required for *(a)* each child in primary school, *(b)* each child in secondary school, *(c)* each child in care, *(d)* each elderly person requiring home help and *(e)* each elderly person requiring residential care, indicating in each case the figure for an English shire council and the figures for each other type of council. [136496]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The table gives for 2000–01, the Education Standard Spending Assessment per pupil for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools for (i) Shire Counties, (ii) London Authorities, (iii) Metropolitan Authorities and (iv) Unitary Authorities.

2000–01	*Average primary SSA per pupil*	*Average secondary SSA per pupil*
Shire Counties	2,350	3,020
London	2,980	3,800
Metropolitan	2,460	3,170
Unitary	2,430	3,130

Since 1997, overall funding per pupil has increased by over £300 per pupil (to some £3,100 per pupil this year). Funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04. Funding for children in care and for elderly people is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Excellence in Cities

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he used to determine the dates on which the summer school pilots set up under the Excellence in Cities programme are to take place; and if he will make a statement. [136527]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend did not set dates for the summer schools for gifted and talented 10–14 year-olds, or the higher education summer schools for those completing Year 11 and Year 12. In each case, the dates were set by the providers.

There are advantages and disadvantages to holding all summer schools within a set period. The Department is looking at this and other ways to maximise recruitment and attendance.

Entrepreneurship (Schools)

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what initiatives are in place to teach socially excluded and disadvantaged young people how to operate their own businesses. [136539]

Ms Jowell: The Department for Education and Employment currently funds two major initiatives that support socially excluded and disadvantaged young people to set up their own business: the self employment route of the New Deal for Young People and the Youth Enterprise Initiative.

The self-employment route of New Deal for Young People is delivered in three stages—a one day awareness raising session; a four day course and/or counselling leading to the production of a business plan; and a 26 week period of test trading, where a participant runs their own business while receiving a training allowance.

The Youth Enterprise Initiative operates in England and is managed by The Prince's Trust, supported by DfEE and private donations. It offers loans and grants to disadvantaged young people between the ages of 18–30 wanting to set up their own businesses—but who are unable to access start-up capital from commercial sources. Assistance is given in putting together a business plan and the help of a business mentor is provided for up to three years.

Digital Divide

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures the Government are taking to address the digital divide in education. [136542]

Mr. Wills: The Prime Minister has given a commitment that, by 2005, all those who want it will have the opportunity to access the Internet. We are currently investing more than £1.7 billion in initiatives to ensure everyone is able to reap the rewards of the digital revolution.

In schools, good progress is being made in improving computer/pupil ratios, and 88 per cent. of all schools are now connected to the Internet. In future, all school leavers should be able to use and benefit from new technologies.

We are also tackling the difficulties that a significant minority of adults currently face in accessing ICT. On 11 September the Prime Minister set out the Government's agenda to get the UK on line. We have pledged that by the end of 2002 there will be around 6,000 UK online centres with access points in many public libraries and around 1,000 learning centres specifically focused on the most deprived urban and rural wards. 50,000 free computer-training courses are being made available for jobless people across the country under our UK online Computer Training scheme. We are also piloting an initiative to wire up homes and schools in some of the most disadvantaged areas. And we are introducing the 'Computers Within Reach' pilot scheme to enable around 100,000 low-income learners and families to acquire reconditioned computers.

National Training Organisations

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to amalgamate national training organisations. [136822]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* There are currently no specific plans to amalgamate National Training Organisations. We made clear at the recent NTO National Council conference our belief that a smaller and stronger network of NTOs is needed to make a greater impact on skills development. We will shortly be consulting widely on the future development of the NTO network to better represent employer skills needs. The consultation will be completed by next spring.

Job Action Teams (Dorset)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Dorset have benefited from Action Teams for Jobs; and if he will make a statement. [136958]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* There is not an Action Team for Jobs in Dorset. We set up Action Teams in 40 local authority districts with the greatest problems associated with high unemployment and low employment.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have been helped into work as a result of the Action Team for Jobs. [136959]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The 40 Action Teams have been operating since 16 October except for the three pathfinders launched in the summer. Early performance figures are not yet available.

New Deal (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) which areas of West Sussex are included in the West Sussex Coastal Plain unit for delivery of the New Deal; [137063]

(2) how much has been spent on the New Deal for young people in West Sussex since its inception. [137062]

Ms Jowell: The West Sussex Coastal Plain unit of delivery covers the South Downs from Chichester and Midhurst to Worthing and Bognor Regis. Since the inception of New Deal this unit of delivery has spent £623,656.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the winding up of the National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets and the transfer of its activities to the Learning and Skills Council. [137035]

Mr. Wicks: The National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets (NACETT) will be wound up on 1 April 2001. As from 1 April 2001, responsibility for advice on National Learning Targets relating to 19-year-olds and older age groups will pass to the Learning and Skills Council. The Government are very grateful for the good work undertaken by NACETT on the Targets and in helping to promote a culture of lifelong learning.

Blind/visually Impaired Pupils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has held with *(a)* the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *(b)* awarding bodies, *(c)* representatives of disability organisations and *(d)* others in connection with

the early availability and special preparation of papers and tests for pupils who are blind or who have a visual impairment. [137036]

Jacqui Smith: Officials of the DfEE regularly consult with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which develops the National Curriculum Key Stage assessments on behalf of the Secretary of State, over the preparation and design of the tests. As part of this test development process, the QCA ensures that advice on the appropriateness of test materials for pupils with special assessment requirements is sought from:

a range of organisations dealing with Special Educational Needs, including the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB);

teachers working with pupils with a range of special assessment needs, including visual impairment;

advisory groups in Special Educational Needs appointed by the QCA;

an agency with specific expertise in developing test materials for visually impaired pupils.

In addition, for those pupils for whom access to the standard tests is difficult, the QCA produces braille, modified large print and enlarged versions of the tests. Further modifications can be approved by the QCA such as copying onto coloured paper.

Schools ordering the statutory National Curriculum Key Stage tests in braille, modified large print and enlarged versions are able to tailor their orders to meet their pupil's exact requirements.

The awarding bodies which develop the GCE, VCE, GCSE, and GNVQ examinations regularly consult with organisations, such as the RNIB, on arrangements for blind and visually impaired candidates. The awarding bodies' special arrangements already allow for the provision of Braille papers and manual Braillers for candidates who are blind or who have a visual impairment. Additional time is also granted to such candidates to allow them to access questions and present responses.

Private Finance Initiative (Schools)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many of his Department's officials *(a)* have worked and *(b)* are working with Islington LEA on the submission of a PFI bid for schools; and at what cost to his Department. [137207]

Jacqui Smith: The preparation of bids for schools PFI projects is the responsibility of local education authorities. My officials are currently reviewing bids for projects to sign contracts in 2002–03; Islington is one of a large number of authorities to have applied for support. Many authorities, including Islington, have taken the opportunity to discuss their bids with officials in my Department. Such discussions are part of the normal work of officials and no separate calculation is made of the costs involved.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the usual process for preparation of a school's PFI bid including details of the involvement of officials from his Department. [137228]

Jacqui Smith: Public Private Partnerships form a central part of the Department's schools capital investment strategy to secure a modern educational infrastructure fit for the 21st century and able to deliver on our aims of raising standards, securing wider access and encouraging lifelong learning. Since May 1997, we have made available over £2.5 billion for schools PFI projects to address the backlog of repair and maintenance work and develop modern school buildings which will provide better conditions for teachers to teach and pupils to learn.

The preparation of bids for schools PFI projects is the responsibility of local education authorities. In July, we invited authorities to bid for support, against the Department's published criteria, for PFI projects expected to reach contract signature in 2002–03. Several authorities took the opportunity to discuss their proposals with my officials before the deadline for receipt of bids at the end of September.

My officials are currently making an initial assessment of the schools PFI proposals we have received. We have commissioned customised computer software to help authorities estimate the level of funding required, and we will be making this software available to those authorities whose projects score most highly in the initial assessment.

Authorities will be advised towards the end of November whether their projects are still under consideration in the current capital round. A priority list of projects which we are able to support will be drawn up in early 2001. Authorities will then be able to discuss with DfEE officials the preparation of outline business cases for consideration by the Office of Government Commerce chaired Project Review Group (PRG).

Islington LEA

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many of his Department's officials have been seconded to work on the outsourcing of certain education services from Islington LEA; and at what cost to his Department. [137226]

Ms Estelle Morris: No officials have been seconded from the Department to work on the outsourcing process in Islington.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if Article 15 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights requires equal working conditions for nationals of third countries working in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [136462]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding. Article 15 recognises that third country nationals who are authorised to work in a particular member state should enjoy working conditions such as protection against unfair dismissal and health and safety, equivalent to citizens of the EU. This is consistent with existing UK law.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Notices of Possession

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average length of time between serving of a notice of seeking possession on a tenant of a local authority and the granting of possession where the application was successful *(a)* in England and Wales, *(b)* in the West Midlands counties and *(c)* in Birmingham in each of the last two years; and if he will make a statement on his proposals to speed up the process. [136288]

Mr. Lock: Information about the length of time between serving a notice of possession on a tenant of a local authority and the granting of possession is not collected.

The Lord Chancellor's Consultation paper entitled: "Access to Justice: Housing and Land proposed new procedures", was issued on 19 July 2000 and included proposals to streamline possession proceedings and tackle unnecessary delay. The proposals were welcomed by the majority of those who responded to the consultation. Draft rules, taking into account the comments received, are currently being considered by the Civil Procedure Rule Committee.

The Lord Chancellor's review of civil enforcement has concluded that service standards should be introduced to the courts, setting a target for evictions to be carried out no later than four weeks after the bailiff first receives the warrant.

Court Service

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what reports, research or projects have been undertaken for the Court Service in the last three years by Mtic Ltd. [136532]

Mr. Lock: We do not have any information or information to indicate that the Court Service has employed this company in the last three years.

Public Trust Office

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list the work undertaken for the Public Trust Office in the last three years by *(a)* FTI, *(b)* IRC Europe, *(c)* Mtic Ltd, *(d)* PriceWaterhouse and *(e)* Zeldon Health Ltd. [136199]

Jane Kennedy: In the last three years none of these organisations has undertaken work for the Public Trust Office.

Civil Procedure Rules

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment she has made of the implementation of the civil procedure rules; what audit has been carried out of the financial consequences of implementation for the Department and the litigating public; and what change there has been in the number of cases conducted by litigants in person following implementation. [136293]

Jane Kennedy: Overall, the civil justice reforms are proving to be a success. A number of bodies have already provided their own independent opinion of the success of the reforms. The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) and the Federation of Insurance Lawyers (FOIL) have provided helpful presentations to the Civil Justice Council. The Centre for Dispute Resolution (CEDR) commissioned MORI to conduct a poll of lawyers and some judges. In addition, Wragge & Co. (Solicitors) have provided research of FTSE 1,000 companies.

From this research it is apparent that attitudes to civil justice have improved with parties coming together earlier to discuss the case. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parties are more willing to co-operate to reach settlement and, where disputes are taken into court, the litigation is conducted in a less adversarial manner.

The Lord Chancellor's Department has just commenced its own evaluation programme, having allowed 18 months for 'bedding in' factors such as stabilisation of work load and the disposal of the majority of pre-reform cases in the system. The programme comprises academic research projects to assess the qualitative aspects of the reforms, attitudinal research through survey to obtain the views of those who use the system, and evaluation of the quantitative aspects through empirical data analysis. The programme is expected to take two years. The long-term financial consequences for the Department and for the litigating public will form part of the overall evaluation programme. Initial indications are that the number of claims commenced by litigants in person has increased since the implementation of the civil justice reforms, but it will not be possible to confirm this or come to conclusions until the overall evaluation programme is completed.

Access to Justice

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on access to justice in Buckinghamshire. [136476]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's aim is to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice.

There are six magistrates courts, two county courts, and one Crown court in Buckinghamshire. Courts in Buckinghamshire are being modernised in order to be fit for the 21st Century. For example, one of the aims of the Crown court programme is to improve efficiency and enhance the facilities at all Crown court centres, irrespective of size, location or current accommodation limitations.

The Community Legal Service (CLS) will improve access to good quality legal advice, through local networks of legal services based on legal needs. There are now 67 firms of solicitors and advice agencies in Buckinghamshire in the latest edition of the CLS Directory, which means they either have the CLS Quality Mark already or are likely to apply for the Quality Mark in the near future. They will provide the local CLS

network in Buckinghamshire. The Legal Services Commission (LSC) is also looking to set up CLS Partnerships covering Buckinghamshire, which will co-ordinate the funding and provision of local services. There is a CLS Partnership in Chiltern, and the LSC are looking to form partnerships with the other districts in Buckinghamshire.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Justice System

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements have been made to improve the co-ordination and effectiveness of the criminal justice system in England and Wales. [137359]

Mr. Straw: The Government are committed to improving the performance of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in England and Wales and have set out clear aims, objectives and targets for the CJS as a whole. A Strategic Plan for the CJS was published in March 1999 covering 1999–2002 and a Business Plan for the CJS in 2000–01 in May 2000. Copies have been placed in the Library. An updated CJS Business Plan for 2001–02 will be published early in 2001.

The strategy for the CJS is overseen by the Ministerial Group on the Criminal Justice System, chaired by me and including my noble and learned Friend, the Lord Chancellor, my noble and learned Friend, the Attorney-General, my right hon. Friend, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury together with Ministers and senior officials from the main CJS Departments. As part of the 2000 Spending Review, my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced in July 2000 a new reserve of £525 million over the three years 2001–02 to 2003–04 to be used to help deliver the objectives and targets set out in the latest CJS Public Service Agreement. Initial decisions on use of the reserve will be made in the next few months.

Alongside these new resources the Government are working with the police, Crown Prosecution Service, courts, probation and prison services on an on-going programme of modernisation and reform and are engaged in a number of important reviews of the criminal justice process. These include Sir Robin Auld's review of the criminal courts and a review of the present sentencing framework led by John Halliday, formerly Director of Criminal Justice Policy at the Home Office.

The Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Law Officers' Department and Her Majesty's Treasury are now pursuing work to draw together the experience of the last three and a half years, and, taking account of the current reviews, to identify the way forward for the longer term. Any firm conclusions which emerge from this work will be reported to the House.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sex offenders subject to the Sex Offenders Act 1997 have been placed on the home detention curfew scheme since 28 January 1999. [137407]

Mr. Boateng: Further to my reply to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) of 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 377W, in which I stated that as of 31 May 2000 only two prisoners subject to the provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 had been granted Home Detention Curfew, I have since been informed that a third sex offender subject to the 1997 Act has been placed on the scheme.

The offender was convicted of unlawful sexual intercourse with a 14-year-old girl and was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. He was considered as a candidate for Home Detention Curfew in view of the exceptional circumstances that he was a registered blind person and it was his first offence. He had a suitable address and was judged at an enhanced risk assessment board to pose a low risk of re-offending. He was placed on the scheme on 11 July 2000 until his conditional release date of 8 September 2000. He successfully completed the curfew and is not known to have been arrested, charged or convicted of any further offence since.

Under existing arrangements, sex offenders subject to the 1997 Act may be released only in exceptional circumstances and then only with the personal authorisation of the Director General of the Prison Service. In this case, as in the other cases previously notified, I regret that this requirement was not followed by the establishment. Although I am satisfied in this particular case that the risk to the public was remote, I have asked the Director General for a report into the circumstances of the release.

Under the amendment to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill which the Government brought forward on 12 June 2000, sex offenders subject to the notification requirements of part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 will be excluded from the Home Detention Curfew scheme altogether. This amendment will prevent the re-occurrence of any further errors of this kind as they will automatically be excluded on the local inmate database system (as in the case for other statutory exclusions, for example deportees).

Charities

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many investigations have been carried out under section 8 of the Charities Act 1993; and what was the average length of time taken to complete an investigation. [134441]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Section 8 of the Charities Act 1993 came into force on 1 August 1993. In the calendar years from 1994 to 1999, inclusive, 2,595 investigations under section 8 of the Charities Act 1993 have been completed. The Commission has changed its reporting from calendar to financial years. Where appropriate both are shown in this breakdown:

	Number
1994	523
1995	926
1996	347
1997	345
1998	199
1999	255
2000 (to 30 September)	234

	Number
1998–99	260
1999–2000	255
2000 (April-September)	130

Statistical information on the average length of time taken to complete an investigation is currently not routinely collected, but plans are under way to collect this information for future years.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many investigations under section 8 of the Charities Act 1993 have taken more than 12 months to complete; and what percentage of section 8 investigations this represents. [134440]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The figures for the length of time taken to conclude investigations in the years 1993–98 are not held centrally. The figures for the most recent years are:

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000*[1]
Number of investigations completed	260	255	130
Number of investigations taking more than 12 months to complete	68	82	26
Percentage of investigations taking more than 12 months to complete	26	32	20

[1] April to September

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many charities were removed from the Charities' Register following an investigation under section 8 of the Charities Act 1993 in each year since the Act came into force. [134439]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Removal from the Register is not one of the remedial or protective powers available to the Charity Commission under section 18 of the Act (which applies to section 8 investigations). The Commission's remedial powers include the suspension, removal and appointment of charity trustees, and the freezing of bank accounts. These measures are designed to protect the assets of a charity under investigation and ensure they are applied properly in the future.

In exceptional circumstances, where it is clear these statutory measures are insufficient to secure the charity's future the Commission can propose the transfer of assets to another charity and the winding up of the original charity. Historical statistics are not held centrally but in the six months April-September 2000, nine charities were removed in these circumstances and proposals to remove a further nine remain under consideration.

Drink Driving

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been (1) prosecuted for drinking and driving in each of the last five years; what proportion of those prosecutions were in the months of November, December and January; and if he will make a statement; [136508]

(2) convicted for drinking and driving offences in each of the last five years while in charge of *(a)* a car and *(b)* a motorbike. [136507]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The available information is contained in the table.

Number of prosecutions and convictions for 'Driving etc. after consuming alcohol or taking drugs', England and Wales, 1995–99

	Prosecutions	*Convictions*
1995	105,407	92,505
1996	107,931	95,705
1997	112,125	100,202
1998	104,045	93,116
1999[1]	99,500	89,364

[1] Provisional

No distinction between those in charge of cars or motorcycles is available in the statistics collected centrally.

Based on the two years 1998 and 1999, the proportion of prosecutions completed in the months of November, December, and January was 9 per cent., 7 per cent., and 9 per cent. respectively, or 25 per cent. for the three months combined.

Crime Figures

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what, based on information contained in British Crime Surveys and police recorded crime figures was the percentage of crimes committed against individuals and their property which *(a)* were reported, *(b)* were recorded by the police, *(c)* were cleared up, *(d)* resulted in a caution or conviction, *(e)* resulted in a conviction and *(f)* resulted in a custodial sentence in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999; and if he will make a statement. [134675]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Information on attrition within the Criminal Justice System in 1997 is detailed on page 29 of "Digest 4—Information on the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales" published by the Home Office in October 1999. A copy of this publication is available in the Library.

The information requested for 1998 is not available, as no British Crime Survey was conducted in 1999.

The 2000 British Crime Survey measures crimes against people living in private households. It also provides estimates of the proportion reported to the police and recorded by them. This is detailed on page 6 of the "2000 British Crime Survey—Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/00" published by the Home Office in October 2000. The survey does not include data on the other requests.

Figures for 1997 and 1999 are not directly comparable due to changes in the Home Office rules on counting and classification of recorded crime on 1 April 1998. Further details of the changes, and the way in which they have affected the notifiable offences series, are shown in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/99.

Police Sick Leave

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were on long-term sick leave in *(a)* each English police force and *(b)* each Metropolitan police divisional force for the last year for which such statistics are available; what

proportion of total establishment officer strength this represents in each case; and if he will make a statement. [134988]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information is given in the tables. It is based on the number of officers who have been on sick leave for more than 28 days on the particular date mentioned.

Forces	*Police officers on long-term sick leave on 31 March 2000*	*Percentage strength on long-term sick leave*
Avon and Somerset	53	1.8
Bedfordshire	24	2.3
Cambridgeshire	41	3.3
Cheshire	83	4.1
City of London	16	2.2
Cumbria	36	3.3
Derbyshire	63	3.5
Devon and Cornwall	99	3.5
Dorset	23	1.8
Durham	23	1.5
Essex	61	2.2
Gloucestershire	16	1.4
Greater Manchester	220	3.2
Hertfordshire	27	1.5
Humberside	35	1.8
Kent	53	1.7
Lancashire	81	2.5
Leicestershire	42	2.1
Lincolnshire	19	1.7
Merseyside	124	3.0
Metropolitan Police	397	1.6
Norfolk	23	1.7
Northamptonshire	16	1.4
Northumbria	57	1.5
North Yorkshire	46	3.6
Nottinghamshire	54	2.4
South Yorkshire	86	2.7
Staffordshire	60	2.8
Suffolk	21	1.8
Surrey	28	1.6
Sussex	72	2.6
Thames Valley	102	2.7
Warwickshire	28	3.1
West Mercia	32	1.7
West Midlands	176	2.4
West Yorkshire	104	2.2
Wiltshire	11	1.0

Note:
Figures for Cleveland and Hampshire are not available

London borough	*Number of officers on long-term sick leave at 31 July 2000*	*Percentage of total strength*
Barking and Dagenham	8	3.0
Barnet	11	2.2
Bexley	3	1.1
Brent	17	3.0
Bromley	8	1.9
Camden	5	0.8
City of Westminster	34	2.2
Croydon	9	1.6
Ealing	12	2.1
Enfield	8	1.7
Greenwich	17	2.8
Hackney	12	1.9
Hammersmith	7	1.4
Haringey	11	2.2
Harrow	3	1.1
Havering	9	2.9
Heathrow Airport	7	2.3
Hillingdon	11	3.1
Hounslow	6	1.5
Islington	11	2.1
Kensington and Chelsea	7	1.3
Kingston upon Thames	6	2.4
Lambeth	13	1.5
Lewisham	7	1.2
Merton	3	1.1
Newham	5	0.9
Redbridge	16	3.9
Richmond upon Thames	5	1.8
Southwark	13	1.7
Sutton	7	2.3
Tower Hamlets	6	1.1
Waltham Forest	13	3.0
Wandsworth	8	1.4

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1997 in reducing sickness absence; and if he will make a statement. [134506]

Mr. Straw: Information on sickness absence data for the Civil Service between 1995 and 1998 was published in a British Medical Institute (BMI) Health Services Report 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service', produced on behalf of the Cabinet Office. Information for 1999 will be included in the next BMI report to be published shortly.

The Home Office and its Agencies have introduced new guidelines, policies and procedures with a view to reducing sickness absence. The Department's Service Delivery Targets for April 2001 to March 2004, which include a target for sickness absence, were published on Friday, 3 November, and are available on the Home Office website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk/pfd/sda2000.htm).

To reduce sickness absence, and sustain this improvement thereafter in the:

Home Office and its agencies (excluding the Prison and Probation Services) to an average of 6.9 days per member of staff by end of March 2003;

Prison and Probation Service to an average of 9.0 days per member of staff by 2004;

Fire Service, by 2005, to a level consistent with or better than those presently achieved by the best quartile of employers, eg an average of 6.5 shifts for firefighters and 5.4 shifts for control room staff; and in

all police forces which now have targets as part of their efficiency plans.

Internet (Child Abuse)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been brought involving *(a)* child abuse and *(b)* stalking of children within internet chat rooms; and how many such prosecutions have been successful. [136215]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested.

Any sexual or violent offence committed against a child might amount to abuse. It is not possible to identify child victims of abuse from the overall statistics.

Among the range of offences an adult might be charged with, in respect of a child, however, is the offence of indecent conduct towards a young child under section 1 of the Indecency with Children Act 1960. For 1999 the statistics for prosecutions and convictions were: 330 prosecutions and 217 convictions.

Similarly, there is no specific offence of stalking of children within internet chat rooms. It is not possible to say how many of the offences of "stalking" under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 involve children using the internet.

However, information is given as follows, for offences under Section 2 and Section 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 in 1999.

Under s. 2—summary offence of harassment—there were: 5,427 prosecutions and 2,709 convictions.

Under s. 4 of the 1997 Act—putting people in fear of violence—there were: 1,632 prosecutions and 488 convictions.

Firearms

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* the most common ways illegally held firearms are obtained and *(b)* what their origin is; and if he will make a statement. [135809]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Government believe that there is no single main source of illegal firearms in the United Kingdom. In particular, there is no evidence of organised and large-scale smuggling of firearms into this country. Interviews with criminals indicate that many firearms are obtained through informal contacts where their origins are not established.

The use of firearms in crime in this country is small in relation both to overall national crime figures and to other comparable countries. It may therefore be misleading to talk of any source of illegal firearms to be 'common' or to draw wider conclusions from particular incidents. Sources of illegally held firearms in recent years have included, for example: theft from legitimate sources; smuggling from abroad; conversion of deactivated or replica firearms to fire live ammunition; and 'trophies of war' brought back by returning service personnel. Individual firearms may remain in circulation for many years and their origins may be difficult to establish.

The Government have accepted the recommendations by the Firearms Consultative Committee (FCC) and the Home Affairs Committee (HAC) that further research should be carried out into this area. We are considering how best this should be carried forward.

Crime (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes *(a)* were reported and *(b)* led to convictions in the Sutton and Cheam constituency in each year since 1979. [134888] [134986]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November, 2000]:* Details of reported crime are not available. Information on the numbers of crimes recorded by the police in the London Borough of Sutton has been provided by the Metropolitan police. The figures cover from the 1995–96 financial year onwards. I understand that comparative data for earlier years are not available.

Recorded offences in the London Borough of Sutton

	Number
1995–96	10,756
1996–97	13,677
1997–98	13,059
1998–99[1]	12,752
1999–2000[1]	14,493

[1] New counting rules

Available information held centrally on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, showing the number of offenders convicted of indictable offences at Sutton Petty Sessional Division (PSD), are as follows:

Offenders convicted for indictable offences at Sutton PSD[1,2]

	Number
1979	624
1984	704
1989	636
1993	655
1994	818
1995	787
1996	692
1997	740
1998	752
1999	681

[1] Includes those found guilty at the Crown Court where the committing PSD was Sutton.

[2] For earlier years also includes Wallington PSD which amalgamated with the then Sutton PSD in 1986–87 to form the current Sutton PSD.

Note:

Due to disproportionate costs, selected years only are given.

It is important to note that as recorded crime data relate to offences, and convictions data relate to offenders, the two sets of figures are not directly comparable.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were convicted in respect of *(a)* murder, *(b)* indictable offences and *(c)* non-indictable offences in each year since 1979 in the Sutton and Cheam constituency. [134889] [134985]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Available information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Databases are given in the table. Due to disproportionate cost selected years only are given.

Number of offenders convicted at Sutton Petty Sessional Division (PSD[1]) or at the Crown court (where the committing magistrates court was Sutton PSD[1]) for certain offences, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1993 to 1999

	Offence		
	Murder	*Indictable offences*	*Summary non-motoring offences*
1979	—	624	742
1984	—	704	876
1989	—	636	789
1993	—	655	885
1994	1	818	281
1995	—	787	373
1996	—	692	1,132
1997	—	740	904
1998	1	752	1,066
1999	—	681	780

[1] For earlier years also includes Wallington PSD which amalgamated with the then Sutton PSD in 1986–87 to form the current Sutton PSD

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the number of young offenders within each Metropolitan police divisional force who have committed *(a)* five offences or more, *(b)* 10 offences or more, *(c)* 20 offences or more and *(d)* 50 offences or more; and if he will make a statement. [134982]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The exact information requested is not held centrally.

However, information on the total number of convictions for recordable offences relating to persistent young offenders convicted of one or more recordable offences in 1999 is available. The information, disaggregated by the Metropolitan police division (and in some cases sub-division) associated with the last recordable offence, is shown in the table.

Number of persistent young offenders convicted of one or more recordable offences in 1999 by division/sub-division and number of recordable offences

	Number of recordable offences					
Metropolitan division or sub-division	*Four*	*5 to 9*	*10 to 19*	*20 to 49*	*50 and over*	*Total*
Acton	—	6	4	—	—	10
Barkingside	—	4	7	—	—	11
Barnet and Hertsmere	—	4	5	3	—	12
Battersea	1	9	2	5	—	17
Belgravia	—	4	5	1	—	10
Bexleyheath	4	14	15	—	—	33
Boreham Wood	1	—	1	—	—	2
Brixton	1	10	4	1	—	16
Bromley and Orpington	6	17	11	6	—	40
Brompton	1	2	2	2	—	7
Catford	2	13	9	3	—	27
Charing Cross	2	6	4	—	—	12
Chingford	—	5	10	5	—	20
Colindale	—	3	1	1	—	5
Croydon	2	7	11	3	—	23
Dagenham	—	10	7	7	1	25
Ealing	2	5	4	1	—	12
Edmonton	—	5	5	2	—	12
Enfield	1	9	7	4	—	21
Epsom and Sutton	2	10	8	3	—	23
Forest Gate	2	6	7	1	—	16
Fulham	2	10	9	1	—	22
Greenwich	2	10	13	6	—	31
Hackney	—	—	—	1	—	1
Hammersmith	1	5	6	—	—	12
Hampstead	—	3	1	2	—	6
Harrow	—	8	6	2	—	16
Harrow Road	—	2	1	—	—	3
Heathrow Airport	—	1	—	—	—	1
Hillingdom	—	1	5	2	—	8
Holborn	—	1	3	1	—	5
Holloway	—	3	5	4	—	12
Hornsey	—	4	9	1	—	14
Hounslow	2	29	17	2	—	50
Ilford	2	9	10	1	—	22
Islington	2	7	3	—	—	12
Kentish Town	2	8	9	2	—	21
Kilburn	—	14	5	—	—	19
Kingston	3	17	13	2	—	35
Lewisham	—	9	9	6	1	25
Leyton	—	4	6	2	—	12
Limehouse	2	7	3	—	—	12
Marylebone	3	10	13	4	—	30
Notting Hill	1	3	4	1	—	9
Paddington Green	—	5	2	—	1	8
Peckham	1	8	4	2	—	15

Number of persistent young offenders convicted of one or more recordable offences in 1999 by division/sub-division and number of recordable offences

Metropolitan division or sub-division	Number of recordable offences					
	Four	5 to 9	10 to 19	20 to 49	50 and over	Total
Plaistow	1	6	7	2	—	16
Plumsted	1	17	5	6	1	30
Redbridge	—	1	2	—	—	3
Richmond	—	4	4	2	—	10
Romford	2	10	12	6	1	31
Shorditch and Hackney	—	4	3	1	—	8
South Norwood	4	19	19	7	—	49
Southall	3	9	6	2	—	20
Southwark	—	5	8	2	—	15
Spelthorne	—	6	6	3	—	15
Stoke Newington	1	4	4	—	—	9
Streatham	—	9	9	3	—	21
Sutton	—	3	5	3	—	11
Teddington	—	1	—	—	—	1
Tooting	—	2	2	—	—	4
Tottenham	1	6	2	1	—	10
Twickenham	1	8	10	1	—	20
Uxbridge	1	14	6	7	—	28
Vauxhall	1	5	7	1	1	15
Wallington	—	—	1	—	—	1
Walworth	—	11	8	—	—	19
Wandsworth	1	4	6	—	—	11
Wembley	2	4	4	—	—	10
West End Central	1	6	2	—	—	9
West Hendon	—	—	—	1	—	1
Whetstone	—	—	—	1	—	1
Whitechapel	1	10	5	1	—	17
Wimbledon	—	22	11	4	—	37
Winchmore Hill	—	—	1	—	—	1
Total	71	517	440	144	6	1,178

Internet Chat Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his Department was represented on the inter-departmental Internet Crime Forum sub-group on internet chat services; when he will receive the report; and if he will make a statement. [136218]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Home Office is represented on the inter-departmental Internet Crime Forum sub-group on internet chat services. The sub-group made its interim findings available on the Internet Crime Forum website—http://www.internetcrimeforum.org.uk/chatwise.html—on 31 October; I understand the full report will be published in due course.

Drugs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have involved *(a)* heroin, *(b)* crack/cocaine, *(c)* ecstasy and *(d)* cannabis in each year from 1990 to 1999; and what his projection is for the numbers in each category for the year 2000. [136570]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information requested, although not published in the annual Home Office statistical bulletin, is available for England and Wales for the years 1993 to 1999 inclusive and is given in the table. Information for the period 1990 to 1992 was collected on a different basis and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Equivalent data for 2000 are not yet available; nor are forecasts usually prepared.

Prosecutions in England and Wales for drug offences 1993–99

	Heroin	Cocaine/ crack	Ecstasy-type	Cannabis
1993	3,570	2,666	2,319	31,275
1994	4,831	2,815	2,826	41,239
1995	6,753	3,205	4,548	44,994
1996	9,549	3,596	5,389	45,121
1997	13,355	4,644	5,265	52,743
1998	16,098	5,852	3,432	60,114
1999	17,673	6,691	5,066	57,512

Source:
Drugs Research Unit, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

Miss Hilda Murrell

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcome of the DNA tests on evidence found in connection with the murder of Miss Hilda Murrell. [136560]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November, 2000]:* I understand from West Mercia Constabulary that no significant DNA results have yet been identified from examination of items which could bear DNA traces. But the police and Forensic Science Service have not yet reached the end of the forensic examination of the items which were prioritised as likely to give results.

Corpus Juris

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the Government's policy towards corpus juris. [134993]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), on 15 May 2000, *Official Report,* column 51W, and to the reply given to the Lord Pearson of Rannoch, on 25 October 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords,* column WA45–46.

Police Stations (Counter Closures)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police station front-counters have closed in the Metropolitan police force area since 1 January; if he will break down the closed counters by police borough; and if he will make a statement. [136575]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November, 2000]:* It is for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to determine the hours of business of police station front-counters. I understand from the Commissioner that a total of seven police station front-counters have closed in the Metropolitan Police force area since 1 January 2000: two in Bexley, one in Bromley, three in Harrow and one in Hounslow. In all cases where front counter services have been withdrawn, a free 24-hour telephone service has been provided at the relevant police building with a direct link to the local police control room. This ensures that members of the public are still able to speak to a police officer or member of the civil staff at all times.

Police Officers

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers there were in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales in each of the last 10 years in areas defined as (i) rural and (ii) urban; and if he will publish the criteria used to define an area as rural or urban. [136746]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November, 2000]:* All police forces in England and Wales have rural and urban areas. Information is not centrally collected about the number of police officers deployed to either rural or urban areas. Available resources are deployed by Chief Officers of Police according to operational need.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 8 November 2000

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ministerial Engagements

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many visits he has made to *(a)* the cinema and *(b)* the theatre in an official capacity since May 1997. [136242]

Mr. Chris Smith: Since May 1997 I have attended 12 cinematic and 25 theatrical performances in an official capacity. In addition I have also attended performances at various festivals over this period and have attended both the cinema and theatre on numerous other occasions in a personal capacity.

Culture Online

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 476W, what estimates he has made of the cost to public funds of establishing the new service provisionally entitled Culture Online. [137221]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is in the process of commissioning a full economic appraisal of this proposal in order to establish the likely cost to public funds and the potential for income generation.

Theatre Closures (London)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about the proposed closure of Westminster Theatre and the Mermaid Theatre; what assessment he has made of planning arrangements governing the future listing of such buildings; and if he will make a statement. [137008]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have received two representations asking me to consider listing the Westminster Theatre and none about the Mermaid. The Westminster Theatre has been assessed for listing and found not to meet the strict criteria; a certificate of immunity against listing, valid for five years, was issued in June 1997. The Mermaid Theatre will be considered should I receive such a request.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137189]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department has no regionally based offices so has had no need of such contracts.

Fitness Facilities

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has to work with *(a)* private health and fitness clubs and *(b)* public sports and leisure facilities to provide health benefits to all the population. [137045]

Kate Hoey: The Government's Sports Strategy "A Sporting Future for All" is based on creating opportunities to participate in sport. Wide participation, which requires easy access to various types of sports and fitness facilities and to sports clubs, will help to improve levels of fitness and lead to long-term improvements. The strategy implementation subgroup charged with this task, whose members include representatives from local authority sport and the private health and fitness sector, is on course to report back to Ministers at the end of the year.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 806–07W, what the average cost per case is for the administration of Housing Benefit in each local authority in England. [136166]

Angela Eagle: The measure of the average cost to a local authority of administering a Housing Benefit case is based on a comparison of the amount the authority reports it spends on benefit administration and the reported size of its case load. The figures have been calculated using this comparison and have been placed in the Library.

Mortgage Benefit Scheme

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on the introduction of a mortgage benefit scheme. [136814]

Angela Eagle: In April we published our Housing Green Paper, "Quality and Choice: A decent home for all" setting out our vision and strategy for the provision of housing in the future. It is the most comprehensive review of housing policy for 23 years and is all about raising standards, improving performance, extending choice and increasing accessibility and accountability. I am aware that some of the responses to the Housing Green Paper support the introduction of a mortgage benefit scheme.

EU Employment Directive

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Inter-ministerial Group on Ageing and Older People last met to discuss the EU directive on discrimination in employment. [137319]

Mr. Rooker: The EU directive is not specific to older people. It was therefore discussed by Ministers across Government throughout the year before it was signed in October.

Elderly People

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was spent on social security for the elderly as

a proportion of gross domestic product in 1996–97; what he estimates it will be in 2001–02; and what amount this would be if basic state pension had been linked to earnings, excluding the cost of free television licences for the over-75s, Winter Fuel Payments and the Minimum Income Guarantee, but including Income Support. [137903]

Mr. Rooker: In 1996–97, Social Security benefit expenditure on elderly people accounted for 5.32 per cent. of GDP. The forecasts underlying the most recently published expenditure plans[1] show that in 2001–02 the corresponding figure will be 5.33 per cent. of GDP. The corresponding figure for 2001–02 would have been 5.23 per cent. if basic state pension had been linked to earnings, excluding the cost of free TV licences for the over-75s, Winter Fuel Payments and the Minimum Income Guarantee, but including Income Support.

[1] Spending Review 2000 plans.

WALES

Rail Improvements

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the chairmen of rail companies operating within Wales to discuss improvements to Welsh railway lines; and what was the outcome of these meetings. [135241]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Oversight of the railway industry is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

I have met representatives of rail companies on several occasions to discuss a range of issues. I also maintain close contact with the National Assembly for Wales, which has a key role to play in encouraging the development of integrated transport networks. I know that Sue Essex, the Assembly's Secretary for Planning, Environment and Transport, has had numerous meetings with the train operating companies and has issued guidance to those bidding for the Wales and Borders franchise, setting out the Assembly's aspirations for rail services in Wales.

Foreign Investment

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the origins of foreign investment in Wales in each of the last 10 years. [135228]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is in the table.

Capital expenditure stated at time of investment decision

£ million

Region	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
France	61.100	55.550	25.500	4.567	0.050	16.900	14.190	19.090	24.064	1.200
Germany	9.212	39.482	8.434	13.682	31.350	6.600	0.975	25.868	63.354	33.880
Italy	0.500	58.070	11.425	2.835	0	5.770	21.849	17.290	17.840	3.810
Japan	39.469	230.475	9.150	87.215	214.590	34.015	96.076	145.558	196.598	24.031
Korea	0	0	0.600	0	0	17.102	1700.000	0	0.400	0
North America	136.543	589.700	384.549	356.527	506.829	520.673	880.289	134.223	144.787	437.930
Other European	15.346	30.820	32.474	67.086	19.671	23.158	17.779	78.606	87.952	7.346
Rest of World	24.300	17.950	318.087	43.000	2.450	296.092	0.989	28.147	5.901	4.067

Business Numbers

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many businesses *(a)* operate and *(b)* operated in 1995 in Wales. [136272]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In 1999 there were 75,230 businesses in Wales registered for VAT. The comparable figure for 1995 is 77,200. These figures do not include companies with an annual turnover of less than £50,000 or those in VAT-exempt sectors.

Small and Medium-sized Businesses

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the level of regulations on small businesses. [136478]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters, including the concerns of small businesses.

Both the Government and the National Assembly are committed to minimising regulatory burdens on business.

Skills Shortages (Alyn and Deeside)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultation he has had with the First Secretary concerning skills shortages in Alyn and Deeside, with particular reference to small and medium-sized enterprises; and if he will make a statement. [137012]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters, including the skills requirements of businesses in particular localities.

Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) are currently responsible for assessing the skill needs of employers in their areas—including small and medium-sized enterprises, and for working with local authorities and others to promote local action to meet those needs. I understand that the National Assembly is supporting this process through commissioning research under the Future Skills Wales study, which provides information on skill needs at TEC area and local authority level. From April 2001, the responsibility for analysing and addressing local skill needs will fall to regional offices of the Council for Education and Training in Wales.

Engineering Industry

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what consultations he has had with the First Secretary concerning the provision of skilled persons in the engineering industries; and if he will make a statement; [137018]

(2) what consultations he has had with the First Secretary concerning policies related to the employment of skilled persons to fill vacancies in the engineering industry; and if he will make a statement. [137015]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters including the skill requirements of particular industries.

I understand that the National Assembly liaises closely with the Engineering and Marine Training Authority (EMTA) and other national training organisations on the skill needs of the engineering industry and will take account of their views in drawing up an employment action plan as part of the National Economic Development Strategy.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the First Secretary concerning the number of houses built by local authorities in Wales since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [137021]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters, including housing provision.

I understand that local authorities reported 1,859 homes completed between January 1990 and December 1999.

Aerospace Industry (Alyn and Deeside)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the First Secretary concerning the requirement for skilled persons in Alyn and Deeside, with particular reference to the aerospace industry; and if he will make a statement. [137014]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters, including the skill requirements of particular industries.

I understand that the National Assembly, the Welsh Development Agency and the Training and Enterprise Councils have been working with the aerospace sector to help overcome recruitment and training difficulties. For example, the Assembly has part-funded a collaborative project with the industry to meet training needs arising out of new British Civil Aviation Authority requirements.

Organic Farming

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what funds organic farming in Wales will receive from EU sources in each of the next three years. [137098]

Mr. Paul Murphy: That is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

DEFENCE

Precision-guided Bombing Capability

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the training of RAF aircrews in laser-guided bombing performance; and what plans he has for improving it. [134403]

Mr. Spellar: As we have acknowledged in the publication 'Kosovo—Lessons from the Crisis', the RAF already has a well-practised low-level all-weather attack capability. Given the strong possibility that future operations could, as in Kosovo, be conducted at medium altitude, we have considered how best to be prepared for such an eventuality. Precision guided munitions, including the RAF's Laser Guided Bombs (Paveway II and Paveway III), achieved good results in the Kosovo crisis. The RAF had built up their precision attack capability as a consequence of lessons from the Gulf War and this paid dividends, with the laser-guided systems performing well and in accordance with expectations. Nevertheless, the limitations of our current laser-guided systems in poor weather were highlighted.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 272W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) about plans for improving laser-guided bombing performance. We intend to procure an interim all-weather precision guided bombing capability for the RAF and have selected Raytheon Systems Corporation to supply the RAF Tornado GR4 aircraft, subject to the successful completion of contractual negotiations, with Enhanced Paveway Bombs.

We keep our training in precision-guided attacks under review to ensure that our crews are properly trained to employ the equipment they operate.

Ranges (Crown Immunity)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Crown immunity applies to the Torrs Warren Range at the head of Luce Bay, Galloway; and if such immunity extends to prescribed sea areas adjacent to both that range and Kirkcudbright Ranges, Galloway. [135107]

Mr. Spellar: Crown immunity is an expression used by lawyers to refer to exemptions for the Crown which appear in legislation. Whether or not the Crown is exempt from certain legislation in respect of the sites in question will depend on the precise terms and effects of that legislation.

Army Overstretch

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 276W, what percentage of Army commitment and what interval between deployments his Department assesses to be optimal in order for overstretch to be alleviated; and if he will make a statement. [136743]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We concluded during the Strategic Defence Review process that for the Army, six-month operational tours and an average interval between tours of 24 months are optimum for operational effectiveness and retention. We do not identify an optimum percentage figure for commitment levels, which are a reflection of operational deployments. Whether such deployments are sustainable depends on a number of factors, including the nature of the task and duration of the commitment, which are not reflected in overall percentage figures on commitment levels.

Nuclear Submarines

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how often nuclear submarines are inspected for safety. [137215]

Mr. Spellar: Royal Navy nuclear submarines are subject to a rolling programme of planned inspection and maintenance. The periodicity of this work is designed to ensure the safety of the nuclear reactor and the submarine as a whole. For example, certain reactor protection systems are inspected every 24 hours, while some hull and support system components are examined every few months. In addition, there are major overhaul periods, which can take some two years to complete, when further inspections are made.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what effect the cracks in the cooling system of HMS Tireless will have on the immediate environment; and if the cracks resulted from a design flaw in the nuclear submarines. [137212]

Mr. Spellar: Since her arrival in Gibraltar on 19 May, HMS Tireless has undergone routine radiation monitoring and has had no effect on the immediate environment. During her repair, no radioactive contamination of any kind will be released into the environment either within HMS Tireless or externally in Gibraltar. All nuclear waste arising from her repair will have extremely low levels of radioactivity and will be returned to the UK in specially constructed tanks.

At present there is no evidence to suggest that the defect found in some, but not all, hunter-killer submarines, has resulted from a design flaw. It is feasible that the defect could have arisen from the manufacturing process when the submarines were built or have some other origin. The analysis of the evidence collected so far is, as yet, inconclusive.

European Forces

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the official language of the European forces as defined in EU Council document SN 300/99 will be; [136298]

(2) if *(a)* the NATO flag or *(b)* the EU flag will be the official flag of the European forces as defined in EU Council document SN 300/99. [136299]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The European forces referred to in EU Council document SN 300/99 are the pool of capability needed to achieve the Headline Goal. The Headline Goal states that, by 2003, EU nations should be able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain up to 60,000 troops capable of undertaking the full range of crisis management tasks.

In the event of an EU-led or NATO-led operation being launched, each nation would decide when and how to commit their forces and each nation would be under their own national command and national flag.

National forces deployed on an EU-led operation in support of this goal will speak their own language. The issue of working language between national forces or in Multinational Headquarters has not yet been addressed in the EU context. However, in NATO the working language for these purposes is English.

Iraq (Southern No-fly Zone)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions *(a)* coalition aircraft and *(b)* UK aircraft patrolling the southern no-fly zone in Iraq have released ordnance in response to violations from (i) 20 December 1998 to 17 May 2000 and (ii) 17 May to date indicating in percentage terms over said periods (1) the nature of the threat, (2) the category of the target attacked and (3) the tonnage of ordnance released on each category of target in proportion to the overall tonnage released in said periods; and if he will make a statement. [136593]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* For the period 20 December 1998 to 17 May 2000 I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 6 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 170W.

Saddam Hussein continues to try to kill coalition aircrew conducting legitimate humanitarian patrols. Coalition patrols respond to these attacks only in self-defence. If Saddam stopped trying to kill our aircrew we would not have to react in this way.

Between 18 May and 31 October 2000 coalition aircraft were directly threatened by the Iraqi air defence forces in the southern no-fly zone on 55 occasions, and responded in self-defence on 16 occasions against Iraqi military facilities posing a direct threat to coalition forces. UK aircraft released ordnance on eight occasions. Details of the threats broken down by percentage, are as follows:

	Percentage
(i) Nature of threat by percentage	
Aircraft Violations of southern no-fly zone	4
Anti-Aircraft Artillery/Surface to Air Missile Firings	91
Hostile Electronic Activity	5
(ii) Category of Target attacked by percentage	
Integrated Air Defence System	100
(iii) Tonnage of Weapons Released by percentage	
Integrated Ground Based Air Defence System	100

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tonnage of ordnance has been released by *(a)* coalition and *(b)* UK aircraft in operations to maintain the southern no-fly zone in Iraq from 17 May to date; and if he will make a statement. [136594]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Between 18 May and 31 October 2000 coalition aircraft patrolling the southern no-fly zone released some 60 tonnes of ordnance. The UK element of this figure was some 11 per cent. These weapons were released in self-defence in response to Iraqi threats to coalition aircraft.

Flooding (Armed Forces)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role the armed forces have played in dealing with the recent floods in the UK. [137314]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces are always ready to respond to requests from the emergency services to provide help and support in the event of national disaster. Over the past week they have responded to numerous requests to help with flood relief. At the peak about 600 service personnel were providing assistance in numerous locations, performing tasks such as the reinforcement of flood defences and the evacuation of residents. Chinook helicopters have been used to move sandbags to inaccessible areas and Sea King helicopters have conducted rescue missions for people trapped by floodwaters.

The armed forces are continuing to provide assistance in several areas, and they remain ready to respond to further calls from the emergency services, wherever the need may arise.

RAF Innsworth

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to reduce the number of MOD police at RAF Innsworth; and if he will make a statement. [136987]

Dr. Moonie: The complement of Ministry of Defence Police at RAF Innsworth reduces from six to two on 1 April 2001. A review of the possible need to strengthen MDP resources in the wider area is currently nearing completion.

War Graves

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the income provided to gardeners employed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. [136980]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 341–42W.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Mr. Roger Sylvester

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Solicitor-General when a decision will be made on the bringing of charges against officers from Tottenham police station in connection with the death of Mr. Roger Sylvester; and if he will make a statement. [136975]

The Solicitor-General: The investigation report of the Essex police has been considered carefully by the Crown Prosecution Service, in accordance with the tests set out in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. Further medical evidence has recently been obtained and is urgently being considered by the Crown Prosecution Service. It is expected that the Crown Prosecutor reviewing the case will be in a position to complete the review by the end of this month. I will write to my hon. Friend when a decision has been made.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Angela Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what additional projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit; and if he will make a statement. [137757]

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the remit given to the Performance and Innovation Unit to make a study of the future of renewable energy; what resources are to be committed to the study; and by when he has asked the PIU to report. [135431]

The Prime Minister: I have asked the Performance and Innovation Unit to undertake the following further projects:

(i) how to achieve better availability of drugs to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria in developing countries, and help achieve the targets for these diseases agreed at the G8 Okinawa summit. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will be the Sponsor Ministers for this project, which will report by summer 2001.

(ii) to carry out an analysis of the extent, nature and main causes of under-investment in work force development, and to bring forward proposals for solutions. The Minister for Transport will be the Sponsor Minister for this project, which will report by autumn 2001.

(iii) to examine the contribution that renewable energy technologies could make to economic growth and environmental protection within the context of using natural resources more efficiently to support sustainable development. The Minister for Health will be the Sponsor Minister for this project, which will report by autumn 2001.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Hawk Aircraft (Indonesia)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what licences to permit the sale of spare parts for Hawk fighters in Indonesia have been granted in the past 12 months; and what reports he has received concerning the Hawks used in civil conflicts in *(a)* East Timor and *(b)* other parts of Indonesia. [136655]

Dr. Howells: Between 1 November 1999 and 31 October 2000, four Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and one Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Indonesia of spares for Hawk aircraft. These figures have been obtained by searching the ECO's computer databases using the entries relating to military aircraft spares.

As regards the receipt of any reports concerning the use of Hawks, I have been informed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they understand Hawks are regularly deployed to various parts of Indonesia for routine training.

I also understand that the FCO are not aware of any evidence that Hawks have ever been used for counter-insurgency in East Timor or in Indonesia.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which relocation companies currently hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil

servants; when those contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137190]

Dr. Howells: Since May 1997, the Department has used only one company for relocating civil servants, Cendant Relocation Services (previously known as Bradford and Bingley Relocation Services and Black Horse Relocation Services). The contract was last let in November 1999. The contract was not advertised; six companies were invited to tender. The contract runs until 31 October 2002 (with provision to extend if necessary). Its value at award was £950,000 a year.

Post Offices

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* Crown post offices, *(b)* franchised post offices and *(c)* sub-post offices there are in each parliamentary constituency. [137010]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I refer to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) on 29 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 22W.

Milk Marque

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had recently with representatives of farming organisations regarding the division of Milk Marque into three separate processing companies. [137231]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* None since my announcement on 2 May that the successors were free to develop milk processing activities if they wished.

Household Debt

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those organisations invited to attend the recent summit on household debt. [137254]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* I invited the following organisations to the conference on tackling over-indebtedness which I hosted on 30 October:

Association of Payment Clearing Services
British Bankers Association
British Retail Consortium
Cabinet Office—Social Exclusion Unit
Consumer Credit Association
Consumer Credit Trade Association
Consumers Association
Council of Mortgage Lenders
Creation Financial Services
Credit Services Association
Department for Education and Employment
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Department of Social Security
Department of Trade and Industry—Insolvency Service
Equifax
Experian
Federation of Independent Advice Centres
Finance and Leasing Association
Financial Services Authority
HM Treasury
Lord Chancellor's Department
Mail Order Traders Association
Money Advice Trust
National Consumer Council
National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
National Pawnbrokers Association
Office of Fair Trading
Office of the Data Protection Commissioner
Personal Finance Research Centre
Scottish Executive
Sheriffs of England and Wales.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what proposals he has to deal with irresponsible lending by financial institutions; [137255]

(2) if he will make a statement on the outcome of the recent summit on household debt. [137253]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The meeting was very constructive and creditor representatives have agreed to work with the Government to look at ways of achieving more responsible lending and borrowing.

I will shortly set up an industry task force to look at three key areas:

improving the transparency of information provided to consumers before and when concluding a credit agreement, including the small print;

adoption of core principles of lending practice, including examining an applicant's overall borrowing exposure and ability to repay; and,

requiring clear notification to consumers on free and low interest agreements before the final payment is made.

I hope that the task force will begin its work before Christmas and make recommendations to Government by spring next year.

Genetically Engineered Animals

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the UK patents which have been *(a)* applied for and *(b)* granted between (i) 1 July 1999 and 27 July 2000 and (ii) since 28 July 2000 in respect of genetically engineered animals and processes for creating such animals; and if he will make a statement. [137293]

Dr. Howells: I can give information only about patent applications which have been published. Prior to publication such information is confidential. Patent applications filed since 1 July 1999 will not yet have been published, since publication occurs 18 months after filing. Between 1 July 1999 and 27 July 2000 four UK patents relating to genetically engineered animals or processes for creating them were granted. These were GB 2318578, GB 2331751, GB 2318792 and GB 2340493, all relating to reconstituting an animal embryo. Since 28 July 2000 there have been no UK patents granted relating to genetically engineered animals or processes for creating

them. This information does not include applications filed at the European Patent Office which may have the effect of UK patents if granted by that office.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Africa Conflict Prevention Fund

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the role and aims of the Africa Conflict Prevention Fund. [136456]

Clare Short: The aim of the Sub-Saharan Africa Conflict Prevention Joint Pool is to reduce violent conflict by improving the effectiveness, impact and efficiency of HMG's contribution to peacekeeping, conflict prevention and management. The Joint Pool's remit is limited to those policy areas and actions that directly contribute to conflict prevention, reduction and management in sub-Saharan Africa. The new arrangements will come into effect from FY 2001–02.

Sterilisation

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if her Department funds incentivised sterilisation in developing countries. [136640]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development does not fund incentivised sterilisation.

EU Aid (Corruption)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of corruption in projects administered by the European Union. [136626]

Clare Short: We assess financial propriety in EC aid by evaluating the annual reports of the European Court of Auditors on the EC budget and the European Development Fund, and their series of special reports.

Sector-wide Approaches

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of the bilateral aid budget is spent on sector-wide approaches. [136636]

Clare Short: To date spending on sector-wide work has been recorded within existing categories defined by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee and cannot be distinguished separately. However, work is under way to generate separate data in consultation with other donors.

Malawi

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she has taken to ensure that British aid to Malawi was not used to purchase 39 Mercedes cars for Government Ministers; and if she will make a statement. [136656]

Clare Short: British aid has not been used for this purpose.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department made of corruption in the Malawian education sector before her recent aid announcement. [136664]

Clare Short: The education programme reviewed financial management in the sector. The programme will itself be audited annually.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support has been given to the Malawi Anti-Corruption Bureau. [136638]

Clare Short: We have provided £352,000 to support the Anti-Corruption Bureau. This comprises a long-term technical adviser and support for professional training. We are discussing additional support for staff, including assistance with prosecutions.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the level of corruption in the Malawian Government. [136663]

Clare Short: The Malawi Government inherited an ineffective and corruption ridden government mechanism from the Banda regime. It has repeatedly stated its commitment to rooting out corruption. We are working with the Government to set up systems to reduce corruption and to take action against those implicated.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list her Department's aid projects in Malawi. [136666]

Clare Short: My Department's aid projects in Malawi are as follows:

Impact Area 1—Decentralisation and the Role of Government

Trade Policy Project

Impact Area 2—Economic and Financial Management

Anti-Corruption Bureau

Gemini Survey of Small and Medium Enterprises in Malawi

Customs Support Programme Phase II

Support to National Statistical Office

Support for Medium Term Expenditure Framework

Impact Area 3—Human Rights

Radio for Development—(Ndizathuzomwe)

Training of Lay Magistrates

Clearance of Homicide Backlog

Rehabilitation of Prison Farms

Safety, Security and Access to Justice Programme

Reform of the Penal Code

Interim Police Organisational Development Project

Paralegal Advisory Service

Human Rights Small Grants Fund

Community Service Pilot Project

NGO Capacity Building

'Through Rights to Needs for Marginalised Malawians'—(support for civil society)

Impact Area 4—Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

Farming Systems Integrated Pest Management

Smallholder Seed Development

Dedza Sustainable Livelihoods Project

Lesson Learning and Testing of Safety Nets

Targeted Inputs Programme
Central Region Infrastructure Maintenance Programme
Microfinance Expansion (FINCA)
Financial Services for the Poor
Training for Enterprise and Exports in Malawi
Economics Activities Programme
Concern Universal: Safe Water and Sanitation
SC (UK) Salima Safe Water and Sanitation
SC (UK) Dowa Safe Water and Sanitation

Impact Area 5—Education and Health

Primary Community Schools Project
Schools Support Systems Project
Support to Education Sector
Safe Motherhood project
College of Health Sciences
National Health Plan
National TB Programme
Sexual and Reproductive Health Programme
Supplementary Readers
Support to National AIDS Control Programme
Reform of Central Medical Stores
Demographic and Health Survey
Banja La Mtsogolo (Reproductive Health)
Expanded Programme of Immunisation
Essential Medical Laboratory Services

Impact Area 6—Safeguarding the Environment

National Forestry Action Plan
Mulanje Forest Conservation.

Human Rights Report

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the FCO concerning the publication of the Annual Human Rights Report 2000. [137223]

Clare Short: FCO's Human Rights Report 2000 makes clear the close interaction between FCO, DFID and other departments in making and implementing the Government's human rights policy.

This year's report is not a joint publication as it was in the past. We published in October 2000 a paper, "Realising Human Rights for Poor People", describing the Human Rights strategy of DFID and how we will integrate reporting on human rights into our annual departmental report.

Contraception Advice

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what advice she gives to people in the Third World about contraception; and if she will make a statement. [136991]

Clare Short: The Government are committed to the principles of freedom and choice in reproductive health services as agreed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and to the International Development to attain universal access to reproductive health services before 2015.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that concessionary travel for pensioners is available on an equal basis between men and women. [135854]

Mr. Hill: The Government have a strong commitment to concessionary travel for elderly people. In the Transport Bill, we are introducing a statutory minimum for local authority concessionary travel schemes, which will provide pensioners and disabled people with half-fare travel or better on local buses with a free pass. In total about 6.5 million people will benefit from the new minimum standard. Under the terms of the Pensions Act 1995, the age of entitlement for concessionary travel for both men and women will be equalised at 65 by 2020.

Aircraft Noise

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response the Government have made to the proposed EU directive introducing common measurements of aircraft noise across the European Union. [136543]

Mr. Mullin: The European Commission's proposal for a Directive on the Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise is concerned with noise from transport and industrial sources generally, not only noise from aircraft. The Government have undertaken a consultation on the proposed Directive and prepared an initial regulatory impact assessment. Copies of the results were placed in the House Library on 19 October.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with airports and aircraft companies regarding the fitting of mufflers to aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [136997]

Mr. Mullin: Officials regularly discuss with stakeholders our strategy on new noise standards, including modification of aircraft to meet those standards. Studies have shown that fitting mufflers can impair an aircraft's performance and handling. Safety is, of course, paramount. Certifying the airworthiness of aircraft is a matter for the Civil Aviation Authority.

Bus Lanes

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of bus lanes there are in England; what steps are taken to enforce the regulations which apply to them; and if he will make a statement. [136669]

Mr. Hill: Allocation of road space is a matter for the local highway authority and information about the length of bus lanes in England is not kept centrally.

Enforcement of bus lanes is shared by the police and local highway authorities. Stationary offences can be enforced by local authorities in London, and outside where authorities have taken on decriminalised parking enforcement. In London also, following trials in four

boroughs, authorities will be taking on the enforcement of moving offences in bus lanes, using cameras. The Transport Bill contains powers which, when enacted, would allow authorities outside London to do the same.

The Metropolitan police are currently responsible for all enforcement on the Greater London Authority road network, some of which uses cameras provided by Transport for London. Outside London the police are responsible for all bus lane enforcement except where the local authorities have taken on the relevant powers to do it themselves.

Road Lighting

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce lighting standards for all classes of road in urban areas; and if he will make a statement. [136425]

Mr. Hill: Standards for road lighting for all classes of roads can be found in the British Standard Code of Practice for Road Lighting, BS 5489. It is for the lighting authority concerned, normally the highway authority, to decide if a road should be lit and how to apply the standard.

Sheep Dips

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent studies the Health and Safety Executive has carried out into the safety of organophosphorus sheep dips in relation to *(a)* humans and *(b)* sheep. [136205]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has completed studies on the following subjects since 1993:

occupational hygiene in sheep dipping;

biological monitoring techniques;

spontaneous reactivation and ageing of acetylcholinesterase in human red blood cells after inhibition by orgnophosphorous (OP) pesticides;

in vitro effects of OP pesticides on cell surface esterases and functional tests at the cellular level;

the relative inhibitory effect of OPs and carbamates towards pseudocholinesterase in human blood;

handling of sheep dip concentrates;

the epidemiology of chronic effects of low level exposure to OP dips (two studies);

human liver metabolism of OP pesticides;

improvements to laboratory analyses for organophosphate pesticide exposure.

Studies are ongoing on the following:

the role of A-esterases in moderating the toxicity of OPs;

psychological effects of exposures to OPs;

genetic variation in susceptibility to chronic effects of organophosphate exposure;

improved engineering controls for sheep dipping;

risk perception of sheep dippers.

All the studies in the list relate to effects in human beings. HSE does not conduct studies into the safety of dips on sheep. Such work is co-ordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Asphalt Production Plants

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compatibility of operating asphalt production plants with the proposed European Union directive on assessment and management of environmental noise, COM (2000) 468 Final, of 26 July. [136295]

Mr. Meacher: The proposed directive does not contain provisions for controlling noise at source. The proposals are for harmonisation of noise indicators and assessment methods for noise from transport sources and from industry in urban areas. They would require use of the common indicators and assessment measures to gather information about exposure of individuals to these sources in the form of noise maps. Information would be made available to the public, and would form the basis for action plans at the local level.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list each of the asphalt production plants licensed to operate in England, indicating the owners, operators, output capacity and date opened in each case; [136705]

(2) what recent assessment has been made by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* consultants to his Department, *(c)* the Environment Agency and *(d)* the Health and Safety Executive, of the potential environmental and health hazards posed by the operation of asphalt production plants; [136294]

(3) if he will list the applications refused for the operation of asphalt plants for each of the past 10 years. [136531]

Mr. Meacher: I understand that the asphalt production referred to is roadstone coating. These plants are a prescribed process under Part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and as a result must be authorised by the relevant local authority. Authorisations must include conditions aimed at ensuring the use of Best Available Techniques Not Entailing Excessive Cost (BATNEEC) to prevent and minimise air emissions. Statutory guidance is issued by the Secretary of State on what constitutes BATNEEC for various sectors, including roadstone coating plant. This guidance has been recently revised and published for consultation. A copy of this can be found on the Internet at http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/epns/laucons.html

My Department does not collect the specific data requested for each of the 17,000 processes regulated by authorities in England and Wales. However, data taken from our annual Local Air Pollution Control (LAPC) statistical survey for 1998–99 allow us to prepare good estimates of the number of roadstone coating and mineral drying processes in England and Wales and which authority authorises them. This information is given in the table. The precise numbers cannot be produced without disproportionate cost. But under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 authorities have a duty to maintain a public register containing all particulars of any application for an authorisation made to an authority and the authorisation itself, and it would therefore be feasible to examine authority registers individually.

The Environment Agency is reviewing the LAPC guidance, referred to above, on roadstone coating and mineral drying processes for the Department has

examined air pollution impacts. In addition the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory, which is produced under a departmental contract, estimates that in 1998 emissions from roadstone coating plant contributed 0.4 per cent. of UK particulate matter under 10 microns (PM_{10}) and 0.3 per cent. of UK dioxin emissions. Copies of the latest National Air Emissions Inventory are available at http://www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual/ and will be available in the Library of the House shortly. These plant are included in the national PM_{10} mapping project which in turn forms the basis of the national scale assessment of health effects of PM_{10}.

Some operators of roadstone coating plant use waste oil to fuel the process. The proposed EU Waste Incineration directive will apply to the burning of waste oil in such plant, and a copy of the Regulatory and Environmental Impact Assessment relating to the proposal was submitted to the House under cover of Supplementary Explanatory Memorandum EM 12791/98.

The Health and Safety Executive has also made no assessment, though research into the health hazards at such plant, has been carried out in recent years. However, during their routine inspections of quarries where asphalt is produced, Health and Safety Executive inspectors would check that the employer has taken appropriate precautions in line with the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999. This would include checking the employer's risk assessment, which should detail how potentially hazardous substances are controlled in the asphalt production process, e. g. through extraction ventilation of dust/vapour/fumes, cleanliness of plant, protection clothing of plant operators etc.

Authorities which have processes authorised under PG 3/15(96)—mineral drying and roadstone coating processes

Authority	*Number*
Wolverhampton	11
Derbyshire Dales	10
Barking and Dagenham	5
Denbighshire	4
Tynedale	4
Greenwich	4
East Hertfordshire	4
North Somerset	2
Taunton Deane	2
South Kesteven	2
Hounslow	2
Huntingdonshire	2
Forest Heath	2
Suffolk Coastal	2
Winchester	2
Staffordshire Moorlands	2
Thurrock	2
Stoke-on-Trent	2
Plymouth	2
Leeds	2
Forest of Dean	2
East Cambridgeshire	2
Wigan	2
Bedford	2
Broxbourne	2
Mansfield	2
Ryedale	2
Vale of Glamorgan	2
Luton BC	1
St. Albans	1
North East Lincolnshire	1
East Staffordshire	1
Falmouth and Truro PHA	1

Authorities which have processes authorised under PG 3/15(96)—mineral drying and roadstone coating processes

Authority	*Number*
Stroud	1
Cherwell	1
Telford and Wrekin	1
Arun	1
Halton	1
Stevenage	1
Reading D. C.	1
Carlisle	1
Richmondshire	1
Breckland	1
Doncaster	1
Bridgend	1
Vale Royal	4
South Bedfordshire	4
King's Lynn and West Norfolk	4
Congleton	3
Stockton-on-Tees	3
North Lincolnshire	3
Colchester	2
Stockport	2
Macclesfield	2
Wychavon	1
Gateshead	1
Mid Bedfordshire	1
Caradon	1
South Shropshire	1
Lichfield	1
Shepway	1
Reigate and Banstead	1
Sefton	1
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	1
South Bucks	1
Darlington	1
Preston	1
Selby	1
Lambeth	1
Lewes	1
Tendring	1
Rushmoor	1
Isle of Wight and Medina	1
Newcastle under Lyme	1
Poole	1
Restormel	1
Ipswich	1
Hillingdon	1
Waveney	1
Powys	1
Maidstone	1
Salford	1
Sheffield	1
Coventry	1
Northampton	1
Vale of White Horse	1
Sedgemoor	1
Chelmsford	1
South Cambridgeshire	1
Milton Keynes	1
Spelthorne	

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses to the consultation on mobile phone masts planning rules have been received *(a)* in total, *(b)* from members of the public, *(c)* from local authorities and other public bodies, *(d)* from mobile phone companies and associated businesses and *(e)* from hon. Members; of (a), how many were (i) broadly supportive of the

Government's proposals and (ii) opposed; when he plans to announce changes to the rules; and if he will make a statement. [136942]

Ms Beverley Hughes: At the end of the day, 7 November 2000, we had received 301 responses in total. Of these, 45 were from members of the public; 230 were from local authorities and other public bodies; 18 were from mobile phone companies and associated businesses; and eight were from hon. Members. The Department is currently analysing the responses. We will announce any changes as soon as practicable.

Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions are taking place between his Department and Liverpool City Council concerning *(a)* the future running and ownership and *(b)* the lease of the Philharmonic Hall. [136946]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There are no discussions taking place between my Department and Liverpool City Council about the Philharmonic Hall.

Rents

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what average proportion of their income working tenants of *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* registered social landlords and *(c)* private landlords paid in rent in the last 12 months. [136813]

Mr. Mullin: Estimates from the Family Resources Survey are shown in the table.

Rent paid[1] as a percentage of disposable household income[2]: renting households containing at least one person in work[3]: England: 1998–99

	Median percentage[4]
Local authority tenants	12
RSL tenants	15
Private landlord tenants	21

[1] Rent paid by the household—does not include any amount met from Housing Benefit.

[2] Disposable household income means total income of household members less Income Tax and National Insurance contributions. It does not include any Housing Benefit received by the household.

[3] Rent paid as a percentage of disposable income is calculated for all households in the sample individually, and the median value shown here.

Source:

DETR analysis of DSS Family Resources Survey

Housing Stock Transfer (Debt Repayment)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what rates of interest Burnley borough council and Coventry city council were paying on debts redeemed under the arrangements for stock transfer; and what interest rates are expected to be paid on the new investment being raised by the successor bodies. [136817]

Mr. Mullin: For the purpose of calculating interest on notional Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt, an individual Consolidated Rate of Interest (CRI) is calculated for each authority. The CRI is a weighted average of actual interest payable on external debt during the year and notional interest on—or the opportunity cost of—internal debt. In the case of Burnley borough council and Coventry city council, the most recent CRI prior to their stock transfers were 6.85 per cent. and 8.37 per cent. respectively.

The methodology for an authority to determine the proportion of debt repaid as a consequence of its stock transfer was announced to the House by my hon. friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on 16 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 250W. The actual amount of debt repaid is a matter for Burnley borough council and Coventry city council.

The rates of interest payable by the successor Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)—Burnley and Padiham Community Housing, Whitefriars Homes North Ltd. and Whitefriars Homes South Ltd.—are a commercial matter for each organisation.

Flooding

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of recent heavy rainfall and flooding on the replenishment of depleted aquifers; and if he will make a statement. [136944]

Mr. Mullin: The UK's hydrological situation is monitored jointly by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the British Geological Survey and monthly reports are published. This regular monthly monitoring shows that only a small minority of aquifers were slightly below their average capacity in early October. Recent heavy rainfall will have helped replenish those remaining depleted aquifers.

Rural Areas

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what rural statutory duties have been placed on the regional development agencies; and which of these relate explicitly to agriculture. [136680]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The statutory purposes of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) relate to: economic development and regeneration, business efficiency, investment and competitiveness, employment, skills and training and sustainable development. They apply as much in relation to the rural parts of their areas as to the non-rural parts. In addition there is at least one member of every RDA Board with experience in rural issues. The statutory guidance on the preparation of RDAs' strategies states that RDAs should take account of the particular features of the region's rural areas including the role of land-based industries such as agriculture.

Waste Disposal Authorities

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what sanctions his Department operates in respect of waste disposal authorities which do not include incineration as an option within their waste local plans. [137247]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* There are no specific sanctions. However, a waste local plan is required to set out credible land use policies to deliver the waste management strategy determined by the local waste disposal authority. The Secretary of State will scrutinise waste local plans and can make objections to any of the policies of a plan, which will be considered by an Inspector at a public inquiry. He may also object to any of the policies as proposed to be modified after such an inquiry. Should the Secretary of State and the relevant authority fail to agree on the policies he may direct that changes be made. The Secretary of State would not normally issue directions about particular sites or technical options, but would address plans which did not contain satisfactory policies to manage or dispose of the waste likely to arise in the authority's area. In exceptional circumstances the Secretary of State could call in part or all of a plan for his own determination.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the guidance his Department issues to waste disposal authorities on incineration. [137246]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The Government are currently publishing no such guidance.

MV Derbyshire

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Mr. Justice Colman's report following the re-opened formal investigation into the loss of the MV Derbyshire. [137362]

Mr. Prescott: On 17 December 1998 I ordered that the Formal Investigation into the loss of the MV Derbyshire be re-opened in the High Court. Today the Honourable Mr. Justice Colman has published his report following a reading of his executive summary at the Royal Courts of Justice, London. The Court sat for a total of 54 days from the 5 April 2000 and concluded its oral hearings on the 26 July. I am grateful to Mr. Justice Colman for presiding over the hearings in the way he did and for producing such a comprehensive and conclusive report.

My gratitude also extends to all those who contributed to the underwater survey of the wreck, the subsequent analysis of the survey material, the related research and the Court hearings. I particularly applaud the fortitude of the relatives and friends of those who died with the vessel. The demands of the investigation will have been difficult for many.

Copies of Mr. Justice Colman's report have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Justice Colman finds that the ship sank through progressive collapse of the main hatch covers following significant flooding of some bow spaces through broken ventilators and air pipes located on the foredeck as a result of prolonged exposure to the sea states generated by Typhoon Orchid. He concludes that the officers and crew of the vessel were in no way to blame for the vessel's loss and specifically rejects any suggestion that the bosun's stores hatch on the foredeck was left unsecured by the crew.

The report concludes that the exposure to risk of bulk carriers of the size of the Derbyshire whose hatch covers do no more than comply with the International Load Line Convention of 1966 poses an unacceptable risk to the safety of those vessels and their crews. Further, Mr. Justice Colman wishes to consider the results of a series of model tests relating to hatch cover strength initiated during the closing states of his investigation's oral hearings and may issue an Addendum to his report, if necessary.

While Mr. Justice Colman is critical of the construction of the vessel at frame 65 he concludes that this did not contribute to the actual loss of the vessel and presented a very low additional safety risk to those on board.

Mr. Justice Colman makes a total of 24 recommendations to enhance bulk carrier safety and safety generally. These are addressed, to the Department, Lloyds Register of Shipping, the International Association of Classification Societies and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). In consultation with the others to whom recommendations are addressed the Department will prepare a response to each of the recommendations. This response will be presented to Parliament. In this respect the Department will give urgent consideration, in particular, to the recommendations that the IMO should revise the relevant provisions of the International Load Line Convention 1966 and that any enhanced requirements concerning hatch cover strength should also apply to existing ships.

I hope that Mr. Justice Colman's report will finally provide the answers to the many questions surrounding the sinking of the MV Derbyshire in September 1980. I have every reason to believe that the work that has been done will enhance future bulk carrier safety. Though nothing can compensate them for their loss, I trust that this will provide some comfort to the relatives and friends of the 44 people who so tragically lost their lives with the ship.

High Hedges

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation to make high hedges subject to planning control. [136983]

Mr. Mullin: The Government announced their plans to bring forward legislation on high hedges on 10 August. The new legislation, which will be introduced as soon as there is space in the parliamentary timetable, will not make high hedges the subject of planning control. It will instead make provision for a complaints system run by local authorities, designed to deal with individual disputes as they arise.

Motorcycles

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce *(a)* a transport plan to include the use of motorcycles, *(b)* guidelines to local authorities regarding excluding motorcycles from congestion and workplace charges and *(c)* the right of motorcycles to use bus lanes; and if he will make a statement. [136994]

Mr. Hill: Our 10-year plan, Transport 2010, and White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", both recognise the contribution that motorcycles can make to integrated transport in certain circumstances. There are complex matters to consider, including road safety, traffic management and environmental issues. We therefore set up an Advisory Group on Motorcycling, chaired by my noble Friend the Under-Secretary, to look at such issues. This will assist us in further defining the role of motorcycles within integrated transport.

We intend to issue guidance to local authorities on how road user charging and workplace parking levy schemes might best be implemented and operated. This guidance will include advice on the treatment of motorcycles in charging and levy schemes.

We need properly monitored pilot studies on motorcycle use of bus lanes before we can reach conclusions about this practice. We are seeking to encourage proposals from local authorities interested in conducting such pilots. A thorough examination of the traffic, safety and environmental implications for motorcyclists and other road users is required. We have contacted a number of authorities that have expressed an interest and will work with any who are keen to proceed to monitor and evaluate the effects.

Diabetic Drivers

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the rules regarding the driving of mini-buses, large vans and small lorries by people with insulin-treated diabetes. [136993]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State's Honorary Medical Advisory Panel on Driving and Diabetes reviewed the licensing arrangements for Group 2 vehicles (vehicles above 3.5 tonnes) on 4 October. They agreed that those with good diabetic control and no significant complications should be allowed to apply for a licence for category C1 vehicles (between 3.5 and 7.5 tonnes). They will meet again on 8 November to finalise the details, after which public consultation will begin with a view to having the legislative changes in place by spring 2001.

When the results of a recently initiated research programme into the risks of hypoglycaemia and driving become available in two to three years time, the Panel will review the arrangements for categories D1, C and D (minibuses, lorries and buses).

Park Homes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation to bring the sale of park homes under property and land law. [136978]

Mr. Mullin: Changes to the provisions on the sale of park homes were included in the recommendations of the Park Homes Working Party, published earlier this year. We have consulted on, and are considering, the Working Party's recommendations.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many New Deal clients there were in each standard region, in *(a)* April 1999 to March 2000 and *(b)* April to August 2000; and how many of these (i) went into non-subsidised employment, (ii) went into New Deal options and (iii) left the register for other reasons. [134569]

Ms Jowell: The table shows, for each cohort of New Deal starts, the number who have subsequently gained an unsubsidised job from any stage of the process, begun an option from the gateway stage, and left New Deal and JSA for other reasons.

The figures are not mutually exclusive, as people who started an option may have subsequently gained a job or left the register.

	Total New Deal starts	*(i) Unsubsidised employment*	*(ii) Options*	*(iii) Left register for other reasons*
(a) April 1999 to March 2000				
Office for Scotland	22,372	8,262	9,384	8,384
Northern	14,866	5,148	7,083	4,713
North West	27,690	9,920	10,486	9,882
Yorkshire and the Humber	21,408	8,120	8,139	8,075
Office for Wales	11,753	4,683	4,938	4,040
West Midlands	20,245	6,909	6,063	7,933
East Midlands and Eastern	16,394	6,519	5,360	6,196
South West	11,048	4,883	3,520	4,021
Laser	46,745	16,873	13,095	19,012
(b) April 2000 to August 2000				
Office for Scotland	8,621	1,880	1,016	1,482
Northern	5,878	1,174	668	822
North West	10,287	2,036	879	1,695
Yorkshire and the Humber	8,020	1,701	653	1,400
Office for Wales	4,568	1,032	487	646
West Midlands	7,727	1,339	505	1,383
East Midlands and Eastern	6,569	1,389	380	1,126
South West	4,119	1,128	286	764
Laser	16,948	3,393	1,104	3,615

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average fee is for completion of a university course in the United Kingdom. [136006]

Mr. Wicks: For students eligible for student support the total tuition fees payable over the duration of their course will depend on the type and length of course as well as their and their families' financial circumstances. For those normally resident in England and Wales only a minority of full-time undergraduates are expected to pay the full fee, which in 2000–01 is set at £1,050 per year, and in future around a half are expected to pay no fees at all. Taking this into account, we estimate that the average total fee payable by an English or Welsh full-time student on a three year degree course (excluding any repeated years) will be around £1,360 in 2000–01 prices.

Schools (Compensation Claims)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the effect on the number of compensation claims for perceived educational or other deficiencies in schools by present or former pupils, of the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into UK law. [136259]

Ms Estelle Morris: Although European Convention Rights were incorporated into UK law in October this year, the Government have observed them for 50 years. We believe that our domestic laws are in harmony with the Convention and we have undertaken a thorough review of our policies and procedures over the past few months. We think these steps reduce the risk of a successful challenge. As with any new legislation, we will keep the situation under review as the law develops.

Higher Education Research

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has commissioned in the past three years from the Centre for Research in Higher Education. [136557]

Mr. Wicks: The Department has not directly commissioned any research from the Centre for Research in Higher Education in the last three years.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what redress is available to parents when a local education authority fails to identify a named person on statements for pupils with special educational needs. [137102]

Jacqui Smith: Should a local education authority fail to give notice in writing to the parent of the name of the person to whom he may apply for information and advice about the child's special educational needs when serving a copy of the statement on the parent of the child, the parent should ask the LEA to do so immediately. If this does not succeed, it is open to the parent to ask the Secretary of State to investigate in order to try and resolve the issue.

Correspondence

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the letters of 6 June and 18 July from the hon. Member for Vale of York concerning the widow's pension of Mr. A. R. Pickering of Rufforth, York. [137211]

Mr. Wicks: I have replied to the hon. Member today, Wednesday 8 November 2000.

Student Loans

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the additional cost as net saving to the Exchequer of increasing the cost of raising the threshold for repayment of income-contingent student loans to *(a)* £13,000, *(b)* £15,000 and *(c)* £17,000 at real interest rates of (i) 0 per cent., (ii) 1 per cent., and (iii) 2 per cent., annually for the years up to 2004–05 assuming student numbers continue on current trends and the proportion of income taken remains at the current level. [136976]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Connexions Service

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on recruitment and training of personal mentors to date. [137033]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Connexions Partnerships have been issued with guidance, drawing on the innovative work of the Connexions Pilots, to assist them to meet our requirement that they identify in their delivery plans how they will recruit the extra staff required to deliver the service from a variety of backgrounds and sectors and with a range of expertise.

A training programme is being developed to meet the varying needs of the range of people who will become Connexions Service personal advisers, and to ensure that all are provided with appropriate training. One element of this programme, the Diploma of Personal Advisers, is currently being piloted in Connexions pilot areas. Further guidance on the recruitment and training of Connexions Service personal advisers will be issued shortly.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has held with the National Youth Agency and the Connexions Service on matters and activities of mutual concern. [137034]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* We have consulted widely on the development and implementation of the Connexions Service. The National Youth Agency and other partners in the youth field have been active participants in a number of working groups looking at different aspects of the new service, including the Professional Formation, Inspection and Standards and Involving Young People Working Groups and the Youth Service Transition Group. The National Youth Agency has also taken the opportunity to respond to public consultations.

Further Education (Staff Checks)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has issued to further education colleges in respect of police checks for college staff working on school link courses for 14 to 16-year-olds; and if he will make a statement. [135926]

Mr. Wicks: DfEE Circular 9/93 makes it clear that all staff selected for posts which involve substantial unsupervised access on a sustained or regular basis to children under the age of 16 should undergo a police check before appointment.

HOME DEPARTMENT

New Year (Licensing Regulations)

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to deregulate liquor licensing regulations for new year's eve and new year's day. [135576]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson), on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 203W.

Secure Training Centres

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment has been made of the operation and success of each of the secure training centres since opening; for each of the centres *(a)* what percentage of children breached their orders, *(b)* what percentage of children re-offended during the period of their order, *(c)* what percentage of children has been reconvicted during the period of their order, *(d)* what assessment has been made of the provision of education and training, *(e)* what percentage of staff has experience of working with children, *(f)* how many and what percentage of the total number of staff have resigned since each centre opened, *(g)* how many incidents of self harm have been recorded, *(h)* how many incidents of concerted indiscipline have been recorded, *(i)* how many assaults on staff have been recorded and *(j)* what is the total amount of payment reductions for contract failures; and if he will make a statement. [135581]

Mr. Boateng: Each secure training centre (STC) is subject to comprehensive inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), who may be accompanied by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and by one or more of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (OFSTED), at least once every three years. There are also annual inspections to check that the secure training centre is meeting core requirements. Other inspections, with or without notice, can take place at any time of the year; and each centre is subject to a pre-opening inspection. Annual and triennial inspection reports are placed in the House of Commons Library as they become available.

The Inspectors' reports show that, after significant initial operational difficulties at the first STC, Medway, both it and the newer centres at Rainsbrook and Hassockfield have progressively developed to provide a good standard, comprehensive regime for difficult young juveniles.

(a) The Secure Training Order (STO) was available from March 1998 to March 2000. 379 children received STOs of whom 319 went to STCs, and the others to local authority secure units. 20 per cent. of those who went to Medway, 8 per cent. of those who went to Rainsbrook and 4 per cent. of those who went to Hassockfield were returned to custody for breach of STO supervision.

The STO was replaced by the Detention and Training Order (DTO) in April 2000. Information on DTO breaches is not held centrally.

(b) and *(c)* This information is not collected routinely but research is under way. The report of the Policy Research Bureau into the first year at Medway "Evaluation of Medway Secure Training Centre", released on 4 October 2000, recorded a 67 per cent. re-offending rate for those at that establishment. Wider research commissioned by the Youth Justice Board into DTO re-offending is being carried out by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO), the Centre for Crimes and Justice Studies and the Policy Research Bureau. Results are expected in March 2002.

(d) Home Office monitors based at each STC ensure that the terms of the contracts including on education and training are met on a daily basis. The SSI's annual and triennial inspection reports are in the Library.

(e) This information is not available. The contracts specify minimum qualifications, skills and experience requirements. All staff receive Home Office-approved training in understanding and dealing with disturbed adolescents.

(f) The number and percentage of staff (custody and teaching staff) who have resigned since each centre opened is as follows:

	Opened	*Resignations*	*Percentage*
Medway	17 April 1998	123	45
Rainsbrook	1 July 1999	43	28
Hassockfield	17 September 1999	49	35

(g), *(h)* and *(i)* Recorded incidents of self harm, concerted indiscipline and assaults on staff are as follows:

	Self harm	*Concerted indiscipline*	*Assaults[1] on staff*
Medway	32	43	193
Rainsbrook	36	3	56
Hassockfield	16	19	33

[1] Assaults exclude "pushing and shoving"

(j) To date, financial penalties reflecting contract failures by the Operating Contractor at each STC total £663,240 (Medway); £155,152 (Rainsbrook); and £45,808 (Hassockfield). These cover failure to meet the scheduled opening date of the STC, non-availability of trainee places and failure to deliver specified services.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135491]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Civil servants in the main Home Office and its agencies may raise any matter of concern in confidence with one of several nominated officials. Details of how to do so are notified to all staff from time to time by means of an

office notice, which also contains an up-to-date list of the nominated officials. This was most recently circulated on 18 August 2000.

Stop and Search

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* arrests have been made and *(b)* charges have been brought by each police force as a result of stops and searches under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 in each year since it came into force; and what has been the nature of the charges; [136085]

(2) how many stops and searches have been carried out by each police force, using powers other than section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, in each year since section 60 of the Act came into force; [136084]

(3) how many stops and searches have been carried out by each police force under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 in each year since it came into force; and how many of these involved the searching of vehicles. [136083]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is published annually in Home Office Statistical Bulletins "Operation of Certain Police Powers under PACE, England and Wales, 1995, 1996, 1997–98 and 1998–99", copies of which are available in the Library. (Issue numbers are 12/96, 27/97, 2/99 and 9/00).

No information is held centrally on the number of charges brought, following arrest under section 60.

The number of searches of vehicles under section 60 for the years 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 are contained in the following table. Data for 1995 and the first quarter of 1996 are not available centrally.

Searches of vehicles under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

England and Wales — *Number*

Police force area	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Avon and Somerset	—	1	33
Bedfordshire	14	6	—
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—
Cheshire	2	—	—
Cleveland	—	—	—
Cumbria	—	—	—
Derbyshire	1	1	—
Devon and Cornwall	—	—	—
Dorset	—	—	1
Durham	—	—	—
Essex	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	—	—
Greater Manchester	11	—	—
Hampshire	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	—
Humberside	—	—	—
Kent	5	1	10
Lancashire	1	—	—
Leicestershire	—	2	—
Lincolnshire	—	—	—
London, City of	—	—	—
Merseyside	—	—	—
Metropolitan Police	22	20	—
Norfolk	—	3	—
Northamptonshire	—	—	—
Northumbria	—	—	—
North Yorkshire	—	—	—
Nottinghamshire	26	68	5
South Yorkshire	—	12	—
Staffordshire	2	2	2
Suffolk	—	5	—
Surrey	—	—	—
Sussex	—	—	—
Thames Valley	3	1	2
Warwickshire	—	—	—
West Mercia	2	4	19
West Midlands	1	3	2
West Yorkshire	2	—	—
Wiltshire	—	1	38
Dyfed Powys	—	—	1
Gwent	—	—	—
North Wales	—	—	—
South Wales	—	—	2
Total	92	130	115

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what percentage of the area declarations made by each police force under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, have been by *(a)* officers above the rank of superintendent, *(b)* officers of the rank of superintendent and (c) officers below the rank of superintendent in each year since it came into force; [136088]

(2) on how many occasions in each year since it came into force each police force has used section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to declare an area as one in which stops and searches can take place; and on how many of these occasions the power was extended beyond 24 hours; [136082]

(3) how many convictions have been obtained by each police force as a result of charges brought following stops and searches under section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act 1994 in each year since it came into force. [136086]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the breakdown by ethnic origin of those persons stopped and searched by each police force under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 in each year since it came into force; and what was the ethnic origin of the population as a whole in the area of each police force. [136087]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information relates to 1998–99 and is contained in the tables.

Stop and searches of persons under section 60 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, by ethnic appearance

England and Wales 1998–99

	Ethnic appearance of person searched				
Police force area	*White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
Avon and Somerset	1,085	115	43	15	32
Bedfordshire	27	1	1	—	1
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—	—
Cheshire	137	5	2	—	—
Cleveland	—	—	—	—	—
Cumbria	—	—	—	—	—

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Stop and searches of persons under section 60 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, by ethnic appearance

England and Wales 1998–99

	Ethnic appearance of person searched				
Police force area	*White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
Derbyshire	64	—	—	—	—
Devon and Cornwall	55	—	—	—	—
Dorset	10	—	—	—	—
Durham	—	—	—	—	—
Essex	—	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	—	—	—	—
Greater Manchester	132	22	5	—	7
Hampshire	19	1	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	—	—	—
Humberside	—	—	—	—	—
Kent	38	6	1	—	—
Lancashire	75	—	—	1	—
Leicestershire	1	—	—	—	—
Lincolnshire	—	—	—	—	—
London, City of	—	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	—	—	—	—	—
Metropolitan Police	273	75	45	15	6
Norfolk	7	1	116	5	—
Northamptonshire	1	—	—	—	—
Northumbria	54	1	—	—	4

Stop and searches of persons under section 60 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, by ethnic appearance

England and Wales 1998–99

	Ethnic appearance of person searched				
Police force area	*White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
North Yorkshire	1	—	—	—	—
Nottinghamshire	428	48	16	4	—
South Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—
Staffordshire	212	4	3	—	2
Suffolk	—	—	—	—	—
Surrey	—	—	—	—	—
Sussex	12	2	—	—	—
Thames Valley	593	—	3	—	—
Warwickshire	—	—	—	—	1,814
West Mercia	318	22	17	1	1
West Midlands	283	28	42	4	—
West Yorkshire	—	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	231	6	1	4	—
Dyfed Powys	29	—	—	—	—
Gwent	—	—	—	—	—
North Wales	—	—	—	—	—
South Wales	52	—	—	—	—
England and Wales	4,137	337	295	50	1,868

Estimated[1] population aged 10 and over by ethnic origin and police force area mid 1998

	Ethnic origin				
Police force area	*White*	*Black*[4]	*Asian*	*Other*[5]	*Total*
Avon and Somerset[2]	1,281,800	10,000	6,900	8,100	1,306,800
Bedfordshire[2]	438,400	11,600	23,400	5,700	479,200
Cambridgeshire[2]	605,100	5,700	12,600	4,300	627,800
Cheshire[3]	852,200	1,900	2,800	3,900	860,800
Cleveland[3]	473,200	1,000	6,300	2,100	482,600
Cumbria[3]	432,900	400	500	1,100	434,900
Derbyshire[2]	826,000	5,800	15,800	2,600	850,200
Devon and Cornwall[3]	1,372,400	2,500	1,300	5,000	1,381,200
Dorset[3]	610,000	1,000	1,300	3,300	615,600
Durham[3]	529,600	700	1,400	1,800	533,600
Essex[2]	1,318,000	4,800	10,300	7,600	1,340,000
Gloucestershire[3]	478,900	3,500	3,100	2,500	488,100
Greater Manchester[2]	2,094,900	28,800	88,700	17,800	2,230,200
Hampshire[2]	1,527,000	5,600	9,300	9,500	1,551,400
Hertfordshire[2]	731,000	6,700	14,500	9,500	761,800
Humberside[3]	763,600	1,700	3,000	3,200	771,600
Kent[2]	1,343,700	6,600	14,800	8,600	1,373,800
Lancashire[3]	1,189,300	4,300	44,600	6,500	1,244,600
Leicestershire[2]	739,800	5,500	59,700	4,100	809,000
Lincolnshire[3]	546,300	1,200	1,100	2,100	550,600
London, City of[3]	4,300	[6]—	100	200	4,700
Merseyside[2]	1,209,600	5,800	5,300	8,800	1,229,400
Metropolitan Police[2]	5,465,700	498,200	431,000	240,900	6,635,800
Norfolk[3]	692,400	1,700	1,300	3,400	698,800
Northamptonshire[3]	514,900	6,700	8,000	4,200	533,800
Northumbria[3]	1,237,900	1,900	7,400	5,400	1,252,600
North Yorkshire[3]	650,800	1,000	1,200	2,600	655,700
Nottinghamshire[2]	872,700	12,300	12,900	4,600	902,500
South Yorkshire[2]	1,106,600	8,200	17,300	5,600	1,137,700
Staffordshire[2]	913,900	6,300	8,400	2,700	931,300
Suffolk[3]	572,000	6,900	1,800	4,300	585,00
Surrey[2]	667,600	2,500	10,200	8,000	688,300
Sussex[2]	1,299,500	4,700	9,900	10,500	1,324,600
Thames Valley[2]	1,735,300	21,600	43,600	19,200	1,819,700
Warwickshire[3]	430,000	2,400	10,500	2,400	445,300
West Mercia[3]	981,500	3,500	6,600	4,700	996,300
West Midlands[2]	1,976,200	71,200	197,200	18,600	2,263,200
West Yorkshire[2]	1,684,800	21,400	111,700	11,700	1,829,500
Wiltshire[3]	518,000	2,700	2,800	3,500	527,100
Dyfed Powys[3]	421,900	600	600	1,700	424,800

Estimated[1] population aged 10 and over by ethnic origin and police force area mid 1998

Police force area	Ethnic origin				
	White	Black[4]	Asian	Other[5]	Total
Gwent[3]	476,000	1,500	3,500	2,400	483,300
North Wales[3]	573,700	800	1,100	2,300	577,800
South Wales[3]	1,056,300	6,500	9,600	8,700	1,081,100
Total	43,215,900	797,800	1,223,400	485,700	45,722,900

[1] The estimates are based on the mid-1998 population estimates from ONS.
[2] Estimates of numbers of individual ethnic groups are based on the 1996+1997+1998 Labour Force Survey.
[3] Estimates for ethnic groups based on the 1991 census.
[4] Includes mixed origin.
[5] Includes Chinese.
[6] Fewer than 50.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those to be involved in the conduct of the proposed review of the voucher scheme for asylum seekers; and if evidence will be taken from *(a)* NGOs and *(b)* individuals. [136081]

Mrs. Roche: The Government have undertaken to invite all stakeholders and interested parties to make representations, and to place in the Library a list of those organisations which contribute to the review. Those invited to make representations will include hon. Members, Lords, non-governmental organisations, retailers, the Post Office, local government, the police and Sodexho Pass, the voucher supplier. We will also be undertaking fieldwork to investigate the views of asylum seekers. Others with evidence to contribute to the review are welcome to send this to the National Asylum Support Service.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are *(a)* the terms of reference and *(b)* the timescale for the proposed review of the voucher scheme for asylum seekers. [136080]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), 20 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 210W.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions she has had with the South West Consortium for Asylum Seekers, with particular regard to future immigration policy; and if he will make a statement. [137001]

Mrs. Roche: I met with members and officers from the South West Consortium on 14 September to discuss the situation regarding National Asylum Support Service's requirements for accommodation in the current financial year. The meeting was not concerned with future immigration policy.

Election Deposits

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the level of the deposit required for UK parliamentary elections. [136269]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In its 1998 report on Electoral Law and Administration, the Home Affairs Committee recommended that the deposit required to stand as a candidate in Westminster parliamentary elections should increase from £500 to £700 for the next general election and that it should be index linked thereafter. This recommendation will need to be considered in consultation with all the political parties represented at Westminster and the European Parliaments.

Databases

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the investigation into leaks from the SIRENE bureaux in 1997 has identified the *(a)* source of the leaks and *(b)* recipient; and if he will make a statement. [136468]

Mrs. Roche: The particular circumstances of this breach of security are a matter for the Belgian authorities, whose investigations are continuing. The Government attach the highest importance to the maintenance of the security arrangements at the SIRENE bureaux. The integrity of the arrangements is vital to international judicial and law enforcement co-operation.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has taken to ensure that the UK element of Schengen Information System-connected databases is of identical format to other connected databases. [136469]

Mrs. Roche: Arrangements for the United Kingdom's connection to the Central Schengen Information System database are still under consideration.

Schengen Agreement

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Article 26 of the Schengen Agreement requires parties to support harmonisation of indirect taxation within the Council of Ministers; and if the UK Government are exempt. [136471]

Mrs. Roche: Article 26 of the Schengen Agreement signed in 1985 was given effect through the Schengen Implementing Convention signed in 1990. Those provisions of the Schengen Implementing Convention dealing with certain aspects of the creation of the Single Market (Articles 120–125) were not given a legal basis in the European Union Treaties as they had been superseded by European Communities legislation. They are therefore not the basis of future Schengen development, and they were not included in the Council Decision on the United Kingdom's participation.

Travel Advice (India)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will issue guidance to UK citizens travelling to India about visiting the Sai Baba ashram. [136850]

Mr. Hain: I have been asked to reply.

The FCO issues guidance for visitors to India through its Travel Advice Unit. This information is also available on the FCO web-site (www.fco.gov.uk).

We have no specific guidance for UK citizens visiting any of the Sai Baba ashrams at Puttaparthi (Andhra Pradesh), Bangalore (Karnataka) or Shirdi (Maf harashtra). The police at Puttaparthi, the focus of celebrations to mark Sai Baba's birthday on 23 November, have assured our Deputy High Commission at Chennai (Madras) that preparations are already under way to meet the demands of the large congregation expected at the ashram.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what criteria are used to classify a project 1 procedure under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 as being likely to be of substantial severity; and if he will make a statement; [136599]

(2) how many procedure 1 projects under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, as a proportion of the total, were in the substantial severity category for each of the last 10 years. [136600]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 sets out the criteria for determining severity levels. Two different types of severity levels are set on project licences; a severity limit for each protocol authorised in the licence and an overall severity banding for the project.

The severity limit for each protocol is determined by the upper limit of the expected adverse effects that may be encountered by a protected animal, taking into account the measures specified in the licence for avoiding and controlling these effects. It represents the worst potential outcome for any animal subjected to the protocol, even if it may only be, and often is, experienced by a small number of the animals to be used. Indeed, it may never be encountered.

Protocols of substantial severity may result in a major departure from the animal's usual state of health or well-being. These include: acute toxicity procedures where significant morbidity is an endpoint; some efficacy tests of anti-microbial agents and vaccines; major surgery; and some models of disease, where welfare may be seriously compromised. If it is expected that even one animal would suffer substantial effects, the procedure would merit a substantial severity limit. The Secretary of State will not license any procedure likely to cause severe pain or distress that cannot be alleviated. Licence holders are required by conditions in both project and personal licences to minimise any pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm and to approach the set severity limit only when absolutely necessary.

The assessment of the overall severity of a project reflects the cumulative effect of each procedure. This assessment is used to weigh the likely adverse effects on all the animals to be used against the benefit likely to accrue. It takes into account not just the level of suffering that might be reached, but also such factors as the number of animals involved; the frequency of use of each procedure; the proportion of animals that are expected to be exposed to the upper severity limits; and the length of time that animals will experience such adverse effects.

The severity bandings of project licences were introduced into the Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals in 1998 at Appendix B. Figures before that date were not published in the annual statistics, but were generally included as part of the Annual Report of the Animal Procedures Committee.

Figures are as follows:

	Number
Project Licences issued during 1991	
Substantial	11
Total	685
Project Licences issued during 1992	
Substantial	33
Total	1,257
Project Licences issued during 1993	
Substantial	21
Total	1,444
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1994	
Substantial not readily available	
Total	4,013
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1995	
Substantial	72
Total	3,977
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1996	
Substantial	66
Total	3,869
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1997	
Substantial	66
Total	3,765
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1998	
Substantial	66
Total	3,650
Project Licences in force on 31 December 1999	
Substantial	66
Total	3,481

Trans-sexual Working Group

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Trans-sexual Working Group established in April 1999 has reported to him; and if he will make a statement. [137315]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply the Secretary of State gave my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), on 26 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 697W.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to require people convicted of sex offences overseas to register automatically as such on their return to the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [136985]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I announced a review of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 in a written reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope), *Official Report*, 26 June 2000, column 395W. Whether and how sex offenders who are convicted abroad can be required to register is an issue which is being considered as part of that review.

Mohammed Maizia

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will make a decision on the application by Mohammed Maizia to remain in the UK (Ref. M637152). [136990]

Mrs. Roche: Mr. Maizia's application has now received attention and his representatives will be contacted with a decision within seven days.

Open Prisons (Absconders)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have escaped from open prisons during *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000, broken down into offences for which they were sentenced; and if he will make a statement. [136999]

Mr. Boateng: Prisoners who escape from open prisons are classified as absconders. The number of absconds from open prisons are given in the table.

	Number
1997	720
1998	607
1999	568
2000 (up to 6 November)	427

A breakdown of these figures by offence could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Radio Broadcasting Licences

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to enable religious organisations to hold national radio broadcasting licences. [137003]

Janet Anderson: I have been asked to reply.

Religious organisations are currently disqualified by provision of Paragraph 2 (1) of Part II of Schedule 2 to the Broadcasting Act 1990 from holding national radio licences. We will publish a White Paper later this year setting out the Government's proposals for reform of broadcasting and telecommunications regulation to ensure a framework is in place which recognises the developments in those industries. The ownership of radio licences for religious broadcasting is one of the issues being considered in that context.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Peacekeeping

7. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about peacekeeping in Northern Ireland. [135603]

Mr. Mandelson: I support the Chief Constable's decision to deploy troops to give additional support to the police in dealing with the recent upsurge in violence in North and West Belfast, which has seen four men killed as a result of feuding between loyalist paramilitary organisations and which I strongly condemn. I know from my own visit to the Shankill just how much pain has been suffered and the Government will maintain a proper security presence in these areas to contain the treat.

I also condemn the bomb attack on Castlewellan RUC station last week. This points up the risks taken by the RUC in carrying out their duties and the thoughts of the whole House will be with the severely injured Constable David Fegan and his family at this time.

Peace Process

9. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the impact of a stable economy on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [135605]

Mr. George Howarth: A stable and improving economy in Northern Ireland is contributing greatly to the peace process in Northern Ireland, helping to build confidence and demonstrating that Northern Ireland is moving into a brighter and more prosperous future. The peace process has in return benefited the Northern Ireland economy. The Belfast agreement gave a tremendous boost to economic activity in Northern Ireland and the transfer of responsibility for economic matters to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 December gave back to locally elected representatives the power to take vital economic decisions for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

16. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what impact terrorist violence over the summer has had on the prospects for sustained peace. [135612]

Mr. George Howarth: Terrorist violence over the summer and more recently has caused great suffering for many people in Northern Ireland. I hope the whole House will join me in condemning without reservation all of the recent violence and intimidation, which we all hoped had been left behind. I do not believe that it will prevent the achievement of a peaceful and prosperous society in Northern Ireland—that is what the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland want and voted for in the Referendum.

24. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [135622]

Mr. Mandelson: We continue to make steady progress in the implementation of the Belfast agreement. The Northern Ireland Executive recently published its first Programme for Government, an impressive range of measures to be taken by the devolved Administration over the coming year. Decommissioning and building confidence remain important priorities. The independent arms inspectors recently carried out a further inspection of IRA arms dumps: they also met the Northern Ireland political parties last week. The security forces continue to take action to deal with dissident republican and loyalist violence. However, I am confident that recent violence

will not deflect us from achieving for the people of Northern Ireland the real benefits that will flow from the full implementation of the Belfast agreement.

Petrol Prices

10. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions he has held with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about petrol prices in Northern Ireland. [135606]

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman is well aware discussions between the Chancellor and Ministers on such matters, for obvious reasons, are confidential.

However, if the hon. Gentleman exercises a little patience, he may hear some more on this subject from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

RUC and Prison Service (Intimidation)

11. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent reports he has received of intimidation against recruits to, and members of, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. [135607]

Mr. Ingram: During the period 1 January to 27 October 2000, there were 155 recorded reports of intimidation/threats against current and former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Over the same period, three general threats and 26 specific threats were recorded against members of the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Decommissioning

12. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about progress on decommissioning terrorist weapons. [135608]

15. **Judy Mallaber:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for removing illegally-held weapons from Northern Ireland. [135611]

Mr. Ingram: Mr. Ramaphosa and Mr. Ahtisaari have reported that they have completed their second inspection of several IRA arms dumps. We welcome this development—it represents further progress and an honouring of commitments given at the beginning of May. I am confident the inspectors will report any further progress that has been made when they deem it appropriate to do so.

Further progress still needs to be made by both Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries to meet their commitments to being a lasting peace to Northern Ireland.

We would call upon the IRA to re-engage with the Commission to show that further progress will be made as promised in its statement in May.

18. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he last met General John de Chastelain to discuss the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. [135614]

Mr. Ingram: Under the Good Friday Agreement the Decommissioning Commission operates as an independent body to resolve the decommissioning issue. The Commission has provided written reports on progress on a number of occasions.

I met General de Chastelain on Tuesday 24 October.

Victim Support Programmes

14. **Mrs. Ann Cryer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about Government programmes for the support of victims of crime. [135610]

17. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about Government programmes for the support of victims. [135613]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friends to the oral answer I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope), at columns 304–05.

Flags

19. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the discussions he has held with the political parties about the flying of flags in Northern Ireland. [135615]

Mr. Mandelson: On 10 July I wrote to the leaders of the political parties in Northern Ireland requesting their views on the flying of flags in Northern Ireland. I considered all of the points made by the parties before preparing draft Regulations, which I then sent to the Northern Ireland Assembly for its consideration as I was required to do by the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000. The Assembly reported its view to me on 18 October. I considered the Assembly's Report, and the views of the parties set out within it very carefully, before laying draft Regulations before Parliament on 23 October.

Criminal Justice Review

20. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the implementation programme for the criminal justice review. [135616]

Mr. Mandelson: The report of the Review of the Criminal Justice System was published in March this year and the period of consultation ended on 29 September. The Government fully endorse the general approach taken in the report. Informed by the consultation exercise we have now put in hand the detailed work needed to prepare legislation and an implementation plan. As the Prime Minister said on 5 May, these will both be published next April.

Security Situation

21. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the current security situation in Northern Ireland. [135618]

22. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the current security situation. [135619]

Mr. Ingram: The Government believe the main paramilitary groups are maintaining their cease-fires; however, there remains a threat from those groups who

are opposed to the peace process as evidenced by the recent explosion at Castlewellan RUC Station. These attacks are carried out against the will of the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland who voted for the Good Friday agreement as the only way forward.

We condemn the recent upsurge in Loyalist violence and appeal to those leaders with influence over paramilitary organisations to bring this senseless feud to an end before the lives of more families are ruined.

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to create a normal security environment in Northern Ireland. [135623]

Mr. Ingram: The Government are committed to normalisation of security as quickly as the threat allows. Major progress has already been made. There are currently under 13,500 troops in Northern Ireland—the lowest level since 1970. Since the ceasefire 31 military bases have been demolished or closed. The Borucki sangar in Crossmaglen has also been demolished.

The Chief Constable recently announced a number of further normalisation measures including the demolition of the six Fermanagh patrol bases, the closure and demolition of Long Kesh army base and, with effect from 1 October, the closure of Strand Road Holding Centre. Further steps will be taken when it is safe to do so.

Organised Crime

23. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about organised crime in Northern Ireland. [135620]

Mr. Ingram: Organised crime has no place in a decent society. On 25 September the Secretary of State announced a new multi-agency approach to tackling organised crime in Northern Ireland. An Organised Crime Task Force has been established and met for the first time on 25 October. I chair the Task Force. The Task Force brings together a number of agencies to provide a strategic focus and to develop the existing co-ordination arrangements between the agencies.

Paramilitary Activity

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the recent level of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. [135600]

Mr. Mandelson: We condemn the recent upsurge in violence in North and West Belfast. In the past number of days four men have been killed as a result of feuding between loyalist paramilitary organisations. I know from my own visits to these communities just how much pain has been suffered. The Government are resolute in their determination to tackle this issue and maintain a proper security presence in these areas to deal with this threat. We support the Chief Constable in his decision to re-introduce troops on to the streets of Belfast to provide additional support to the police.

We also condemn the recent attack on Castlewellan RUC Station. Any attack of this nature is to be deplored but to attack police officers as they carry out their duty in protecting the public is particularly heinous. Our thoughts are with Reserve Constable David Fegan and his family at this time.

British-Irish Council

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made over the summer in relation to the British-Irish Council. [135522]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have been asked to reply.

Over the summer, the participants in the British-Irish Council have been taking forward work in a number of the areas identified as priorities at the first BIC summit meeting last December. The second BIC summit was due to take place in Dublin on Wednesday 18 October, hosted by the Irish Government. Regrettably, the summit had to be postponed following the death of the right hon. Donald Dewar MP MSP, First Minister of the Scottish Executive. Action is in hand to identify a new date for the summit.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cereals Producers

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received about the falling incomes of cereal farms as a result of the weakness of the euro and the need for the Government to claim agrimonetary compensation from the European Commission prior to the end of October; what his policy is on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [R] [135080]

Ms Quin: I refer the right hon. and learned Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what cereals area payments *(a)* are and *(b)* were payable in 1999 to British farmers. [136964]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Farmers are entitled to payments under the Arable Area Payments Scheme in respect of cereals grown and claimed under the rules of that Scheme. In 2000, farmers in England will receive £217.27/ha on 98.36% of their payable area of eligible cereal crops (other than maize). In addition, and subject to the agreement of the European Commission, they are expected to receive £7.37/ha in agrimonetary compensation on the same area. In 1999 they received £208.06/ha on 99.06 per cent. of their payable area. In addition they received a payment of £33.66/ha in agrimonetary compensation and are now receiving a further instalment of £11.22/ha on the same area. Producers of maize in England received the same payments but on a lower area (33.15 per cent. of the payable area in 1999 and 35 per cent. of the payable area in 2000). Farmers in other parts of the UK receive lower payments in line with historic yields but, other than in Scotland, do not suffer area penalties.

Knacker Industry

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the knacker industry. [135143]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Although no Minister has recently met with representatives of the knacker industry, my officials do have frequent discussions with them.

Poultry

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his annual budget for poultry science research and development was in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; and in each of those years what proportion of this budget was spent on research aimed at increasing broiler chicken (i) growth rate and (ii) feed efficiency. [136155]

Ms Quin: The annual budget for poultry science research and development was £1.0 million in 1998 and £940,000 in 1999. In addition, a further £1.66 million and £1.44 million were spent in 1998 and 1999 respectively on animal welfare projects relevant to poultry nutrition and welfare. There were no projects during 1998–99 aimed at increasing standard broiler chicken growth rate. The work we are funding on increasing broiler chicken feed efficiency in 1998–99 was £325,000 and £338,000 in 1999–2000. This research is driven by a need—with the reduction in pollutants in mind—to move away from the use of animal proteins in chicken feed and to utilise home grown sources of proteins.

Exports

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of agricultural products made in the UK are exported; and to which countries. [136613]

Ms Quin: It is not possible to calculate accurately the percentage of agricultural products made in the UK which are exported, as many exports will be in the form of processed food and feed products. Using a broad assumption to value just the raw commodity element of these processed products, it is estimated that approximately 20 per cent. of UK agricultural production in 1999 was exported.

The table lists the main countries to which food and feed products were exported in 1999. The values relate to the actual product value, including the full value of processed products.

Exports of UK food and feed products in 1999

	£ million
Irish Republic	1,158
France	864
Germany	482
Spain	408
Netherlands	369
Belgium	304
Italy	284
USA	274
Denmark	117
Portugal	108
Other	1,429
Total	5,797

Beef Exports (France)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when legal proceedings brought by the EU against France for prohibiting the importation of British beef will be heard by the European Court of Justice. [136196]

Ms Quin: The timing of the various stages in the European Commission's case against the French Government is determined by the European Court of Justice. The case is now entering the final phase of the written procedure and once that is concluded the Court will fix a Hearing date. It is possible, but not certain, that the Hearing could take place by Spring 2001. However, if the French Government, the Commission and the Court all agreed that a Hearing was not necessary, the oral procedure could be dispensed with altogether leaving the Court to begin its deliberations in advance of the Advocate General's Opinion and the Court's Judgment.

Floods (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the report he has commissioned from the Environment Agency into the recent floods in Lewes will consider the workings of the entire river system including the Uck and the Ouse; if he will undertake to fund the recommendations in that report; and if he will make a statement. [136568]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The report I have commissioned will look at the whole Sussex Ouse catchment, including the Uck. It will consider the rainfall/hydrology which caused the flooding, the existing flood defences and the options available to help improve the situation. The report will also link in with the planned Sussex Ouse River strategy, which will consider the management of the Ouse defences in the longer term. Contemplating the strategy will commence in 2001–02 and it is scheduled for completion in 2002–03.

It will be for the Environment Agency to secure funding for any programme of work resulting from these investigations, having regard to available funding and other priorities in the area. MAFF grant is available for any capital works which meet economic, technical and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score. Part of the additional £51 million announced by the Deputy Prime Minister for flood defence measures will be to provide funding for whole catchment area studies.

GM Seeds

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list each application for national seed listing of genetically modified varieties, indicating *(a)* the application number, *(b)* the company name, *(c)* the approximate date for decision, *(d)* the release consent number, *(e)* the date consent was granted and *(f)* if different from the national list applicants, the applicants' names. [136486]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information is set out in the table.

Genetically modified plant varieties—National list applications under consideration—November 2000

Application number	*Name of breeder's reference*	*Species*	*NL application*	*Earliest date of proposed decision*	*DETR release consent/marketing consent reference, holder and date granted*
35/959	Archimedes	Spring Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	Test and trials complete[1]	Marketing Consent 94/M1/1[1] Granted 28 February 1996 (Aventis)
35/960	Socrates	Spring Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	Tests and trials complete[1]	Marketing Consent 94/M1/1[1] Granted 28 February 1996 (Aventis)
35/1174	PHW98–407	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	Tests and trials complete[2]	98/R19/18 Application 4 December 1998 Granted 22 March 1999 (Agrevo)
35/1210	PH96S452	Spring Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	Tests and trials complete[2]	98/R19/18 Application 4 December 1998 Granted 22 March 1999 (Agrevo)
35/1211	PH96S443	Spring Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	Tests and trials complete[2]	98/R19/18 Application 4 December 1998 Granted 22 March 1999 (Agrevo)
35/1318	PHW99–429	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	November 2001[1]	00/R33/6 and 00/R33/6S Granted 23 August 2000 (Aventis)
35/1397	PHW00–43	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	November 2002[1]	00/R33/6 and 00/R33/6S Granted 23 August 2000 (Aventis)
35/1398	PHW00–434	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	November 2002[1]	00/R33/6 and 00/R33/6S Granted 23 August 2000 (Aventis)
35/1494	PHW01–441	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	November 2002[1]	00/R33/6 and 00/R33/6S Granted 23 August 2000 (Aventis)
35/1495	PHW01–446	Winter Oilseed Rape	Aventis CropScience NV Belgium	November 2002[1]	00/R33/6 and R33/6S Granted 23 August 2000 (Aventis)
45/774	STURGEON	Sugar Beet	Novartis Seeds AB Sweden	Tests and trials complete[2]	96/R21/4 Application 24 December 1996 Granted 5 February 1997 (Novartis)
45/798	KWS 8191	Sugar Beet	Kleinwanzlebener Saatzucht AG Germany	Tests and trials complete[2]	97/R19/13 Application 20 January 1997 Granted 17 March 1997 (Agrevo)
45/813	DS 8003	Sugar Beet	Danisco Seeds UK	Tests and trials complete[2]	96/R21/4 Application 24 December 1996 Granted 5 February 1997 (Novartis)
45/850	KWS 9193	Sugar Beet	Kleinwanglebener Saatzucht AG Germany	April 2001[1]	00/R32/2 Granted 28 April 2000 (Aventis)
45/865	HM 1976	Sugar Beet	Novartis Seeds AB Sweden	April 2001[1]	99/R21/6 Granted 3 May 2000 (Novartis)
45/877	ANDORRA	Sugar Beet	Danisco Seeds UK	April 2001[1]	99/R21/6 Granted 3 May 2000 (Novartis)
45/931	H1 0156	Sugar Beet	Novartis	April 2002[1]	99/R21/6 Granted 3 May 2000 (Novartis)
45/950	H7 5011	Sugar Beet	Advanta	April 2002[1]	00/R13/10 Granted 28 April 2000 (Advanta)
51/833	CHARDON LL	Maize	Aventis GMBH Germany	[4]—	Marketing Consent C/F/95/12/07 Published 5 August 1998 (Aventis)
51/886	SHERIDAN	Maize	Van Der Have Netherlands	February 2001[5]	Marketing Consent C/F/95/12/07 Published 5 August 1998 (Aventis)

[1] Marketing consent permits seed multiplication only. No proposed decision will be considered until the new Seeds (National List of Varieties) Regulations come into force.
[2] Tests and trials complete, National Listing cannot be considered unless a marketing consent under Directive 90/220 is promulgated.
[3] Subject to promulgation of marketing consents under 90/220 and satisfactory completion of tests and trials.
[4] A proposal to add this variety to the National List has been made. This is currently the subject of written representations and a public hearing.
[5] Subject to satisfactory completion of tests and trials.

Fishing Vessels (Safety)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about grant aid to encourage the safe operation of fishing vessels. [137406]

Mr. Morley: The Government wish to see the fishing industry develop a positive safety culture. Former schemes providing grants simply for equipment have not been successful in cutting accident rates. One of the keys to improving safety is good training and that will be our priority. We therefore propose to make up to £0.5 million available in each of the next three financial years to deliver safety training for fishermen in England. These payments, to be funded through the EU structural fund for fisheries, will cover the fees to enable courses to be offered to fishermen without charge.

My Department is in discussion with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the Fisheries Departments of the devolved Administrations to develop a suitable new package of training measures. These will include courses to update safety awareness among fishermen hitherto exempt from the requirement for safety training; to provide training in accident prevention and risk assessment; and safety training for newcomers to the industry. We will consult the fishing industry on our proposals.

We also intend that grant aid should be available through FIFG to support the trialling of innovative and experimental equipment to improve vessel safety.

HEALTH

HIV and Hepatitis C

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to discuss the costs of drugs used in the treatment of HIV and hepatitis C infections with representatives of the Pharmaceutical Industry. [136161]

Ms Stuart: I have no such plans. The prices of branded medicines are controlled indirectly by the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme (PPRS) which limits the profits which companies can make from the sale of these products to the National Health Service. Companies have freedom of pricing within this ceiling on overall profits. A new scheme was introduced in October 1999 under which the prices of medicines covered by the PPRS were reduced by 4.5 per cent. overall giving savings to the NHS of around £200 million per year. Copies of the agreement, containing full details, are in the Library.

At the same time, hospitals can aggregate their purchasing power for these products and the NHS Purchasing and Supplies Authority then competitively tenders this business on their behalf. In some cases hospitals themselves negotiate direct with the pharmaceutical industry.

Free Dental Examinations

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of restoring free dental examinations to *(a)* all adults, *(b)* all those over the age of 65, *(c)* all those over the age of 60 and *(d)* all those over the age of 55 years; and if he will make a statement. [136483]

Mr. Hutton: About a quarter of dental examinations carried out on adults in the General Dental Service have either no patient charge or else the patient pays a reduced charge. Making dental examinations free to all adults would reduce patient charge revenue in England by:

£ million

Adults	*Annual reduction in patient charge revenue*
Age 18 and over	75
Age 65 and over	13
Age 60 and over	19
Age 55 and over	26

The total cost of making the change would exceed the reduction in patient charge revenue because additional demand would be stimulated for dental examinations and there would be some additional dental treatment.

Free Eye Examinations

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of restoring free eye examinations to *(a)* all adults, *(b)* all those over the age of 65, *(c)* all those over the age of 60 and *(d)* all those over the age of 55 years; and if he will make a statement. [136484]

Mr. Hutton: In April 1999 we made everyone aged 60 and over eligible for a free, National Health Service sight test. Children, people on low incomes and people suffering from or predisposed to eye disease are also eligible. Our estimates of the costs per annum of extending eligibility further are £75 million for all adults and £15 million for people aged 55 and over.

Free Prescriptions

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of restoring free prescriptions to *(a)* all adults, *(b)* all those over the age of 65, *(c)* all those over the age of 60 and *(d)* all those over the age of 55 years; and if he will make a statement. [136482]

Ms Stuart: The cost of restoring free prescriptions to all adults would be £380 million a year. The cost of restoring free prescriptions to all adults aged 55 and over is estimated to be £70 million a year. Those who are over the age of 60 are already exempt. These figures relate solely to the loss of patient charge revenue and make no allowance for any increase in the number of prescription items that might result from this change.

Carers

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are being taken to ensure that people with responsibilities as carers are not discriminated against in the labour market. [136577]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) on 6 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 41–42W.

Duchess of Kent Military Hospital

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on the impact on civilian patients of the closure of the Duchess of Kent military hospital; and if he will make a statement. [137198]

Mr. Hutton: The decision to close the Duchess of Kent military hospital, Catterick was made by the Ministry of Defence following extensive local consultation. Since the closure on 1 July 1999, 13 representations concerning the future provision of treatment for civilian patients have been made to the Secretary of State for Health by hon. Members and by the general public.

Community Health Councils

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans to replace community health councils. [136996]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service Plan sets out the new structures which will be set in place to extend and increase patient and citizen empowerment across all sectors of NHS. Chapter 10 of the NHS Plan announced the establishment of a Patient Advocacy and Liaison

Service in every trust. At the moment we are conducting a major exercise to take the views of stakeholder groups nationally and locally on the specific details of how the new arrangements will be set up and co-ordinated in practice. The results of this exercise will be disseminated in the New Year.

Nursing Home Beds (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about *(a)* the number of nursing home beds in Gloucestershire and *(b)* the demand for them. [136992]

Mr. Hutton: On 31 March 1999 there were 3,532 nursing care places in 126 nursing care homes in Gloucestershire. Information on the number of beds on 31 March 2000 will be published shortly in "Community Care Statistics: Residential Personal Social Services, England, 2000".

The demand for nursing home beds varies on a daily basis but is currently at high levels. Gloucestershire Social Services and local National Health Service bodies are working together to develop a whole systems approach to the commissioning of nursing home care.

Care Needs (Elderly People)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will conclude his consideration of models of assessment of people's care needs: and if he will list the models under consideration. [136209]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* In line with the National Health Service Plan, we aim to introduce a single assessment process for health and social care for older people by April 2002, with protocols to be agreed locally between health and social services. Initially this will be introduced for those older people who are most vulnerable, for example those living alone, or recently discharged from hospital or entering residential or nursing care. Work on developing the assessment process is being taken forward as part of the development of the National Service Framework for older people.

With regard to nursing care, the NHS will make an assessment of the nursing care requirements of nursing home residents. The Department is working in close consultation with a number of organisations on a standardised approach for this part of the assessment process, which will be ready for implementation in October 2001. There are a range of nursing assessment tools currently available, though each is likely to require some development to deliver the outputs needed.

Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to ensure that the new Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service will be independent of the NHS trusts in which it operates; [136070]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that staff employed in the Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service will be accountable to line managers outside the trust in which they are working; and if he will make a statement; [136071]

(3) who will set targets for and monitor performance of staff employed in the Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service. [136072]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Chapter 10 of the National Health Service Plan announced the establishment of a Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service (PALS) in every NHS trust. At the moment, we are conducting a major exercise to take the views of stakeholder groups nationally and locally on the specific details of how the new arrangements set out in Chapter 10 of the NHS Plan should be set up and co-ordinated in practice. The accountability arrangements and performance standards for PALS and PALS staff will be considered as part of this exercise. Also, the issue of independence will be resolved. A clear statement on the outcome of the exercise will be given in the new year.

Children's Carers

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the checking procedures into *(a)* carers in children's homes and *(b)* owners of children's homes with particular reference to persons suspected of being under investigation or who have been subject to investigation by (i) the police and (ii) other authorities. [136487]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Department maintains a list under the Protection of Children Act of persons considered to be unsuitable to work with children. The Department for Education and Employment maintains a separate list of persons barred from working in educational establishments. The Protection of Children Act 1999 requires all regulated child care organisations (including all children's homes) to check against these lists everyone they intend to employ in work that brings them into contact with children. Criminal record checks are also available and where the person being employed will have regular unsupervised contact with children the information supplied will include relevant non-conviction information.

The Children Act 1989 Guidance, Volume 4 sets out the types of checks that are expected on staff and others in children's homes with regular contact with children.

A thorough investigation is made into any organisation or private individual applying to set up a registered voluntary or private children's home. This includes making reference checks with both employment and personal referees. Applicants are asked to supply details of their employment history. Applicants must satisfy the registration authority that they have relevant experience and qualifications. If it appears that further investigation is needed the registration authority can ask the police to check if the applicant has a criminal record. These arrangements will be extended in 2001 to small private unregistered children's homes which will be required to register with local authorities for the first time.

In the future, with the introduction of the National Care Standards Commission, there will be a nationwide, comprehensive set of national minimum standards for all children's homes. These will set out the type of checks required on those owning and working in children's homes.

TREASURY

Pensions Mis-selling

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those employees in the financial services sector who have been disciplined by the regulatory authorities for misdeeds relating to the mis-selling of pensions, including financial penalties and those relating to terms of employment; and if he will make a statement. [135660]

Miss Melanie Johnson: No individual employees have been disciplined by the regulators for failures to pursue the review of personal pensions mis-selling. However, the Personal Investment Authority, as the main regulator for firms carrying out the review, has taken disciplinary action by fining 314 firms over £7 million in total, expelling four and reprimanding one.

Winter Deaths

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of excess winter deaths which occurred in 1999–2000, providing a breakdown for *(a)* each English region, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Great Britain by age band; and if he will provide corresponding estimates for each of the last five years. [135129]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question asking for an estimate of the numbers of excess winter deaths which occurred in 1999–2000, providing a breakdown for each English region, Scotland, Wales and the GB figure by age band, and for corresponding estimates for each of the last five years.

Figures are provided in the attached table for English Government Office Regions and for Wales. Figures are also provided for Great Britain but were only readily obtainable for all ages. Figures for Scotland are now the responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

The figures for winter 1999–2000 are provisional and will only be finalised in October 2001 when data for all deaths occurring in 2000 becomes complete.

Excess winter deaths are defined by National Statistics as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

Excess winter deaths by age-group and Government Office Region of usual residence, 1994–95 to 1999–2000

Age at death	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
England						
0–64	2,090	2,720	2,930	1,670	2,900	4,140
65–74	5,250	6,690	6,520	3,890	6,430	7,210
75–84	9,110	13,460	16,490	7,410	15,430	15,890
85+	9,310	14,940	18,900	8,770	19,250	19,290
All ages	25,760	37,810	44,850	21,730	44,010	46,520
Wales						
0–64	200	190	120	90	230	270
65–74	270	420	490	360	540	430
75–84	580	920	1,050	480	930	1,110
85+	600	910	1,220	350	1,200	1,150
All ages	1,650	2,440	2,880	1,290	2,900	2,970
North East						
0–64	130	250	130	110	90	310
65–74	260	520	490	360	470	490
75–84	400	650	920	530	890	1,040
85+	420	650	690	550	920	890
All ages	1,210	2,080	2,220	1,550	2,370	2,720
North West						
0–64	230	630	510	280	630	470
65–74	960	1,010	1,070	500	1,230	1,110
75–84	1,410	2,060	2,260	980	2,600	2,070
85+	1,190	1,940	2,520	1,010	2,880	2,510
All ages	3,790	5,630	6,360	2,770	7,350	6,170
Yorkshire and the Humber						
0–64	130	250	240	210	260	420
65–74	530	820	700	470	810	690
75–84	1,030	1,440	1,810	860	1,800	1,700
85+	1,110	1,530	1,880	910	1,900	1,900
All ages	2,790	4,040	4,550	2,460	4,760	4,710
East Midlands						
0–64	240	170	250	130	310	400
65–74	570	500	470	360	550	600
75–84	850	1,110	1,280	700	1,560	1,280
85+	660	1,140	1,540	820	1,680	1,620
All ages	2,330	2,930	3,540	2,000	4,090	3,900

Excess winter deaths by age-group and Government Office Region of usual residence, 1994–95 to 1999–2000

Age at death	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
West Midlands						
0–64	250	250	410	250	470	480
65–74	600	880	730	510	750	970
75–84	700	1,580	1,650	800	1,720	1,820
85+	760	1,460	1,740	900	1,920	2,100
All ages	2,310	4,160	4,530	2,450	4,860	5,370
Eastern						
0–64	240	180	250	170	130	400
65–74	550	480	710	410	640	690
75–84	1,110	1,380	1,720	930	1,590	1,810
85+	1,090	1,830	2,330	1,020	2,440	2,070
All ages	3,000	3,870	5,010	2,540	4,800	4,970
London						
0–64	380	440	430	150	410	580
65–74	530	860	870	320	670	940
75–84	1,370	1,680	2,240	930	1,690	2,080
85+	1,220	1,850	2,390	1,120	2,160	2,430
All ages	3,500	4,830	5,930	2,530	4,930	6,030
South East						
0–64	220	310	420	250	370	720
65–74	690	940	860	560	890	1,080
75–84	1,330	2,240	2,770	990	2,190	2,500
85+	1,750	2,670	3,600	1,410	3,260	3,540
All ages	3,990	6,150	7,650	3,200	6,710	7,830
South West						
0–64	280	250	300	120	230	370
65–74	550	680	600	400	420	640
75–84	920	1,320	1,830	700	1,380	1,600
85+	1,100	1,880	2,320	1,020	2,100	2,230
All ages	2,850	4,140	5,060	2,230	4,130	4,830

[1] Provisional

Excess winter deaths, all ages, Great Britain, 1994–95 to 1999–2000

Year	*Number*
1994–95	29,710
1995–96	43,910
1996–97	51,370
1997–98	25,630
1998–99	51,660
1999–2000[1]	54,680

[1] Provisional

Single Currency

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those economies of the single currency with which a sustainable convergence must be demonstrated for the purpose of satisfying his first economic test as to whether entry into the euro is in Britain's economic interest. [136203]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The first test concerns sustainable convergence between Britain and the economies of a single currency.

Illegal Fuel Imports

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the volume of road fuel imported illegally into Great Britain from the Republic of Ireland in the last 12 months; and what volume was so imported via the ports of Cairnryan and Stranraer. [137090]

Mr. Timms: No such estimate has been made.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137191]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury presently holds no contracts with relocation companies.

Unemployment (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many long-term young unemployed there were in Hendon in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* now. [136952]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Andrew Dismore, dated 8 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of long-term young unemployed in Hendon in May 1997 and now. (136952)

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The ONS preferred measure of unemployment is derived from the LFS and is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It counts as unemployed people who are a) without a paid job, b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. However, estimates for the number of ILO long-term young unemployed in the constituency of Hendon cannot be used as they are below the threshold for reliable data.

ONS also publishes the monthly number of people who are claiming unemployment-related benefits, also known as the Claimant count.

In May 1997 there were 160 18–24 year olds on the claimant count (computerised claims only). This fell to 9 by May 2000 and to 14 in September 2000. Constituency level claimant count figures are not seasonally adjusted so comparisons are best made year to year. Computerised claims do not include clerical claims which currently makes up around 1 per cent of the total claimant count.

Tax Documents

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to publish the next tax ready reckoner and tax reliefs document; and if he will make a statement. [137676]

Dawn Primarolo: The Treasury will today be publishing a booklet containing the estimates of the effects of various illustrative tax changes on tax receipts in 2001–02 and 2002–03 (plus 2003–04 for indirect taxes) and estimates of the costs of the main tax reliefs in 1999–2000 and 2001–02. Copies are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Financial Services Review Group

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the establishment of a voluntary code for the Financial Services Review Group. [137678]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I am pleased to announce that the Government have appointed Dr. Anne Julius to chair the Group. The other members of the Group will be announced shortly.

The review will examine:

whether the voluntary codes for financial services are delivering sufficiently strong benefits to consumers;

what scope there is to introduce greater independence and consumer representation in the drawing up of codes;

what role there is for the Ombudsman in influencing or determining standards for consumers;

whether greater information disclosure can be achieved without the need for further regulation.

Dr. Julius will serve in a personal capacity, as will all the members of the group. The group will be asked to publish its report by April 2001.

Devolution

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the increased costs to the Civil Service arising from devolution in Scotland and Wales. [136977]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The costs arising from devolution in Scotland and Wales are the responsibility of the devolved administrations. They are expected to meet all the costs associated with devolution form within their existing budgets.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* families and *(b)* children in Hull have benefited from the working families tax credit; what is the total weekly sum involved; what estimate he has made of the number of families which are entitled to apply and have not done so; what further steps he plans to bring this entitlement to their attention; and if he will make a statement. [135593]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the number of families in each local authority in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) at the end of May, based on a 5 per cent. sample of awards, are shown at Table 9.3 in the WFTC Quarterly Inquiry for May 2000. A copy has been placed in the Library.

The Inquiry also gives the average value of awards to families in the Yorkshire and the Humber Government Office Region. There are too few sample cases to provide reliable estimates of average awards, or of total expenditure, at the local authority level.

We started a new phase of advertising for WFTC on 23 October, which includes national television, national and regional press, radio and advertising in women's and television magazines. This campaign will be running in the Hull area as in all other areas of the UK.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* families and *(b)* children in Inverclyde have benefited from the working families tax credit; what is the total weekly sum involved; what estimate he has made of the number of families which are entitled to apply and have not done so; what initiatives he has undertaken to bring this source of income to their notice; and if he will make a statement. [135925]

Dawn Primarolo: For the number of families benefiting from WFTC in Inverclyde, and for details of the current advertising campaign, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer given above to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara).

There are too few sample cases to provide reliable estimates at the local authority level of total expenditure on WFTC, or of the number of children in families in receipt of WFTC. The WFTC Quarterly Inquiry for May 2000 gives the average number of children per family in receipt of WFTC in Scotland at that date is estimated at 1.8.

National Insurance

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has completed his review of national insurance contributions for 2001–02. [137677]

Dawn Primarolo: I have completed the annual review under section 141 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992. In line with the reforms to national insurance contributions announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his March 1999 Budget and reaffirmed in his pre-Budget reports of 9 November

1999 and 8 November 2000, I propose the following changes to take effect from 6 April 2001. These rates and limits will also apply to Northern Ireland national insurance contributions.

Employers and Employees

In line with the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, the lower earnings limit for primary class 1 contributions is to be raised to £72 a week. It is set at the level of the basic retirement pension for a single person from April 2001 and rounded down to the nearest pound.

The primary threshold for primary class 1 contributions will be aligned with the secondary threshold for secondary class 1 contributions and the weekly amount of the income tax personal allowance at £87 a week. This means that no tax or class 1 contributions will actually be paid on earnings below this level.

The upper earnings limit for primary class 1 contributions will be raised to £575 a week to ensure a fair base of earnings liable to such contributions.

The rate of secondary class 1 contributions payable by all employers is to be reduced by 0.3 per cent., from 12.2 per cent. to 11.9 per cent.

The self-employed

The rate of class 2 contributions is to remain at £2 a week.

Self-employed people with earnings below the annual small earnings exception can apply to be exempted from paying class 2 contributions. This limit will be raised by £130 to £3,955.

The annual lower and upper profits limits for liability to class 4 contributions will be raised respectively by £150 to £4,535 (in line with the income tax personal allowance) and by £2,080 to £29,900, to maintain the link with employees' earnings liable to class 1 contributions and ensure a fair base for contributions by the self-employed.

Class 3

The rate of class 3 voluntary contributions will be increased by 20 pence to £6.75 a week.

Share Fishermen

The special rate of class 2 contributions for share fishermen, which allows them to build entitlement to contributory jobseekers allowance in addition to the other contributory benefits available to the self-employed, will remain at £2.65 a week.

Volunteer Development Workers

The special rate of class 2 contributions for volunteer development workers, which entitles them to the full range of contributory benefits, will be increased by 25 pence to £3.60 in line with the statutory formula of 5 per cent. of the primary class 1 lower earnings limit.

Treasury Grant

Although benefit expenditure from the National Insurance Fund will broadly match income, I need to ensure that the fund can maintain a prudent working balance throughout the coming year. In accordance with section 2(2) of the Social Security Act 1993, I propose to do so by prescribing that the maximum Treasury grant which may be made available to the fund in 2001–02 shall not exceed 2 per cent. of the estimated benefit expenditure for that year. Similar provision will be made in respect of the Northern Ireland National Insurance Fund.

I shall be laying a draft re-rating order before Parliament in due course. This will accompany a report by the Government Actuary to myself and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security, which we shall jointly present to Parliament.

The following table sets out the rates, earnings limits and thresholds for National Insurance Contributions proposed for 2001–02.

National insurance contributions, proposed re-rating, April 2001

Item	*2001–02*
Lower Earnings Limit, primary Class 1	£72 per week
Upper Earnings Limit, primary Class 1	£575 per week
Primary Threshold	£87 per week
Secondary Threshold	£87 per week
Employees' primary Class 1 rate	10 per cent. of £87.01 to £575 per week
Employees' contracted-out rebate	1.6 per cent.
Married women's reduced rate	3.85 per cent.
Employers' secondary Class 1 rate	11.9 per cent. on earnings above £87 per week
Employers' contracted-out rebate, salary-related schemes	3 per cent.
Employers' contracted-out rebate, money-purchase schemes	0.6 per cent.
Class 2 rate	£2 per week
Class 2 Small Earnings Exception	£3,955 per year
Special Class 2 rate for share fishermen	£2.65 per week
Special Class 2 rate for volunteer development workers	£3.60 per week
Class 3 rate	£6.75 per week
Class 4 rate	7 per cent.
Class 4 Lower Profits Limit	£4,535 per year
Class 4 Upper Profits Limit	£29,900 per year

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

China

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he plans to have with hon. Members over the future of the EU/China human rights dialogue. [135765]

Mr. Battle: The Government take an active role in the EU in determining the direction and strategy for the EU/China Human Rights Dialogue. The UK proposed a review into strengthening the dialogue procedures at a joint COHOM/COASI meeting on 9 February. This was supplemented by the GAC conclusions of 20 March which, at the Foreign Secretary's initiative, included a call for the setting of objectives. The Presidency envisage concluding the review by the GAC meeting on 4 December. The Foreign Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry into the bilateral relationship with China, to which the Foreign Secretary gave evidence.

European Union (Qualified Majority Voting)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what policy he will adopt at Nice on the extension of qualified majority voting. [136396]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy concerning the balance of responsibilities between the United Kingdom Government and the European Union and proposals to change the method of voting in Brussels on *(a)* the approval of the rules of procedure of the Court of Auditors, *(b)* the appointment of the Court of Auditors, *(c)* the rules of procedure of the European Court of First Instance, *(d)* the rules of procedure of the European Court of Justice, *(e)* the appointment of the Deputy Secretary-General of the Council, *(f)* the appointment of the Secretary-General, *(g)* the Association of Overseas Countries and Territories and *(h)* the powers of the Court of Justice in Title IV. [136672]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Members to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), on 30 October 2000 *Official Report,* column 238W.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times, and on what issues, Her Majesty's Government have used their veto in the EU in each of the last 10 years; and how many times vetoes were used in total in each of those years. [136773]

Mr. Vaz: The Council Secretariat does not hold figures on the number of times proposals for legislation are vetoed, and the figures sought could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The use of the veto on legislative proposals is comparatively rare. But the requirement for unanimity in the most sensitive areas of policy acts as an important discipline, helping to ensure that member states tend to develop proposals which all can support.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the expansion of the aquis communautaire. [136393]

Mr. Vaz: The Government are clear about the benefits for the UK of co-operating with our European partners. But they are also clear that the Community should act only where the objectives cannot be better carried out by member states.

Middle East

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Her Majesty's Government will pass on to the UN Human Rights Commission inquiry information on human rights abuses collected by British consular staff in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. [136453]

Mr. Hain: We remain concerned about human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories, and if the special session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to be convened in New York passes the UNHRC resolution convening the Commission of Inquiry, we will co-operate fully.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Palestinian Authority about the use of children during the clashes between Israelis and Palestinians. [137103]

Mr. Hain: I deplore the fact that children have been caught up in recent violence in the Occupied Territories, which has led to tragic loss of life and casualties among children. I appeal to both sides to ensure that every effort is made to protect children.

Fishery Concessions (Tristan da Cuhna)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the companies and vessels that hold the fisheries concessions in the area of Tristan da Cuhna. [136808]

Mr. Hain: Two companies hold fisheries concessions in Tristan da Cunha's waters. They are:

Eurex Limited of St. Peter Port Guernsey, which has exclusive rights to fish for lobster with a by-catch of finfish and octopus up to twelve miles from the coast. The concession is for five years with an option to renew for a further five years when it runs out in 2002. It operates the fishing vessels Kelso and Edinburgh.

San Libatore, the offshore fishing company of Cook Strait Seafoods of Wellington, New Zealand, which has exclusive rights for trawling from 50 to 200 miles. This concession began on 1 September 2000 and runs for two years with an option to renew for a further three years when it runs out. It operates the fishing vessel San Libatore.

Ad hoc licences are issued from time to time for single fishing trips.

Trade (EU Market Access)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what impact the EC's Everything but Arms initiative will have on the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. [136830]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

None. The European Commission's proposal on improved market access for the 1 per cent. of products from the 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) which do not yet have tariff and quota free access to the EU will be implemented by adjustments to the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) scheme. The Cotonou Partnership Agreement and the preferences it enshrines for the participating countries will be unchanged. However, the 39 Cotonou countries which are also LDCs would be able to gain some additional benefits if they export to the EU products covered by the proposed new GSP arrangements.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when sanctions against Yugoslavia will be lifted. [136968]

Mr. Vaz: The EU oil embargo and flight ban have already been lifted with effect from 9 October. The remaining EU sanctions, with the exception of the arms embargo and the ban on the export of equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism, are being revised to ensure that only those measures aimed directly at Milosevic and those persons directly associated with him remain in place: this process should be complete by the end of November.

The UN arms embargo and ban on arming and training for terrorist activities there, imposed by UNSCR 1160 (1998), will remain in place.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy that all the EU's economic sanctions against Yugoslavia should be lifted. [136967]

Mr. Vaz: The EU oil embargo and flight ban against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were lifted on 9 October following the election of Vojislav Kostunica as President of the FRY. The remaining EU sanctions, with the exceptions of the arms embargo and ban on equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism, are being revised to target only Milosevic and those individuals associated with him.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will urge the European Union to provide finance to reconstruct the civilian infrastructure damaged by NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia. [136966]

Mr. Vaz: The European Union has already responded quickly to support the new government in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and repair the damage brought on by the Milosevic regime. At the Biarritz European Council on 13 October, the EU announced a 200 meuro emergency assistance package. This package will focus on support for the energy sector, food, health, education and heating. The EU has also allocated 22 meuro for the clearance of the Danube.

European Security and Defence

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from the US Administration on the further development of *(a)* European Security and Defence Identity and *(b)* European Security and Defence Policy. [137201]

Mr. Vaz: President Clinton welcomed the outcome of the Feira European Council regarding the European Security and Defence Policy in a statement on 20 June 2000. Speaking at the NATO Informal Defence Ministerial at Birmingham on 10 October 2000, Defence Secretary Cohen said that the US agrees with the Helsinki Headline Goal

> not grudgingly, not with resignation, but with whole-hearted conviction.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if a method for involving non-EU allies into the process for the elaboration of the Headline and Capability Goals has been established; and if he will make a statement. [137200]

Mr. Vaz: Non-EU European allies and candidates for accession to the EU have been encouraged to make additional contributions to the Headline Goal target. The European Council at Feira welcomed initial declarations of intent to contribute. Defence Ministers of those countries will have the opportunity to announce offers to make forces available to EU-led crisis management operations in meetings with Defence Ministers of EU member states on 21 November. These offers will be additional to the Headline Goal, which is for EU member states alone to achieve.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the scope of the *(a)* European Security and Defence Identity, *(b)* Common European Security and Defence Policy and *(c)* European Security and Defence Policy. [137073]

Mr. Vaz: The European Security and Defence Identity refers to the arrangements established within NATO for the Alliance to support European-led crisis management operations.

The Common European Security and Defence Policy (also known as the European Security and Defence Policy) refers to the arrangements established within the EU for the EU to have the capacity to undertake conflict prevention and crisis management tasks. ESDP is being developed in close co-operation with NATO.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the *(a)* role and *(b)* composition is of the European Military Committee; and what representation it has within *(a)* NATO and *(b)* other EU bodies. [137109]

Mr. Vaz: The Nice European Council is likely to take decisions on establishing permanent political and military bodies including an EU Military Committee. The EU Military Committee will give military advice on questions relating to crisis management operations. It will be composed of Chiefs of Defence Staff of the member states. Day-to-day business will be carried out by national military representatives, who may be double hatted with military representatives at NATO. The Chairman of the Military Committee will attend the Political and Security Committee and meetings of the Council when decisions with defence implications are to be taken.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made in setting up co-operation and co-ordination mechanisms involving non-EU NATO members in the ESDI/P framework. [137075]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave on 25 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 148W.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if *(a)* ESDI and *(b)* ESDP actions will be subject to a veto by any NATO member state. [137074]

Mr. Vaz: All decisions on ESDI in NATO and on ESDP in the EU are taken by consensus. EU decisions are taken by EU member states only.

European Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in setting up a standing Political and Security Committee dealing with aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. [137077]

Mr. Vaz: The Council of the European Union adopted a decision establishing an interim Political and Security Committee (PSC) on 14 February 2000. It met for the first time on 3 March 2000. The interim PSC meets on average twice weekly and can address the full range of Common Foreign and Security Policy issues. As a standing body it

can meet at short notice if required. The Government expect the interim PSC to be formally established as a permanent body in the course of the Swedish Presidency of the European Union, January-June 2001.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on incorporating the post of EU high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy into the European Commission. [137076]

Mr. Vaz: The Government believe that the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) should continue to be based on inter-governmental cooperation. The role of High Representative provides a valuable focus for the increasingly important role played CFSP. The Government would not support proposals to incorporate this role into the Commission.

International Criminal Court

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for proposing legislation to establish an international criminal court. [137107]

Mr. Hain: The Government will introduce legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows. The ICC Bill was published in draft on 25 August and a consultation process on the draft Bill has been completed.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his participation in the talks designed to create an International Criminal Court. [136984]

Mr. Hain: The UK has fully participated throughout the negotiations on the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The sixth session of the Preparatory Commission for the ICC begins in New York on 27 November and British officials will again be actively involved.

Western Sahara

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people of Western Sahara as set out in the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975; and if he will make a statement. [135927]

Mr. Hain: We recognise the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination over their own future and will continue to support international efforts to achieve a just and durable solution in the territory.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response the Government have made to the Moroccan Government's statement that it will no longer support the UN Settlement Plan for Western Sahara, including a referendum; and if he will make a statement. [135928]

Mr. Hain: Our understanding is that Morocco remains committed to the UN Settlement Plan for Western Sahara, and to a referendum. The UN Secretary-General has said that the implementation of the plan has been held up for ten years because of differences between the two parties on its voter identification and appeals protocols.

The Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, James Baker, was drafted in earlier this year to explore all options for an agreed and durable solution, including a political solution which could then be put to a referendum. Morocco's recently stated willingness in principle to consider a political means of breaking the impasse is a positive development. We will continue to give our full support to Mr. Baker's efforts to resolve this dispute.

Arms Brokering

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provisions are in place to ensure that arms exported from the UK are not brokered to a third country; and if he will make a statement. [137000]

Mr. Hain: The Government are continually seeking to strengthen further their monitoring of the end-use of defence exports to prevent diversion to third parties. The Government have already taken a number of steps to strengthen risk assessment at the licensing stage and to improve the sharing of information on end-users of concern with like-minded countries. For example, the UK regularly seeks additional details of proposed end-use and end-users, including through our overseas posts, in order better to assess particular export licence applications.

It would be neither practical nor useful to monitor the end-use of all strategic goods exported from the UK over their lifetime with the end-user, particularly when we have already taken steps to satisfy ourselves of the end-user's reliability and integrity before issuing a licence. Post-export monitoring cannot in itself prevent equipment from being diverted or misused, although it may help to inform future licensing decisions. Such monitoring is extremely resource-intensive and generally requires a degree of technical expertise on the part of those involved.

Nevertheless, the UK is prepared to undertake monitoring of equipment in the recipient country in certain circumstances where the Government believe that such monitoring would genuinely add value to its efforts to minimise the risk of diversion. Several examples of such post-export monitoring are contained in the Government's 1999 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House.

At present the Government have powers to control only trafficking and brokering of defence equipment under the United Nations Act 1946 where this is necessary to implement a binding United Nations decision. However, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 28 September that the Government have decided to introduce a system of licensing for arms trafficking and brokering. This will go significantly further than the proposals on trafficking and brokering in the 1998 White Paper on Strategic Export Controls. Full details of the Government's proposals on trafficking and brokering will

be set out when the Government announce their proposals for new export control legislation following conclusion of the White Paper review.

Dog Breeds

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with German Ministers about their proposals to ban certain breeds of dog; and if he will make a statement. [136988]

Mr. Vaz: I have not discussed the matter with German Ministers, since such matters are an internal matter for the German authorities.

I understand the German Government have proposed that such measures be considered for adoption as EU legislation. The European Commission doubt there is a legal basis for EU-wide legislation and it seems unlikely that any such proposals will progress. Our policy is that such domestic legislation should remain a matter for member states. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), has already stated that existing United Kingdom law is adequate for both present and future controls in this area.

European Public Prosecutor

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy on proposals for a European Public Prosecutor. [135381]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for West Suffolk, (Mr. Spring) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 529W.

European Movement

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what account the EU has taken in making decisions to provide funding to the European Movement of the European Movement's other sources of funding. [136255]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

It is within the remit of the Commission to decide the criteria for disbursing such grants.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judges' Lodgings

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the total cost was of judges' lodgings for each of the last three years; what was *(a)* the average cost and *(b)* the highest cost per night of occupancy of lodgings for each of the last three years; what plans he has to review the cost of judges' lodgings; what recent representations he has received from members of the judiciary concerning lodgings; and if he will make a statement. [134334]

Jane Kennedy: The total cost of running the judges' lodgings in each of the last three years was:

	£
1997–98	4,776,680
1998–99	5,232,957
1999–2000	4,785,683

For completeness, the average and highest cost per night of occupancy of lodgings by the judge and his or her clerk, inclusive of travel between the lodgings and the court, is set out as follows on three bases:

Total cost figures

		£
	Highest	*Average (mean)*
1997–98	2,550	967
1998–99	2,375	919
1999–2000	2,030	901

Total cost of lodgings less, for freehold properties, the Treasury capital charge

		£
	Highest	*Average (mean)*
1997–98	2,550	918
1998–99	2,107	838
1999–2000	2,030	818

Only those costs immediately attributable to judicial occupation

		£
	Highest	*Average (mean)*
1997–98	815.27	380.70
1998–99	646.81	368.36
1999–2000	677.94	357.34

An internal review of judges' lodgings is taking place which will:

review the current location of lodgings, bearing in mind their degree of use and the maximum acceptable travelling times to the court centres they serve;

compare the value for money provided by lodgings (including past and future capital, running, incidental and opportunity costs) with alternative forms of accommodation providing appropriate standards of security, privacy and comfort; and

make recommendations concerning the most cost-effective means of managing and staffing lodgings.

The Lord Chancellor has already begun consultation with the judiciary on the review. When the Lord Chancellor makes his decisions, which will be as soon as possible, he will publish them along with the review.

No recent representations have been received from members of the judiciary about lodgings.

Judges

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* High Court judges, *(b)* circuit judges, *(c)* recorders or assistant recorders, *(d)* district judges (including family division) and *(e)* deputy district judges (including family division),

have been appointed in each of the last six years; and how many were (i) solicitors or former solicitors, (ii) women and (iii) people from ethnic minorities. [135127]

Mr. Lock *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The first table gives the requested breakdown for appointments to each level of judge requested for the last three financial years, and for the principal categories from April 1 this year. Another table provides the figures which are readily available for appointments in the calendar years 1994, 1995 and 1996. A further table gives statistics for all professional judicial appointments through the main open competitions in 1999–2000, and shows that of those appointments, 47 per cent. were solicitors, 27 per cent. women and 4 per cent. from ethnic minorities.

Appointments in the last three financial years

	Total	Solicitors	Women	Ethnic minority
1997–98				
High Court Judges	9	0	0	0
Circuit Judges[1]	34	3	6	0
Assistant Recorders[2]	93	12	20	4
District Judges[1,3]	37	36	8	1
Deputy District Judges[3]	63	57	20	2
1998–99				
High Court Judges	7	0	0	0
Circuit Judges[1]	15	1	2	1
Assistant Recorders	150	10	22	4
District Judges[1,3]	43	39	8	3
Deputy District Judges[3]	100	86	32	1
1999–2000				
High Court Judges	8	0	3	0
Circuit Judges[1]	31	8	3	0
Assistant Recorders[2]	113	9	21	6
District Judges[1,3]	27	24	10	1
Deputy District Judges[3]	125	102	39	2

[1] The figures for Circuit Judges and District Judges are for those who were approved for appointment, although they did not take up their appointments until the following year

[2] Appointments in the full competition completed in the year concerned (which usually spans two financial years) rather than the appointments made in that financial year which would be from parts of two competitions

[3] Including Family Division

Appointments 1 April 2000 to 31 October 2000

	Total	Solicitors	Women	Ethnic minority
High Court Judges	11	1	0	0
Circuit Judges[1]	8	6	2	0
District Judges[1,2]	3	2	0	0

[1] Candidates who were interviewed in the competitions in 1999–2000, were originally on the reserve list, and were subsequently appointed. The total figures for those who have taken up post since 1 April 2000 are, therefore, the figures in table 1 plus those in table 2.

[2] Including Family Division

Appointments in the calendar years shown

	Total	Solicitors	Women	Ethnic minority
1994				
High Court Judges	'8	0	1	0
Circuit Judges	35	4	2	0
Assistant Recorders[2]	50	13	6	3
District Judges[2,3]	31	28	10	0
Deputy District Judges[2,3]	20	17	4	0

Appointments in the calendar years shown

	Total	Solicitors	Women	Ethnic minority
1995				
High Court Judges	12	0	1	0
Circuit Judges	48	16	4	1
Assistant Recorders[2]	58	9	9	1
District Judges[2,3]	31	30	4	0
Deputy District Judges[2,3]	63	56	16	4
1996				
High Court Judges	9	0	0	0
Circuit Judges	45	5	1	0
Assistant Recorders[2]	98	16	17	2
District Judges[2,3]	24	22	3	0
Deputy District Judges[2,3]	7	6	0	0

[1] The figures of six High Court Judges appointed in 1994 which was given in answer to a written question on 9 February 1999 was incorrect

[2] These figures are those that are the most readily available from existing records but may not be wholly comprehensive because of changes in recording procedures

[3] Including Family Division

Total appointments through the main judicial appointments competitions in 1999–2000

	Appointments	Percentage
Total	453	100
Men	331	73.1
Women[1]	122	26.9
White	407	89.8
Ethnic minority	19	4.2
Not known	27	6
Barrister (not QC)	172	38
Solicitor (not QC)	211	46.6
QC	27	6
Other	43	9.5

[1] If appointments to the Appeals Service are included, the proportion of women appointed in 1999–2000 was 33.4 per cent.

CABINET OFFICE

British-Irish Council

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made during the summer in relation to the British-Irish Council. [135617]

Marjorie Mowlam: Over the summer, the participants in the British-Irish Council have been taking forward in a number of the areas identified as priorities at the first BIC summit meeting last December. The second BIC summit was due to take place in Dublin on Wednesday 18 October, hosted by the Irish Government. Regrettably, the summit had to be postponed following the death of the right hon. Donald Dewar MP MSP, First Minister of the Scottish Executive. Action is in hand to identify a new date for the summit.

Civil Servants (Stakeholder Pensions)

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to offer stakeholder pensions to *(a)* new civil servants, *(b)* existing civil servants and *(c)* staff of executive agencies. [134376]

Mr. Stringer: As required under the legislation, from October 2001, designated stakeholder pension arrangements will be made available to all civil servants who cannot be covered by the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (PCSPS). Civil service stakeholder pension arrangements will also be made available to civil servants who are covered by the PCSPS but who earn less than £30,000 a year, and who wish to top up their PCSPS benefits.

These arrangements will be for *(a)* new civil servants, *(b)* existing civil servants, and *(c)* staff of executive agencies while they are employed within the civil service.

Departmental Websites

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what assessment she has made of the advantages and disadvantages of establishing chat rooms on departmental websites. [136925]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My Department has issued guidelines for Government websites. In paragraph 3.7 of this document there is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of chat rooms. These guidelines are available on the web at http://www.citu.gov.uk/iagc/guidelines/websites/websites.htm.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 November 2000

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes will be made to his Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138175]

Mr. Rooker: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class XII, Vote 2 and Class XII, Vote 3, the Department of Social Security Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £399,594,000 from £3,190,745,000 to £3,590,339,000.

The increase of Class XII, Vote 3 is the net effect of additional Comprehensive Spending Review funding of £86,000,000 (running costs), an increase of £112,000,000 (running costs) associated with the move to ACT as the method of payment for all benefits, a take up of £40,026,000 (running costs) from the Departmental Unallocated Provision (which will not change the gross running costs limit), an increase of £37,946,000 (running costs) and £1,118,000 capital under the End Year Flexibility Scheme as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Out-turn White Paper Cm 4812 published on 18 July, an increase of £6,670,000 (running costs) for the administration costs of additional pensions work, an increase of £18,500,000 for the administrative costs arising from Budget 2000 measures, an increase of £9,000,000 (running costs) resulting from the Debt Recovery Scheme, an increase of £6,000,000 (running costs) arising from initiatives contained in the Grabiner report, an increase of £4,320,000 (running costs) associated with the Civil Service Modernisation programme, an increase of £750,000 (running costs) towards the administrative costs of ONE, an increase of £75,000,000 (capital) from the Welfare Modernisation Fund to help speed up IT modernisation, and an increase of £11,542,000 (capital) arising from the proceeds of a development gain under the PRIME initiative.

Other changes result from a transfer of £2,374,000 (running costs) towards the administrative costs of Decision Making and Appeals offset by a corresponding increase on Class I, Vote 3 (Employment Services), a transfer of £1,199,000 (running costs) and £1,328,000 capital for the Resettlement Programme in Scotland, offset by a corresponding increase in the Scottish Executive, a transfer of £400,000 (capital) for expenditure on the London Rough Sleepers Unit, offset by a corresponding increase on Class III, Vote 1 (Housing, construction, regeneration, regional policy, planning and countryside and wildlife, England) and a transfer of £11,000 (running costs) in respect of Better Government for Older People, offset by a corresponding reduction on Class III, Vote 2 (Planning, roads, local transport and vehicle safety), (£6,000) and Class XVII, Vote 1 (Cabinet Office: administration) (£5,000).

There is also an increase of £20,970,000 (running costs) associated with services provided to other Government Departments on a repayment basis, an increase of £47,021,000 (running costs) arising from increased payments of Value Added Tax on contracted-out services, an increase of £15,153,000 (running costs) associated with expenditure on sub let accommodation and an increase of £168,000 to meet the costs of overseas medical examinations. Appropriation in Aid increases by £169,152,000.

Changes in the Welfare to Work provision arise from an increase of £975,000 under the End Year Flexibility Scheme as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Out-turn White Paper Cm 4812 published on 18 July, a reduction of £7,367,000 offset by a corresponding increase on Class 1, Vote 3 (Employment Service), an increase of £15,000 offset by a corresponding reduction on Class 1, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services), an increase of £2,308,000 for costs associated with pilots and innovative schemes arising from the programme of measures to help people with a disability or long term illness move into or remain in work and an increase of £2,313,000 for expenditure on work focused interviews relating to the measures to help Lone Parents move from Welfare to Work.

As a result of these changes the running costs limit of this Department will be increased by £277,792,000 from £2,941,730,000 to £3,219,522,000 and the running costs limit of the Welfare to Work programme will be reduced by £1,756,000 from £15,752,000 to £13,996,000.

Changes to Class XII, Vote 2 arise from an increase of £37,430,000 under the End Year Flexibility Scheme as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Out-turn White Paper Cm 4812 published on 18 July and an increase of £2,500,000 associated with the administration cost of Budget 2000 measures.

Increases will be offset by transfers or a charge to the DEL Reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Government Actuary (Report)

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he has received the report from the Government Actuary's Department under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000. [138173]

Mr. Darling: The Report by the Government Actuary on the Cost of Uprating the Basic Retirement Pension in Line With the General Level of Earnings (Cm 4920) has been laid before Parliament today. Copies have been placed in the Library and are available for hon. Members in the Vote Office.

Benefit Rates

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the new rates of benefit proposed from April 2001. [138174]

Mr. Darling: The information requested is set out in the schedule. The annual uprating of benefits will take place in the first full week of the tax year. In 2001, this will be the week beginning 9 April.

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Attendance Allowance		
higher rate	53.55	55.30
lower rate	35.80	37.00
Child Benefit		
only, elder or eldest for whom child benefit is payable (couple)	15.00	15.50
only, elder or eldest for whom child benefit is payable (lone parent)	17.55	17.55
each subsequent child	10.00	10.35
Child's Special Allowance		
see note on Child Dependency Increase	11.35	11.35
Council Tax Benefit		
Personal allowances		
single		
18 to 24	41.35	42.00
25 or over	52.20	53.05
lone parent—18 or over	52.20	53.05
couple—one or both over 18	81.95	83.25
Dependent Children		
from birth to September following 16th birthday	30.95	31.45
from September following 16th birthday to day before 19th birthday	31.75	32.25
Premiums		
family	14.25	14.50
family (lone parent rate)	22.20	22.20
pensioner		
single	26.25	'39.10
couple	40.00	'57.30
pensioner (enhanced)		
single	28.65	'39.10
couple	43.40	'57.30
pensioner (higher)		
single	33.85	'39.10
couple	49.10	'57.30
disability		
single	22.25	22.60
couple	31.75	32.25
enhanced disability premium single rate	5.95	'11.05
disabled child rate	5.95	'11.05
couple rate	8.60	'16.00
severe disability		
single	40.20	41.55
couple (one qualifies)	40.20	41.55
couple (both qualify)	80.40	83.10
disabled child	22.25	'30.00
carer	14.15	'24.40
bereavement	15.30	'19.45
Non-dependant deductions		
aged 18 or over and in remunerative work		
gross income: £269 and above	6.95	6.95
gross income: £215-£268.99	5.80	5.80
gross income: £125-£214.99	4.60	4.60

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
gross income less than £125	2.30	2.30
others, aged 18 or over	2.30	2.30
Alternative maximum Council Tax Benefit		25% of Council Tax
second adult on IS or JSA (IB)		25% of Council Tax
second adult's gross income:		
under £125		15% of Council Tax
£125 to £162.99		7.5% of Council Tax
Capital		
upper limit	16,000.00	16,000.00
amount disregarded	3,000.00	3,000.00
amount disregarded o/60s		6,000.00
child's limit	3,000.00	3,000.00
upper limit of RC/NH	16,000.00	16,000.00
amount disregarded of RC/NH	10,000.00	10,000.00
Tariff income		
£1 for every complete £250 or part thereof between amount of capital disregarded and capital upper limit		
Earnings disregards		
where disability premium awarded	15.00	20.00
various specified employments	15.00	20.00
lone parent	25.00	25.00
where the claimant has a partner	10.00	10.00
single claimant	5.00	5.00
where carer premium awarded	15.00	20.00
childcare charges (1 child) - maximum	70.00	70.00
childcare charges (2 or more children) maximum	105.00	105.00
Other income disregards		
maintenance disregard	15.00	15.00
war disablement pension and war widow's pension	10.00	10.00
certain voluntary and charitable payments	20.00	20.00
student loan	10.00	10.00
student's covenanted income	5.00	5.00
income from boarders:		
disregard the fixed amount (£20) plus 50% of the balance of the charge	20.00	20.00
30 Hr Adult Allowance in DPTC	11.25	11.45
30 Hr Adult Credit in WFTC	11.25	11.45
Expenses for subtenants		
furnished or unfurnished	4.00	4.00
where heating is included, additional	9.25	9.55
Dependency Increases		
Adult Dependency Increases		
For spouse or person looking after children, with:		
retirement pension on own insurance	40.40	43.40
long term incapacity benefit, unemployability supplement	40.40	41.75
severe disablement allowance	24.20	25.00
invalid care allowance	24.15	24.95
short-term incapacity benefit if beneficiary over pension age	38.80	40.10
maternity allowance/short-term incapacity benefit	31.50	32.55
Child Dependency increases, with; retirement pension, widows benefit, short-term incapacity benefit at the higher rate and long term incapacity benefit, invalid care allowance severe disablement allowance, higher rate industrial death benefit, unemployability supplement and short-term incapacity benefit if beneficiary over pension age[2]	11.35	11.35
Disability Living Allowance		
Care Component		
Highest	53.55	55.30
Middle	35.80	37.00
Lowest	14.20	14.65

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Mobility Component		
Higher	37.40	38.65
Lower	14.20	14.65
Earnings Rules		
Invalid Care Allowance	50.00	72.00
Limit of earnings from councillor's allowance	59.50	60.50
Therapeutic earnings limit	59.50	60.50
Industrial injuries unemployability supplement permitted earnings level (annual amount)	3,094.00	3,146.00
War pensioners' unemployability supplement permitted earnings level (annual amount)	3,094.00	3,146.00
Adult dependency increases with		
short-term incapacity benefit where claimant is		
(a) under pension age	31.50	32.55
(b) over pension age	38.80	40.10
maternity allowance	31.50	32.55
retirement pension, long-term incapacity benefit, severe disablement allowance, unemployability supplement where dependant		
(a) is living with claimant	52.50	53.05
(b) still qualifies for the tapered earnings rule	45.09	45.09
retirement pension where dependent not living with claimant	40.40	43.40
long-term incapacity benefit and unemployability supplement where dependant not living with claimant	40.40	41.75
severe disablement allowance where dependant not living with claimant	24.20	25.00
invalid care allowance	24.15	24.95
Child dependency increases level at which CDIs are affected by earnings of claimant's spouse or partner		
for first child	145.00	150.00
for each subsequent child	19.00	20.00
Guardian's Allowance see note on Child Dependency Increase	11.35	11.35
Hospital Benefit Personal allowances		
single		
16 to 24	41.35	42.00
25 or over	52.20	53.05
lone parent		
under 18	41.35	42.00
18 or over	52.20	53.05
couple		
both under 18	62.35	63.35
one or both over 18	81.95	83.25
dependent children		
from birth to September following 16th birthday	30.95	31.45
from Sept. following 16th birthday to day before 19th birthday	31.75	32.25
Premiums		
family	14.25	14.50
family (lone parent rate)	22.20	22.20

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
pensioner		
single	26.25	[1]39.10
couple	40.00	[1]57.30
pensioner (enhanced)		
single	28.65	[1]39.10
couple	43.40	[1]57.30
pensioner (higher)		
single	33.85	[1]39.10
couple	49.10	[1]57.30
disability		
single	22.25	22.60
couple	31.75	32.25
enhanced disability premium single rate	5.95	[1]11.05
disabled child rate	5.95	[1]11.05
couple rate	8.60	[1]16.00
severe disability		
single	40.20	41.55
couple (one qualifies)	40.20	41.55
couple (both qualify)	80.40	83.10
disabled child	22.25	[1]30.00
carer	14.15	[1]24.40
bereavement	15.30	[1]19.45
Non-dependant deductions rent rebates and allowances		
aged 25 and over, in receipt of Income Support or income based Job Seekers Allowance		
aged 18 or over, not in reumnerative work or gross income less than £84.00	7.40	7.40
aged 18 or over and in remunerative work		
gross income: less than £84.00	7.40	7.40
gross income: £84 to £124.99	17.00	17.00
gross income: £125 to £162.99	23.35	23.35
gross income: £163 to £214.99	38.20	38.20
gross income: £215.00 to £268.99	43.50	43.50
gross income: £269.00 and above	47.75	47.75
Service charges for fuel		
heating	9.25	9.55
hot water	1.15	1.20
lighting	0.80	0.85
cooking	1.15	1.20
Amount ineligible for meals		
three or more meals a day		
single claimant	18.65	18.95
each person in family aged 16 or over	18.65	18.95
each child under 16	9.40	9.55
less than three meals a day		
single claimant	12.40	12.60
each person in family aged 16 or over	12.40	12.60
each child under 16	6.25	6.35
breakfast only—claimant and each member of family	2.25	2.30
Capital		
upper limit	16,000.00	16,000.00
amount disregarded	3,000.00	3,000.00
amount disregarded o/60s		6,000.00
child's limit	3,000.00	3,000.00
upper limit for permanent resident of RC/NH	16,000.00	16,000.00
amount disregarded for permanent resident of RC/NH	10,000.00	10,000.00

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Tariff income		
£1 for every complete £250 or part thereof between amount of capital disregarded and capital upper limit		
Earnings disregards		
where disability premium awarded	15.00	20.00
various specified employments	15.00	20.00
lone parent	25.00	25.00
where the claimant has a partner	10.00	10.00
single claimant	5.00	5.00
where carer premium awarded	15.00	20.00
childcare charges	70.00	70.00
childcare charges (2 or more children)—maximum	105.00	105.00
Other income disregards		
maintenance disregard	15.00	15.00
war disablement pension and war widow's pension	10.00	10.00
certain voluntary and charitable payments	20.00	20.00
student loan	10.00	10.00
student's covenanted income	5.00	5.00
income from boarders:		
disregard the fixed amount (£20) plus 50% of the balance of the charge	20.00	20.00
30 Hr Adult Allowance in DPTC	11.25	11.45
30 Hr Adult Credit in WFTC	11.25	11.45
Expenses for subtenants		
furnished or unfurnished	4.00	4.00
where heating is included, additional	9.25	9.55
Incapacity Benefit		
Long-term Incapacity Benefit	67.50	69.75
Short-term Incapacity Benefit (under pension age)		
lower rate	50.90	52.60
higher rate	60.20	62.20
Short-term Incapacity Benefit (over pension age)		
lower rate	64.75	66.90
higher rate	67.50	69.75
Increase of Long-term Incapacity Benefit for age		
higher rate	14.20	14.65
lower rate	7.10	7.35
Invalidity Allowance (Transitional)		
higher rate	14.20	14.65
middle rate	9.00	9.30
lower rate	4.50	4.65
Income Support		
Personal Allowances		
single		
under 18—usual rate	31.45	31.95
under 18—higher rate payable in specific circumstances	41.35	42.00
18 to 24	41.35	42.00
25 or over	52.20	53.05
lone parent		
under 18—usual rate	31.45	31.95
under 18—higher rate payable in specific circumstances	41.35	42.00
18 or over	52.20	53.05
couple		
both under 18	62.35	63.35
one or both 18 or over	81.95	83.25
dependent children		
birth to September following 16th birthday	30.95	31.45
from Sept. following 16th birthday to day before 19th birthday	31.75	32.25

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Residential Allowance		
except Greater London	61.30	63.30
Greater London	68.20	70.45
Premiums		
family	14.25	14.50
family (lone parent rate)	15.90	15.90
pensioner		
single	26.25	[1]39.10
couple	40.00	[1]57.30
pensioner (enhanced)		
single	28.65	[1]39.10
couple	43.40	[1]57.30
pensioner (higher)		
single	33.85	[1]39.10
couple	49.10	[1]57.30
disability		
single	22.25	22.60
couple	31.75	32.25
enhanced disability premium single rate	5.95	[1]11.05
disabled child rate	5.95	[1]11.05
couple rate	8.60	[1]16.00
severe disability		
single	40.20	41.55
couple (one qualifies)	40.20	41.55
couple (both qualify)	80.40	83.10
disabled child	22.25	[1]30.00
carer	14.15	[1]24.40
bereavement	15.30	[1]19.45
Maximum amounts for accommodation and meals in		
residential care homes		
old age	221.00	225.00
very dependent elderly	256.00	261.00
mental disorder (not handicap)	234.00	238.00
special criteria satisfied	256.00	261.00
drug/alcohol dependence	234.00	238.00
special criteria satisfied	256.00	261.00
mental handicap	266.00	271.00
physical disablement		
(a) (under pension age)	303.00	308.00
(b) (over pension age)	221.00	225.00
(c) (special criteria satisfied)	256.00	261.00
others	221.00	225.00
maximum Greater London increase	46.00	47.00
nursing homes		
mental disorder (not handicap)	331.00	337.00
drug/alcohol dependence	331.00	337.00
mental handicap	337.00	343.00
terminal illness	330.00	336.00
physical disablement		
(a) (under pension age)	373.00	379.00
(b) (over pension age)	330.00	336.00
others (including elderly)	330.00	336.00
maximum Greater London increase	51.00	52.00

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Amounts for meals where these cannot be purchased within the accommodation (Daily Rate)		
breakfast	1.10	1.10
midday meal	1.55	1.55
evening meal	1.55	1.55
Allowances for personal expenses for claimants in		
private and voluntary residential care and nursing homes		
personal expenses	15.45	'16.05
dependent children		
(a) under 11	6.15	6.25
(b) 11 to 15	9.00	9.15
(c) 16 to 17	10.40	10.55
(d) age 18	15.00	15.25
local authority (Part III) accommodation	67.50	'72.50
of which, Personal Expenses	15.45	'16.05
Allowances for personal expenses for claimants in:		
the Polish home Ilford Park		
max. amount for accommodation and meals	373.00	379.00
personal expenses for claimant	17.35	17.35
personal expenses for partner	17.35	17.35
personal expenses for dependant children		
(a) under 11	6.15	6.25
(b) 11 to 15	9.00	9.15
(c) 16 to 17	10.40	10.55
(d) 18	15.55	15.55
Housing costs		
deduction for non-dependants aged 25 and over, in receipt of Income Support or income based Job Seekers Allowance aged 18 or over, not in work or gross income less than £84.00	7.40	7.40
aged 18 or over and in remunerative work:		
gross income: £81 to £124.99	17.00	17.00
gross income: £125 to £162.99	23.35	23.35
gross income: £163 to £214.99	38.20	38.20
gross income: £215 to £268.99	43.50	43.50
gross income: £269.00 and above	47.75	47.75
Deduction for direct payments arrears of housing, fuel and water costs council tax and fines default, and	2.65	2.70
deductions for child maintenance (standard)	5.30	5.40
deductions for child maintenance (lower)	2.65	2.70
Arrears of Community Charge court order against claimant	2.65	2.70
court order against couple	4.10	4.20
Maximum rates for recovery of overpayments		
ordinary overpayments	7.95	8.10
where claimant convicted of fraud	10.40	10.80
Reduction in benefit for strikers	28.00	28.50
Capital		
upper limit	8,000.00	8,000.00
amount disregarded	3,000.00	3,000.00
child's limit	3,000.00	3,000.00
upper limit of RC/NH	16,000.00	16,000.00
amt disregarded of RC/NH	10,000.00	10,000.00
upper limit o/60s		12,000.00
amount disregarded o/60s		6,000.00

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Tariff income		
£1 for every complete £250 or part thereof between amount of capital disregarded and capital upper limit		
Disregards		
standard earnings	5.00	5.00
couples earnings	10.00	10.00
higher earnings	15.00	20.00
war disablement pension and war widow's pension	10.00	10.00
certain voluntary and charitable payments	20.00	20.00
student loan	10.00	10.00
student's covenanted income	5.00	5.00
income from boarders:		
disregard the fixed amount (£20) plus 50% of the balance of the charge	20.00	20.00
Expenses for subtenants		
furnished or unfurnished	4.00	4.00
where heating is included, additional	9.25	9.55
Industrial Death Benefit		
Widow's pension		
higher rate	67.50	72.50
lower rate	20.25	21.75
Industrial Injuries Disablement Pension		
18 and over, or under 18 with dependants		
100%	109.30	112.90
90%	98.37	101.61
80%	87.44	90.32
70%	76.51	79.03
60%	65.58	67.74
50%	54.65	56.45
40%	43.72	45.16
30%	32.79	33.87
20%	21.86	22.58
Under 18		
100%	66.95	69.15
90%	60.26	62.24
80%	53.56	55.32
70%	46.87	48.41
60%	40.17	41.49
50%	33.48	34.58
40%	26.78	27.66
30%	20.09	20.75
20%	13.39	13.83
Maximum life gratuity (lump sum)	7,260.00	7,500.00
Unemployability Supplement	67.50	69.75
plus where appropriate an increase for early incapacity		
higher rate	14.20	14.65
middle rate	9.00	9.30
lower rate	4.50	4.65
Maximum reduced earnings allowance	43.72	45.16
Maximum retirement allowance	10.93	11.29
Constant attendance allowance		
exceptional rate	87.60	90.40
intermediate rate	65.70	67.80
normal maximum rate	43.80	45.20
part-time rate	21.90	22.60
Exceptionally severe disablement allowance	43.80	45.20
Invalid Care Allowance	40.40	41.75

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Jobseekers Allowance		
Contribution based JSA—Personal rates		
under 18	31.45	31.95
18 to 24	41.35	42.00
25 or over	52.20	53.05
Income-based JSA Single persons allowance		
under 18	31.45	31.95
18 to 24	41.35	42.00
25 or over	52.20	53.05
lone parent		
under 18—usual rate	31.45	31.95
under 18—higher rate payable in specific circumstances	41.35	42.00
18 or over	52.20	53.05
couple		
both under 18	31.45	31.95
both under 18, one disabled	41.35	42.00
both under 18, with resp. for a child	62.35	63.35
one under 18, one 18–24	41.35	42.00
one under 18, one 25+	52.20	53.05
both 18 or over	81.95	83.25
dependent children		
from birth to September following 16th birthday	30.95	31.45
from Sept. following 16th birthday to day before 19th birthday	31.75	32.25
Residential Allowance		
except Greater London	61.30	63.30
Greater London	68.20	70.45
Premiums		
family	14.25	14.50
family (lone parent rate)	15.90	15.90
pensioner		
single	26.25	'39.10
couple	40.00	'57.30
pensioner (enhanced)		
couple	43.40	'57.30
pensioner (higher)		
single	33.85	'39.10
couple	49.10	'57.30
disability		
single	22.25	22.60
couple	31.75	32.25
enhanced disability premium single rate	5.95	'11.05
disabled child rate	5.95	'11.05
couple rate	8.60	'16.00
severe disability		
single	40.20	41.55
couple (one qualifies)	40.20	41.55
couple (both qualify)	80.40	83.10
disabled child	22.25	'30.00
carer	14.15	'24.40
bereavement	15.30	'19.45

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Maximum amounts for accommodation and meals in		
residential care homes		
mental disorder (not handicap)	234.00	238.00
drug/alcohol dependence	234.00	238.00
mental handicap	266.00	271.00
physical disablement		
(a) (under pension age)	303.00	308.00
others	221.00	225.00
maximum Greater London increase	46.00	47.00
nursing homes		
mental disorder (not handicap)	331.00	337.00
drug/alcohol dependence	331.00	337.00
mental handicap	337.00	343.00
terminal illness	330.00	336.00
physical disablement		
(a) (under pension age)	373.00	379.00
others (including elderly)	330.00	336.00
maximum Greater London increase	51.00	52.00
Amounts for meals where these cannot be purchased within the accommodation:		
(Daily Rate)		
breakfast	1.10	1.10
midday meal	1.55	1.55
evening meal	1.55	1.55
Allowances for personal expenses for claimants in private and voluntary residential care and nursing homes		
personal expenses	15.45	[1]16.05
dependent children		
(a) under 11	6.15	6.25
(b) 11 to 15	9.00	9.15
(c) 16 to 17	10.40	10.55
(d) age 18	15.00	15.25
local authority (Part III) accommodation	67.50	[1]72.50
of which, Personal Expenses	15.45	[1]16.05
Housing costs deduction for non-dependants		
aged 25 and over, in receipt of Income Support or income based Job Seekers Allowance		
aged 18 or over, not in remunerative work or gross income less than £84.00	7.40	7.40
aged 18 or over and in remunerative work		
gross income: less than £84.00	7.40	7.40
gross income: £84 to £124.99	17.00	17.00
gross income: £125 to £162.99	23.35	23.35
gross income: £163 to £214.99	38.20	38.20
gross income: £215.00 to £268.99	43.50	43.50
gross income: £269.00 and above	47.75	47.75
Deduction for direct payments		
Deductions from JSA (IB) arrears of housing, fuel and water costs council tax and fines default	2.65	2.70
Deductions for Child Maintenance		
deductions for child maintenance (standard)	5.30	5.40
deductions for child maintenance (lower)	2.65	2.70
Arrears of Community Charge court order against claimant	2.65	2.70
court order against couple	4.10	4.20
Deductions from JSA (Cont.)		
Arrears of Comm. Charge, Council Tax, fines and overpayment recovery		
Age 16–17	10.48	10.65
Age 18–24	13.78	14.00
Age 25+	17.40	17.68
Max. deduction for arrears of Child Supp. Maintenance		
Age 16–17	10.48	10.65
Age 18–24	13.78	14.00
Age 25+	17.40	17.68

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Maximum rates for recovery of overpayments in JSA (IB)		
ordinary overpayments	7.95	8.10
where claimant convicted of fraud	10.40	10.80
Reduction in benefit for strikers	28.00	28.50
Capital		
upper limit	8,000.00	8,000.00
amount disregarded	3,000.00	3,000.00
child's limit	3,000.00	3,000.00
upper limit of RC/NH	16,000.00	16,000.00
amt disregarded of RC/NH	10,000.00	10,000.00
amt disregarded o/60s		6,000.00
upper limit o/60s		12,000.00
Tariff income £1 for every complete £250 or part thereof between amount of capital disregarded and capital upper limit		
Disregards		
standard earnings	5.00	5.00
couples earnings	10.00	10.00
higher earnings	15.00	20.00
war disablement pension and war widow's pension	10.00	10.00
certain voluntary and charitable payments	20.00	20.00
student loan	10.00	10.00
student's covenanted income	5.00	5.00
income from boarders:		
disregard the fixed amount (£20) plus 50% of the balance of the charge	20.00	20.00
Expenses for subtenants		
furnished or unfurnished	4.00	4.00
where heating is included, additional	9.25	9.55
Maternity Allowance		
New standard rate	60.20	62.20
MA threshold	30.00	30.00
Pneumoconiosis, Byssinosis, and Miscellaneous Diseases Scheme and The Workmen's Compensation (Supplementation)		
Total disablement allowance and major incapacity allowance (maximum)	109.30	112.90
Partial disablement allowance	40.40	41.75
Unemployability supplement	67.50	69.75
plus where appropriate increases for early incapacity		
higher rate	14.20	14.65
middle rate	9.00	9.30
lower rate	4.50	4.65
Constant attendance allowance		
exceptional rate	87.60	90.40
intermediate rate	65.70	67.80
normal maximum rate	43.80	45.20
part-time rate	21.90	22.60
Exceptionally severe disablement allowance	43.80	45.20
Lesser incapacity allowance		
maximum rate of allowance	40.40	41.75
based on loss of earnings over	53.55	55.30
Retirement Pension		
Category A or B	67.50	'72.50
Category B (lower)—husband's insurance	40.40	'43.40
Category C or D—non-contributory	40.40	'43.40
Category C (lower)—non-contributory	24.15	24.95

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Additional pension		3.30%
Increments to:		
Basic and additional pensions		Increase by: 3.3%
Contracted out deductions (CODs) (Pre Apr '88 earnings)		
Graduated Retirement Benefit (GRB)		
Increments to CODs (April 1988—March 1997 earnings)	0.00	0.30%
[3.0 per cent. paid by schemes]	0.00	
Graduated Retirement Benefit (unit)(pence)	8.77	9.06
Graduated Retirement Benefit (Inherited)		Increase by: 3.3%
Addition at age 80	0.25	0.25
Severe Disablement Allowance		
Basic rate	40.80	42.15
Age-related addition (from December 1990)		
Higher rate	14.20	14.65
Middle rate	9.00	9.30
Lower rate	4.50	4.65
Statutory Maternity Pay		
Earnings threshold	67.00	72.00
Lower rate	60.20	62.20
Statutory Sick Pay		
Earnings threshold	67.00	72.00
Standard rate	60.20	62.20
War Pensions		
Disablement Pension (100% rates)		
officer (£ per annum)	6,053.00	6,251.00
other ranks	116.00	119.80
Age allowances		
40%-50%	7.75	8.00
over 50% but not over 70%	11.95	12.35
over 70% but not over 90%	17.00	17.55
over 90%	23.90	24.70
Disablement gratuity		
specified minor injury (min.)	738.00	762.00
specified minor injury (max.)	5,513.00	5,695.00
unspecified minor injury (min.)	306.00	316.00
unspecified minor injury (max.)	7,169.00	7,406.00
Unemployability allowance		
personal	71.65	74.00
adult dependency increase	40.40	43.40
increase for first child	9.85	9.70
(See note on Child Dependency Increase)		
increase for subsequent children	11.35	11.35
(See note on Child Dependency Increase)		
Invalidity allowance		
higher rate	14.20	14.65
middle rate	9.00	9.30
lower rate	4.50	4.65
Constant attendance allowance		
exceptional rate	87.60	90.40
intermediate rate	65.70	67.80
normal maximum rate	43.80	45.20
part-time rate	21.90	22.60
Comforts allowance		
higher rate	18.80	19.40
lower rate	9.40	9.70

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Mobility supplement	41.70	43.10
Allowance for lowered standard of occupation (maximum)	43.72	45.16
Exceptionally severe disablement allowance	43.80	45.20
Severe disablement occupational allowance	21.90	22.60
Clothing allowance (£ per annum)	149.00	154.00
Education allowance (£ per annum)(max.)	120.00	120.00
War widow's pension (further details in schedule WWP)		
Widow (private)	87.55	90.45
Widow (NCO)	87.55	90.75
Widow—Officer (£ p.a. max.)	5,415.00	5,594.00
Childless widow u-40 (private)	20.25	'21.75
Childless widow (NCO)	20.55	'21.75
Childless widow (Officer max. £s pa)	5,415.00	5,594.00
Supplementary pension	57.07	58.95
age allowance		
(a) age 65 to 69	10.00	10.35
(b) age 70 to 79	19.20	19.85
(c) age 80 and over	28.60	29.55
children's allowance		
increase for first child (See note on Child Dependency Increase)	14.35	14.30
increase for subsequent children (See note on Child Dependency Increase)	15.85	15.95
Orphan's pension		
increase for first child (See note on Child Dependency Increase)	16.20	16.20
increase for subsequent children (See note on Child Dependency Increase)	17.70	17.85
Unmarried dependant living as spouse (max.)	85.50	88.40
Rent allowance (maximum)	33.10	34.20
Adult orphan's pension (maximum)	67.50	69.75
Widower's pension		
private (max.)	87.55	90.45
officer (£ per annum) max.	5,415.00	5,594.00
Widow's Benefit		
Widow's payment (lump sum)	1,000.00	1,000.00
Widowed mother's allowance	67.50	'72.50
Widow's pension		
standard rate	67.50	'72.50
age-related[3]		
age 54 (49)	62.78	'67.43
53 (48)	58.05	'62.35
52 (47)	53.33	'57.28
51 (46)	48.60	'52.20
50 (45)	43.88	'47.13
49 (44)	39.15	'42.05
48 (43)	34.43	'36.98
47 (42)	29.70	'31.90
46 (41)	24.98	'26.83
45 (40)	20.25	'21.75

Social Security Benefit Rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)

	Rates 2000	*Rates 2001*
Bereavement Benefit (from 9 April 2001)		
Bereavement Payment (lump sum)		2,000.00
Widowed Parents Allowance		[1]72.50
Bereavement Allowance		[1]72.50
age-related		
54		[1]67.43
53		[1]62.35
52		[1]57.28
51		[1]52.20
50		[1]47.13
49		[1]42.05
48		[1]36.98
47		[1]31.90
46		[1]26.83
45		[1]21.75

[1] Benefit increased by more than RPI/Rossi

[2] NB—The Overlapping Benefits Regulations provide for the rate of child dependency increases, guardian's allowance and child special allowance to be adjusted where the increase or allowance is payable for the eldest eligible child for whom Child Benefit is also payable. The weekly rate of the increase or allowance is reduced by the differential (less £3.50 from April 2000) between the rate of Child Benefit payable for the oldest eligible child and that payable for a subsequent child.

[3] For deaths occurring before 11 April 1988 refer to age-points shown in brackets.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many additional households are entitled to the Winter Fuel Payment as a result of *(a)* eligibility being extended to men aged 60 to 64 years and *(b)* the inclusion of other groups of people not receiving a state pension or other benefit. [138205]

Mr. Darling: An estimated 900,000 households will be newly eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment this winter. Of these, an estimated 850,000 contain a man aged 60–64 and a further 50,000 contain someone of pensionable age who is not in receipt of a State Pension or other qualifying benefit.

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on the 1998–99 Family Resources Survey.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest 50,000.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households are entitled to the Winter Fuel Payment. [136319]

Angela Eagle: Last winter, 1999–2000, around 10 million pensioners in over 7.5 million households benefited from Winter Fuel Payments.

Following a ruling by the European Court of Justice, on 16 December 1999, we changed the conditions of eligibility for the Winter Fuel Payment scheme. In essence, the scheme was extended and Winter Fuel Payments became payable to men as well as women from age 60, and the need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit was removed.

State Pension

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over the State Pension age *(a)* have no entitlement to the basic State Pension and *(b)* are not entitled to the full value of the basic State Pension. [138207]

Mr. Darling: An estimated 460,000 people of pensionable age in Great Britain have no entitlement to the basic State Pension. A further 890,000 people in receipt of the basic State Pension are not entitled to the full value of the Category A pension (in the case of men and single women) or the full Category BL rate (in the case of married women).

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 10,000

Source:

Pension Strategy Computer System at 31 March 2000.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 349–50W, *(a)* how many people have been sent letters inviting them to apply for the Minimum Income Guarantee and of these (i) how many tear-off slips have been returned and (ii) how many of the letters have resulted in a successful claim and *(b)* how many people have contacted the Minimum Income Guarantee helpline and as a result (i) how many claims have been submitted as a result of a helpline inquiry and (ii) how many of the helpline inquiries have resulted in a successful claim. [137525]

Mr. Rooker: Around 500,000 pensioners have requested claim forms or contacted the Minimum Income Guarantee helpline. The campaign is still in progress so comprehensive data are not yet available on the complete number of successful claims awarded. Of those processed half have been successful.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the average award of Minimum Income Guarantee which has been paid to the

pensioners who have started to receive the Minimum Income Guarantee as a result of his Department's current take-up campaign. [137408]

Mr. Rooker: Pensioners who have made successful claims as a result of the Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign are better off by around £20.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the reasons for the fall (1) in new Housing Benefit claims determined within the statutorily required period of 14 days between 1998–99 and 1999–2000; and what plans he has to halt this decline; [137064]

(2) in Housing Benefit renewal claims determined within the statutorily required period of 14 days, between 1998–99 and 1999–2000; and what plans he has to halt this decline; [137065]

(3) in new Council Tax Benefit claims determined within the statutorily required period of 14 days, between 1998–99 and 1999–2000; and what plans he has to halt this decline. [137066]

Angela Eagle: Recently published summary statistics for Great Britain indicate that the number of claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit that have been determined within 14 days has fallen. We are determined to secure improvements in Housing Benefit administration and have introduced a number of measures which will help to achieve this.

We have set Best Value performance indicators from this April designed to ensure that authorities provide their communities with a faster, more accurate Housing Benefit service which is more secure against fraud, and which provides value for money and takes account of the views and needs of clients. Authorities are required to set challenging targets against these indicators and demonstrate that they are achieving year on year improvements in the standard of service they provide.

The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is conducting an ongoing programme of inspections of local authorities, encouraging them to develop action plans to improve administration and tackle fraud and error. Best practice guidance, developed through this programme, has been made available to all local authorities. As at 3 November 2000, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate had published reports on over 70 local authorities. We have made it abundantly clear to all local authority Chief Executives that where the Inspectorate finds evidence of persistent failings, we will use our powers to direct the authority as to the improved standards it is to attain and the timescales for achieving them. We issued the first such Directions in August 2000.

We are making better use of IT to speed up administration and reduce the scope for fraud and error. Many millions of paper forms previously sent by the Benefits Agency to local authorities through the post are now sent electronically, significantly reducing the time taken just to transfer information.

We have made significant progress. Our Housing Green Paper, published in April, set out how we can take this further. We are currently studying the responses to the Green Paper and will announce our decisions shortly.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the amount of Housing Benefit which is currently owing to housing associations as a result of delays in the administration of Housing Benefit. [136318]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We keep in touch with the National Housing Federation about Housing Benefit owed to the tenants of housing associations and other registered social landlords. However, the Department does not hold information on the amount of benefit which might be involved. We are currently looking at what further steps might be taken to improve the administration of Housing Benefit.

Maternity Benefits

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have been eligible for the maternity payment and the Sure Start maternity grant, and how many people have received each of these benefits, in each month since May 1997. [134552]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Maternity payment and Sure Start maternity grant awards

Month	
Maternity payment	
May 1997	16,700
June 1997	17,328
July 1997	17,914
August 1997	14,765
September 1997	17,042
October 1997	17,158
November 1997	15,058
December 1997	13,979
January 1998	17,277
February 1998	15,491
March 1998	15,733
April 1998	14,713
May 1998	14,488
June 1998	16,281
July 1998	16,568
August 1998	13,965
September 1998	16,052
October 1998	15,355
November 1998	14,774
December 1998	12,830
January 1999	15,593
February 1999	14,557
March 1999	16,050
April 1999	14,421
May 1999	14,155
June 1999	15,720
July 1999	14,530
August 1999	13,863
September 1999	15,069
October 1999	14,384
November 1999	14,819
December 1999	11,258
January 2000	14,978
February 2000	14,695
March 2000	13,935
April 2000	7,254
May 2000	5,217
June 2000	3,724
July 2000	2,233
August 2000	978
September 2000	165

Maternity payment and Sure Start maternity grant awards

Month	
Sure Start maternity grant	
April 2000	3,583
May 2000	10,846
June 2000	13,954
July 2000	13,971
August 2000	15,117
September 2000	15,235

Notes:

1. Maternity payment figures May 1997 to March 1998 may contain very minor inaccuracies because of computer programming parameters.
2. Figures from April 1998 to September 2000 represent the number of initial awards plus the number awarded on appeal, reduced by the number of payments returned to the Department.
3. Maternity payments and Sure Start maternity grants must actually be claimed in order for an award to be made, therefore details of those who might have been eligible but did not claim are not available.

Departmental Statistics

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 427W, if he will list the publication dates of statistics to be released by his Department and agencies in the next 12 months. [137176]

Mr. Rooker: The information in the table relates to statistics published by the Department under the National Statistics banner.

Although many of the dates are provisional at this stage, final release dates will be notified in the National Statistics Update issued by the Office for National Statistics in the month prior to the publication. This is in line with DSS release practice.

Title	*Period of issue*	*Period ending*	*Date of release*
Imminent Publications			
Child Benefit Quarterly Statistics	Quarterly	August 2000	9 November 2000
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	August 2000	23 November 2000
Fraud and error in claims for Income Support and JSA	Annual	October 1998 to September 1999	29 November 2000
Fraud and error in claims for Income Support and JSA	Annual	April 1999 to March 2000	29 November 2000
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Quarterly	September 2000	7 December 2000
Appeal Tribunal Statistics	Quarterly	June 2000	7 December 2000
Take-up of Income Related Benefits	Annual	1998–99	8 December 2000
Client Group Analysis—Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of Working Age on Key Benefits	Quarterly	May 2000	14 December 2000
Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance	Quarterly	August 2000	14 December 2000
Social Security Statistics	Annual	2000	14 December 2000
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	August 2000	14 December 2000
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Quarterly Summary Statistics	Quarterly	August 2000	21 December 2000
Disability Care and Mobility Benefits	Quarterly	August 2000	18 January 2001
Client Group Analysis of the Population Over State Pension Age	Bi-annual	May 2000	18 January 2001
Statistical Summary	Quarterly	December 2000	18 January 2001
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	November 2000	15 February 2001
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	November 2000	22 February 2001
Retirement Pension Summary of Statistics	Bi-annual	September 2000	15 March 2001
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Quarterly Summary Statistics	Quarterly	November 2000	29 March 2001
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Annual Summary Statistics	Annual	May 2000	26 April 2001
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	February 2001	17 May 2001
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Quarterly Summary Statistics	Quarterly	February 2001	21 June 2001
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	May 2001	16 August 2001
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	May 2001	18 October 2001
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	August 2001	15 November 2001
Provisional Publication Dates			
Child Benefit Quarterly Statistics	Quarterly	November 2000	8 February 2001
Abstract of Statistics for Social Security Benefits and indices of prices and earnings	Annual	2000	22 February 2001
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Quarterly	December 2000	8 March 2001
Appeal Tribunal Statistics	Quarterly	September 2000	15 March 2001
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	November 2000	15 March 2001
Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance	Quarterly	November 2000	22 March 2001
Client Group Analysis—Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of Working Age on Key Benefits	Quarterly	August 2000	29 March 2001
Statistical Summary	Quarterly	March 2001	9 April 2001
Disability Care and Mobility Benefits	Quarterly	November 2000	19 April 2001
Child Benefit Quarterly Statistics	Quarterly	February 2001	17 May 2001
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	February 2001	24 May 2001
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	February 2001	14 June 2001
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Quarterly	March 2001	14 June 2001
Appeal Tribunal Statistics	Quarterly	December 2000	14 June 2001
Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance	Quarterly	February 2001	21 June 2001
Client Group Analysis—Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of Working Age on Key Benefits Working Age	Quarterly	November 2000	24 June 2001
Family Resources Survey report	Annual	1999–2000	July 2001
Statistical Summary	Quarterly	June 2001	8 July 2001
Disability Care and Mobility Benefits	Quarterly	February 2001	19 July 2001

Title	Period of issue	Period ending	Date of release
Tax Benefit Model	Annual	2001	29 July 2001
Child benefit Quarterly Statistics	Quarterly	May 2001	9 August 2001
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	May 2001	23 August 2001
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	May 2001	13 September 2001
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Quarterly	June 2001	13 September 2001
Appeal Tribunal Statistics	Quarterly	March 2001	13 September 2001
Retirement Pension Summary of Statistics	Bi-annual	March 2001	13 September 2001
Client Group Analysis—Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of Working Age on Key Benefits	Quarterly	February 2001	30 September 2001
Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance	Quarterly	May 2001	20 September 2001
Statistical Summary	Quarterly	September 2001	14 October 2001
Disability Care and Mobility Benefits	Quarterly	May 2001	18 October 2001
Child Benefit Quarterly Statistics	Quarterly	August 2001	8 November 2001
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	August 2001	22 November 2001
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Quarterly	September 2001	6 December 2001
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry	Quarterly	August 2001	13 December 2001
Appeal Tribunal Statistics	Quarterly	June 2001	13 December 2001
Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance	Quarterly	August 2001	13 December 2001
Client Group Analysis—Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of Working Age on Key Benefits	Quarterly	May 2001	16 December 2001
Release Date to be Determined			
Pensioners Income Series 1999–2000	Annual	1999–2000	To be determined within next 12 months
Households Below Average Income Statistics	Annual	1999–2000	To be determined
Client Group Analysis of the Population Over State Pension Age	Bi-annual	November 2000	To be determined
Social Security Statistics	Annual	2001	To be determined
Take-up of Income Related Benefits	Annual	1999–2000	To be determined sometime 2001

Age Allowances

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the current value of the *(a)* Christmas Bonus and *(b)* 25p age addition for pensioners aged over 80 years would be if they had been uprated in line with prices since their first introduction. [137526]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the written answers I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 14 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 301–04W.

Benefits Expenditure

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 261W, on benefits expenditure, if he will reproduce the table on the assumption that working families tax credit is a means-tested benefit. [137300]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Contributory, means-tested with tax credits and other benefits as a proportion of total benefits and tax credits

Percentage

	Contributory	Means-tested	Others
1995–96	46	36	18
1996–97	46	35	19
1997–98	46	34	20
1998–99	47	33	20
1999–2000	47	32	22

Note:

Working families tax credit and disabled persons tax credit have been included in the means-tested benefits. This causes a 1 per cent. increase in the proportion of means-tested benefits for 1999–2000 to 32 per cent.

Source:

Departmental report 2000, Spending Review 2000.

Social Fund

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of people in each sub-region who were turned down for social fund budgeting loans in 1999–2000 on the grounds that they already had excessive levels of outstanding debt. [134514]

Angela Eagle: On 5 April 1999 we introduced major changes to the budgeting loan scheme, which have made it fairer, more objective and quicker and easier for customers to use. Applications are decided according to a few simple facts relating to the applicant's length of time on benefit and the size of their family, taking into account the level of budgeting loan debt they may already have. Because loans are repayable, applicants no longer have to justify their reasons for needing a loan or provide information about what they will spend it on.

During 1999–2000 the scheme provided more help to more people than ever before. The number of applications for budgeting loans increased by 26 per cent. to almost 1.7 million. The number of successful applications increased by 9 per cent., with 82,000 more people receiving help than in 1998–99. Expenditure rose by 15 per cent. to almost £400 million, an increase of £52 million over the amount spent in 1998–99. And, for the first time since the fund started in April 1988, over 1 million budgeting loans were awarded in a year.

The significant increase in applications inevitably led to an increase in the number that were refused a loan—38 per cent. of applications were refused compared to 33 per cent. in 1998–99—an increase of only 5 percentage points.

As part of the April 1999 changes, the wide-ranging reasons for refusal, which had existed previously, were radically simplified and reduced. As a result, a new reason for refusal, which only applies to people with social fund debt, has been introduced. Those with existing debt of

half or more of their maximum possible loan amount are restricted from having further loans until their outstanding debt drops below that level, at which point they are free to re-apply. The scheme therefore does allow limited access to further loans while previous loans are still being repaid but without encouraging people to run up and maintain high levels of debt. It would not be fair to allow the cash-limited budget to be monopolised by people continually topping-up their loans to the maximum at the expense of other applicants.

By limiting access by those with existing social fund debt, the scheme is able to offer loans to all applicants who satisfy the qualifying conditions and who have no debt. While benefiting all family types this change has enabled more single people to access the scheme, the group most likely to have been refused a loan on priority grounds under the previous scheme.

Budgeting loan applications refused between April 1999 and March 2000 because of the level of existing budgeting loan debt are given in the table by Benefits Agency Area Directorates. For completeness the table also includes the number of awards made.

Budgeting loans: awards and refusals because of existing budgeting loan debt 1999–2000

Benefits Agency Area Directorate	*Awards*	*Number of refusals*
East London and Anglia	79,195	24,280
Chilterns	63,356	18,986
London South	98,896	28,754
West Country	56,713	18,333
Mercia	75,515	28,075
West Midlands	78,388	26,778
Wales	70,917	27,338
North West Coast	109,800	38,231
Greater Manchester	76,537	27,121
Yorkshire	99,980	35,978
Tyne Tees	88,850	34,283
West of Scotland	82,918	32,105
East of Scotland	61,139	22,167
Total	1,042,204	362,429

DEFENCE

Far East Prisoners of War

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if ex-gratia payments to former prisoners of war in the Far East will include civilians. [136528]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the statement in the House on 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 159–170.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Far East prisoners of war are still living; and what estimate he has made of the numbers residing in East Lancashire. [136554]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces gave him on 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 398W.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on compensation for former PoWs of the Japanese; and what estimate has been made of the numbers involved. [137344]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to my statement in the House on 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 159–70.

Meteorological Office

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future location of the Meteorological Office. [138176]

Dr. Moonie: The Met Office has recognised for some time that its existing accommodation in Bracknell is becoming increasingly expensive and unsuitable for its future business needs. The overwhelming conclusion of the business case, produced to examine the options, showed that a new site with purpose built accommodation was the best way of meeting its long-term needs and those of its customers. The Met Office plans to relocate by March 2003.

Following a thorough search and careful evaluation of potential sites throughout the United Kingdom, the Met Office selected four—Beaufort Park in Bracknell, Shinfield Park in Reading, Exeter Business park and Norwich Research Park—that it felt could best meet its needs. After detailed consideration of many factors, including cost, staffing issues, proximity to customers and other key stakeholders, planning and environmental issues, Exeter Business Park has been chosen as the preferred site.

This has not been an easy decision since all four shortlisted sites had obvious strengths. Nevertheless, the Met Office is certain that Exeter is the best location from which to build a secure and successful future.

The two consortia with whom the Met Office is negotiating over the provision and ongoing maintenance of the new accommodation will now work up detailed proposals for the Exeter site; tenders are due to be submitted to the Met Office by the end of February 2001 and a contract is expected to be placed by June 2001.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he received between November 1999 and November 2000 on *(a)* the timing and *(b)* the content of strategic export controls legislation from (i) non-Governmental organisations including voluntary and charitable groups, (ii) commercial interests, companies and trade organisations and (iii) other categories; and if he will make a statement. [136601]

Mr. Byers: The Government have received a large number of representations, mostly from individuals and non-governmental organisations, but also from businesses and business organisations, in the period in question. Representations have supported proposals for new strategic export control legislation and called for that legislation to be introduced soon. A number of representations have raised different aspects of strategic

export controls, including arms trafficking and brokering and licensed production overseas. The Government have undertaken a thorough review of proposals for new strategic export control legislation on the basis of the White Paper (Cm 3989) published in July 1998. We shall announce the outcome of that review shortly. In addition I have announced that the proposed new legislation will include a system of licensing for arms trafficking and brokering. This is a significant change and we are currently considering the details of this. We intend to announce the outcome in the near future.

Small Businesses

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action is being taken to help people who are *(a)* aged 50 and over and *(b)* aged under 25 years, and who are not working to set up their own businesses. [136698]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The Small Business Service was launched in April this year to provide information, advice, or access to experts, on all aspects of running a business. The services are available to anyone wishing to set up or run their own business irrespective of age.

In addition, the SBS is working with PRIME (The Prince's Initiative for Mature Enterprise) with a view to supporting that organisation's plans to enhance access to finance for unemployed over 50s seeking to start in business.

The Government also continue to provide support for programmes and initiatives to help the creation of an enterprise culture in the country. This includes support for schemes such as Young Enterprise which aim to double to 200,000 the number of pupils benefiting from enterprise courses in our schools and colleges.

Consumer Policy Institute

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the Consumer Policy Institute. [137257]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Last June I met with several members of the National Federation of Consumer Groups to discuss their future plans. One of their action points was the creation of the Consumer Policy Institute.

Professor Geoffrey Woodroffe, who leads the Institute, was present at that meeting and gave me a briefing on the aims of the Institute. I understand that the Institute has now been established and wish it well in the future.

Broadband Telecommunications

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he plans to put in place to limit potential interference from broadband telecommunications systems, such as an asymmetric digital subscriber line; and if he will make a statement. [138155]

Ms Hewitt: ADSL technology will allow broadband data services into people's homes and offices over the local telephone network. It is an important technology in the development of the information society and e-commerce. However, because it operates at radio frequencies over cables which may become unbalanced and hence radiate, there is a risk of interference to medium wave broadcasting and to some aeronautical and other services. There is a difficult balance to strike as we want DSL and other similar broadband technologies to be deployable widely, but we cannot allow undue interference.

My Department has therefore been consulting over a standard to be put in place to limit interference from these technologies. Taking due account of the various representations—and they have been strong on all sides—we have decided to adopt the limits in the so-called February draft standard published by the Radiocommunications Agency (RA). I will be making Regulations to implement this standard in due course. Safety of life radio services will be protected as the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949 allows immediate close down of interference sources where the Regulations are breached. Officials will also be putting in place a complaints procedure for domestic consumers experiencing broadcast interference from DSL. This procedure will be worked up in consultation with the Radio Authority, the BBC and the radio industry. The Director General for Telecommunications proposes to place an obligation on the operators of DSL systems to take all reasonable steps to remedy any interference caused.

The Government believe that this balanced package will provide a high level of protection to existing spectrum users while allowing deployment of new technology without undue constraint. We will undertake a review in two years—less if necessary—to assess whether the level in the standard has been appropriately set and to decide the timing of any future reviews. We will make the standard tougher if necessary. The review itself will cover the number of unresolved complaints. Further research is being undertaken by the RA on the cumulative effects of DSL as it rolls out and this will further inform our review.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total cost is of the projects approved under the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation for *(a)* waste incineration, *(b)* offshore wind, *(c)* onshore wind, *(d)* solar power and *(e)* barriers; and if he will make a statement. [137395]

Mrs. Liddell: No payment is made under the Non Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO) until approved projects are commissioned.

Total project costs and costs to the Fossil Fuel Levy in the year to August 2000 for commissioned projects in these technologies were:

£ million

	Total costs	*Costs to Levy*
(a) Waste Incineration	22.3	10.1
(b) Offshore Wind	Nil	Nil
(c) Onshore Wind	13.5	7.0
(d) Solar Power	Nil	Nil
(e) Tidal Barriers	Nil	Nil

No projects relating to solar power or tidal barriers have been approved under NFFO. One project relating to offshore wind has been approved under NFFO, but no expenditure under NFFO has yet arisen.

There will be no further NFFO rounds as the Government plan to impose a new renewables obligation on all electricity suppliers, but existing contracts will be protected.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what position Her Majesty's Government have adopted on the definition of renewable energy being negotiated for the European Union Draft Renewable Energy Directive; and if he will make a statement. [137393]

Mrs. Liddell: The Draft Directive on the promotion of electricity from renewable energy sources in the internal electricity market proposes an indicative UK target of 10 per cent. of electricity consumption to be generated from renewable energy sources by 2010. This indicative target is in line with the UK's policy as described in "The Renewables Obligation Preliminary Consultation" document, published on 5 October 2000. In negotiations the Government's position is to ensure that the Directive's definition of renewable energy is wide enough for the UK to achieve the Directive's indicative target within the UK's policy framework for renewables and the detailed mechanisms for the obligation on which we are currently consulting.

Pirate Radio Transmitters

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each of the last five years, in respect of interference with aeronautical radio communications by pirate radio transmitters, *(a)* the number of reported cases, *(b)* the number of prosecutions brought by the Radio Communications Agency and *(c)* the sentences applicable to such offences; and if he will make a statement. [137572]

Ms Hewitt: The Department's Radiocommunications Agency take seriously any interference to authorised radio communications. Where the interference has implications for the safety of life the Agency has a target to respond within 24 hours.

Reports of interference to aeronautical radio communications are not usually specific as to the source. However, the Agency has seized pirate radio transmitters identified as being the source of interference to aeronautical radio communications on the following number of occasions in each of the past five years.

Year	*Numbers*
1996	5
1997	19
1998	10
1999	8
2000[1]	2

[1] To date

The number of persons prosecuted in each of the past five years where there was evidence that the pirate radio station had caused such interference is as follows:

Year	*Numbers*
1996	0
1997	2
1998	0
1999	2
2000[1]	6

[1] To date

The maximum penalty for the use of radio transmitting equipment contrary to the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949 is a fine of £5,000 and six months' imprisonment on conviction at the magistrates court and an unlimited fine and two years' imprisonment on conviction at the Crown court. In both instances the court can also order the forfeit of anything used in the commission of the offence. In 1999 one of those convicted was sentenced to 28 days' imprisonment and this year two of those convicted were sentenced to six months' and four months' imprisonment respectively.

Road Fuel

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is providing to ensure continuing availability of road fuels in the event of disrupted supplies. [137529]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 29 September that members of the Fuel Supply Task Force had signed a Memorandum of Understanding to put in place more robust systems to avoid disruption of fuel supplies. He further told the House on 2 November that the Task Force was putting in place measures aimed at ensuring, in the event of future disruption, the delivery of fuel to petrol stations, with priority for essential users; better preparation for disruption by local authorities and other essential users; the protection of food depots and other potential targets and the keeping open of major roads.

The Task Force continues to meet to discuss whether further measures need to be taken to ensure that the disruption caused by the recent protests is not repeated.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes will be made to the Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs for his Department, British Trade International, the Office of Fair Trading, the Office of Telecommunications, and the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. [138153]

Mr. Byers: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the voted element of the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Department of Trade and Industry will be increased by £87,800,000 from £3,503,716,000 to £3,591,516,000, the non-voted element of the Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £11,885,000 from £118,752,000 to £130,637,000. In addition and the gross running costs limit will be increased by £11,913,000 from £401,002,000 to £412,915,000.

The net provision of Class IX, Vote 1 will be increased by £87,799,000, which results from:

(i) the take up of end-year flexibility of £64,154,000 comprising £7,654,000 for running costs and £56,500,000 for current expenditure, of which £11,500,000 will be added to the provision for Enemy Property and £45,000,000 to that for Nuclear Decommissioning;

(ii) additional provision of £12,500,000 for compensation to distant water trawlermen;

(iii) additional provision of £25,000,000 from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund, of which £15,000,000 is for the Small Business Service Gateway project and £10,000,000 for the Information Society Initiative getting SMEs on line project;

(iv) additional provision of £3,810,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund of which £3,410,000 will be added to the running costs provision for Section D and £400,000 to that for Section G;

(v) the transfer of £17,215,000 in gross provision and £15,000 in appropriations in aid to British Trade International, (Class IX, Vote 4) in respect of the programme expenditure of Invest UK, formerly the Invest in Britain Bureau;

(vi) the transfer of £1,166,000 to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (Class III, Vote 1) in respect of the administrative costs of the Regional Development Agencies and the London Development Agency;

(vii) the transfer of £536,000 in gross provision to the Innovation budget from the National Assembly for Wales, (Class XIV, Vote 1);

(viii) the transfer of £165,000 in programme expenditure from the Home Office (Class IV, Vote 1) to the Innovation budget for crime reduction activities;

(ix) the appropriation in aid of receipts from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, (Class X, Vote 2) of £8,500,000 in respect of the Farm Business Advice Service and an equivalent increase in the gross provision of the programme budget of the Small Business Service who will be responsible for delivering this service;

(x) an increase of £22,545,000 in the gross expenditure provision for the Radiocommunications Agency, which is offset by an equivalent increase in the appropriations in aid provision;

(xi) other movements between sections of the Vote.

The net provision of Class IX, Vote 2 will be increased by £1,000, which results from:

(i) the take up of end-year flexibility of £11,850,000 for the Science Enterprise Challenge Scheme comprising £2,500,000 for capital expenditure and £9,350,000 for current expenditure. This is offset by a reduction in voted capital expenditure of £11,884,000 in respect of the Joint Infrastructure Fund;

(ii) running costs transfers of £110,000 from the Home Office, (Class IV, Vote 1) to fund a foresight panel on crime reduction and £75,000 to the Department of Health, (Class II, Vote 2) for the Office of Science and Technology's share of the Human Genetic Commission's Secretariat.

Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the voted element of the Departmental Expenditure Limit for British Trade International, Class IX, Vote 4, will be increased by £18,233,000 from £67,410,000 to £85,643,000. This increase in net provision results from:

(i) the take up of end-year flexibility entitlements of £1,033,000 for current expenditure, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in Table 7 of the 1999–2000 Public Expenditure White Paper (Cm 4812);

(ii) the transfer from the DTI Programmes and Administration Vote (Class IX, Vote 1) of £17,215,000 in gross provision and £15,000 in appropriations in aid in respect of the programme expenditure of Invest UK, formerly the Invest in Britain Bureau, whose transfer to British Trade International from the Department of Trade and Industry was announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade on 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 522–523.

British Trade International is the joint responsibility of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. In addition, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Office of Fair Trading, Class IX, Vote 8, will be increased by £6,824,000 from £25,676,000 to £32,500,000 and the gross running costs limit will be increased by £5,024,000 from £25,490,000 to £30,514,000.

These changes result from:

(i) the take up of end-year flexibility of £854,000;

(ii) additional provision of £1,800,000 for work arising from the implementation of EC directives on Distance Selling and Injunctions, and Unfair Contract Terms;

(iii) additional provision of £450,000 for changes to work on Mergers;

(iv) additional provision of £750,000 for the review of the Professions;

(v) additional provision of £1,800,000 for appropriations in aid resulting from the shortfall in notification fees arising from the Competition Act 1998;

(vi) the transfer of £1,070,000 from the baseline of the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate in respect of the payment of rent for Fleetbank House;

(vii) additional provision of £100,000 from the Cabinet Office Modernisation Fund in support of diversity awareness training for the Office of Fair Trading and the Office of Telecommunications.

In addition, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary token Supplementary Estimate, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Office of Telecommunications, Class IX, Vote 9, will be increased by £1,000 from £2,400,000 to £2,401,000 and the gross running costs limit will be increased by £559,000 from £12,589,000 to £13,148,000. These changes result from partial take up of end-year flexibility carry forward of £179,000 and an increase of £380,000 to address increased regulatory action. These increases will be offset by a compensating increase in appropriations in aid.

Also, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, Class IX, Vote 10 will be increased by £671,000 from £1,000 to £672,000. The increase reflects the net effect of additional provision for expenditure on the introduction of the New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA) and relocation costs, largely offset by higher VAT refunds and increased receipts from energy companies. The net increase represents the take up of end-year flexibility. The gross running costs limit for the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets will be increased by £13,300,000 from £62,115,000 to £75,415,000. The increase reflects the increase in expenditure on NETA, partially offset by the increase in VAT refunds.

All of the above increases will either be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of (1) the effect of changes in heating oil costs on Government targets to reduce fuel poverty; [136919]

(2) the role played by heating fuel oil costs in progress made on tackling fuel poverty. [137104]

Mrs. Liddell: The latest available figures[1] suggest that about 3 per cent. of households in England have oil-fired central heating. The figures also indicate that 2 per cent. (around 80,000 households) of those in fuel poverty in 1996 had oil-fired central heating. In the four years from the second quarter of 1996 to the second quarter of 2000, there has been a 9.25 per cent. rise in real terms in the price of heating oils.

The Government recognise that recent increases in heating oil prices may have adversely affected those households using this fuel, including those in rural or isolated areas. While the numbers affected are relatively small, compared to the total number in fuel poverty, the Government recognise that fluctuations in prices can take people in and out of fuel poverty.

The Government will be consulting on its draft strategy to tackle fuel poverty later this year.

[1] English House Condition Survey 1996.

Nuclear Power Stations

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of UK electricity was provided by nuclear power stations for each of the last 10 years. [137216]

Mrs. Liddell: Nuclear power stations accounted for the following percentages of electricity supplied in the UK by major power producers:

Year	*Percentage from nuclear*
1990	21
1991	22
1992	24
1993	28
1994	28
1995	27
1996	28
1997	29
1998	29
1999	28

Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics, 2000 (Electricity supplied is measured net of use for pumping at pumped storage stations)

Oil Licensing Agreements

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the factors underlying his decision to announce a further round of oil licensing agreements. [137174]

Mrs. Liddell: The decision to announce the 19th round of offshore petroleum licensing was taken having regard to the United Kingdom's future energy needs and the investment and employment benefits that would derive from the development of any petroleum discoveries.

The Secretary of State will consider and apply the EU Habitats directive when deciding whether to grant licences in the round. Licence awards will be based on an applicant meeting certain geological, technical and environmental criteria. The results of an extensive public consultation on an assessment of the impact of oil and gas activities on the marine environment of the area of the UK Continental Shelf between the Shetland and Faroes Islands will be taken into account in any decision-making.

Industrial Diseases (Compensation Claims)

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cases of *(a)* emphysema, *(b)* pneumoconiosis, *(c)* other respiratory illness and *(d)* vibration white finger claims (i) have been processed and (ii) are outstanding; and what assessment he has made of the length of time needed to complete the outstanding claims. [136960]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department has received over 124,000 claims for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which encompasses all regulatory disease claims, excluding those made solely for pneumoconiosis. Claims for COPD are continuing to come in at a rate of around 1,000 a week. In addition the Department has registered nearly 113,000 claims for vibration white finger (VWF).

Claims for pneumoconiosis are made under a British Coal scheme which commenced in 1979, for which the Department assumed responsibility in April 1998. Under the scheme nearly 86,000 claims have been received.

Of these, 3,300 claims for COPD; 85,600 claims for pneumoconiosis; and 17,500 claims for VWF have been settled in full and final settlement (includes both offers and denials).

Not all aspects of compensation for COPD and VWF are settled—some are being negotiated with the solicitors representing the claimants, and some are with the Court. The Department is therefore not able to offer full and final settlements in many cases, but wherever possible, we are making interim payments. Some 22,300 interim payments have been made to COPD claimants, and a further 17,500 interim payments have been made to VWF claimants.

In total the Department has made payments totalling nearly £260 million to COPD and VWF claimants. In addition, lump sum payments of over £137 million have been made under the British Coal scheme to pneumoconiosis claimants—some claimants also receive weekly payments.

Some 120,000 COPD claims and 94,000 VWF claims remain outstanding. Claims for pneumoconiosis are processed on a continuing basis and only 350 claims remain outstanding.

On COPD an original estimate of two to three years was given to assess all the existing claimants but this is kept under review in view of the escalating number of claims. We are giving priority to claims from those most old and ill, widows and those most likely (on the basis of initial testing) to have emphysema. If these claims were processed in the normal way through the courts it would take 10–15 years.

On vibration white finger, we aim to have carried out initial assessments on the existing claimants by the end of next year. A further assessment may be required for those claimants seeking compensation for loss of services but this is still under consideration.

EU Combustion Plants Directive

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the European Commission concerning the EC directive on large combustion plants. [137551]

Ms Hewitt: My Department works closely with others, in particular the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, to ensure that business interests are properly factored into the development of policy on the protection of the environment, at both national and European levels. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has represented the views of Her Majesty's Government in the process of reaching a Common Position on the revision of this directive at the June meeting of the Environment Council.

TREASURY

Third-World Debt

16. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations his Department has received about the alleviation of the debts of countries with a large number of HIV/AIDS cases. [135964]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government receive frequent representations on this issue which was discussed along with other pressing development concerns, for example at the recent meeting of Commonwealth Finance Ministers in Malta where I represented the UK.

Tragically HIV/AIDS is a serious problem, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In response the Government continue to press for faster, wider and deeper debt relief, are significantly increasing our aid spending and, as announced in the pre-Budget Report, we will be doing urgent work into ways to encourage the research and development of new vaccines for HIV/AIDS and the other major diseases so badly affecting developing countries.

Aggregates Tax (Glass Industry)

17. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the aggregates tax on the glass industry. [135965]

Mr. Timms: Since the sand used in the manufacture of glass will be relieved from the levy, I do not expect it to have an adverse impact on the glass industry. Indeed, the levy will encourage use of waste glass as an alternative to primary aggregate.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas

18. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his Department's plans to encourage the use of LPG fuel. [135966]

Mr. Timms: We support the use of liquid petroleum gas because of its environmental benefits over petrol and diesel. We do so in two ways—first, a substantially lower rate of duty on LPG, the rate being frozen again for next year; and, second, support for the Powershift programme, helping people to convert their vehicles to LPG.

Employment

19. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of full employment. [135967]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The modern definition of full employment is the Government's aim of employment opportunity for all. The Government's long-term economic ambition is that by the end of the decade there will be at least three quarters of the working age population in employment. Macroeconomic stability is a prerequisite to achieving this aim, combined with microeconomic policies to ensure an effective, secure transition from welfare into work.

The Chancellor announced in Chapter 4 of pre-Budget Report 2000 a further range of measures, which build on existing employment programmes in order to reach full employment.

Business Taxation

20. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from representative organisations of commerce and industry about his policies on business taxation. [135968]

Dawn Primarolo: We have received a number of representations from business organisations on the pre-Budget Report and Budget, including the Confederation of British Industry, the British Chamber of Commerce and the Institute of Directors.

24. **Mr. Sarwar:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy for business taxation. [135975]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's policies on business taxation are set out in the Financial Statements and Budget Statements, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

27. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the consequences for business of tax changes since 1997. [135978]

35. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the additional taxes payable by businesses since May 1997. [135986]

Dawn Primarolo: All changes to the tax system are included in the relevant Budget Reports. These are available in the Library of the House.

Higher Rate Tax

21. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much an increase in top-rate tax from 40p to 50p in the pound would raise if that were applied to those earning over £250,000 per annum. [135969]

Dawn Primarolo: The full-year yield from raising the top rate of income tax to 50 per cent. on taxable income of over £250,000 is £1.5 billion in 2001–02.

The estimate is based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and is consistent with the March 2000 Budget.

Industrial Tribunals

22. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on negotiations with the Society of Registration Officers regarding its access to industrial tribunals in unfair dismissal cases. [135973]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Current legal proceedings may conclude that this access is available. If this does not transpire, the Government are committed to making such access available. The Registrar General will pursue an Order under the Employment Relations Act 1999 if this proves necessary to give registration officers access.

Public Spending

23. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to relate the level of public spending to economic growth. [135974]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government's expenditure projections are set out in Table B13 of the pre-Budget Report.

Unemployment

25. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the revenue consequences of the changes in unemployment levels since May 1997. [135976]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The extent to which higher employment affects Government revenues will depend on a number of assumptions, in particular the extent to which higher employment reflects permanently higher output growth. Research published by the Treasury indicates that a 1 per cent. increase in output relative to trend increases the ratio of Government receipts to GDP by about 0.2 per cent. after one year. This is equivalent to an increase in receipts of about £6 billion.

Low Pay

26. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to increase the take-home pay of those in low paid work. [135977]

Dawn Primarolo: Measures introduced during this Parliament have provided significant extra help for those in low-paid work.

The National Minimum Wage, introduced in April 1999, is estimated to have increased the wages of 1.5 million low-paid workers.

The new 10p starting rate of income tax has halved the marginal tax rate for 1.9 million low-paid working people, and reforms to employee National Insurance Contributions mean that one million people no longer have to pay NICs.

Through the Working Families Tax Credit, the Government are giving additional support to over 1.1 million working families with children who are now receiving on average £30 more per week compared to old Family Credit.

These measures demonstrate the Government's commitment to increase the incomes of people in low-paid work and to ensure that work pays more than benefit. By the end of this Parliament, a family on half average earnings—£12,500—and with two children will be £2,600 a year better off as a result of the tax and benefit reforms.

Living Standards

28. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on changes in household living standards since April. [135979]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Living standards for a single-earner family on average earnings with two children are expected to increase by 10 per cent. in real terms over the Parliament. For a single-earner family on half average earnings with two children, living standards have increased by 18 per cent. in real terms over the last year.

Fuel Prices

29. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce the impact of increased fuel prices for people on low incomes and rural dwellers. [135980]

Mr. Timms: The Chancellor announced a package of measures in his pre-Budget Report which will be of benefit to both people on low incomes and those living in rural areas.

Pensioners (Savings Limit)

30. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his review of financial support for pensioners with special reference to the savings limits disregard. [135981]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government announced in the Budget that the savings limit in the Minimum Income Guarantee will double next April from £3,000 to £6,000. Today the Secretary of State for Social Security is publishing a consultation document outlining plans for a Pension Credit from 2003 to reward low and modest income pensioners who have worked hard to save for their retirement.

Family Taxation

31. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the net change to tax on families payable in this Parliament as a result of his Budget measures so far. [135982]

Dawn Primarolo: As a result of personal tax and benefit measures introduced during this Parliament, by April 2001, on average families with children will be £850 a year better off. The direct tax burden on a single-earner family on average earnings with two children is expected to fall from 20.9 per cent. in 1997–98 to 18.6 per cent. in 2001–02—it's lowest level since 1972.

Disabled Person's Tax Credit

32. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in the north-west have claimed the Disabled Person's Tax Credit since October 1999. [135983]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of individuals and families in the north-west in receipt of the Disabled Person's Tax Credit at the end of August 2000 is

provisionally estimated at 3,900. This compares with 2,800 in receipt of the Disability Working Allowance at its peak, in July 1999.

Fiscal Intervention

33. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the cost to the UK of the intervention to purchase euros and the additional purchase of euros by his instruction to the Bank of England to sell gold. [135984]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The $2.1 billion proceeds from the gold auctions held to date have been reinvested in interest-bearing foreign currency assets broadly in the proportions 40 per cent. dollars; 40 per cent. euros; and 20 per cent. yen.

The only intervention undertaken, since the euro was launched, was on 22 September 2000 when 85 million was purchased against sterling.

To provide a short-term snapshot of the value of these investments would not be meaningful as it would reflect distortions arising from short-term fluctuations in asset prices and currencies.

Pre-Budget Report

34. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what impact his proposals in the pre-Budget statement will have on the incomes of women and children. [135985]

Dawn Primarolo: As a result of personal tax and benefit measures introduced over this Parliament, by April 2001:

on average, women will be £400 a year better off, compared to £290 a year for all individuals;

families with children will be £850 a year better off;

a family with two young children on income support will be £1,500 a year better off;

a lone parent with two young children in work on £12,500 a year will be £2,600 better off.

Some of the major changes that affect women and children are:

the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, which is already helping around 1.1 million families;

changes to the National Insurance Contributions system which will remove around 750,000 women and 250,000 men from NICs liability by 2001–02;

a 26 per cent. real terms increase in Child Benefit over the Parliament.

Payroll Giving

Dr. Godman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the cost to date of the give-as-you-earn scheme; and what estimate he has made of the likely cost over the next three years. [135950]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The cost of the Payroll Giving scheme since it was introduced in 1986 has been published in Inland Revenue Statistics on an annual basis. The total cost of the scheme up to April 2000 was £53 million. The estimated cost until April 2003 is around £60 million.

The Economic Secretary launched a £2 million promotional campaign in October this year to encourage more employers and employees to become involved in Payroll Giving. We aim to double donations by April 2003 to more than £60 million a year.

Family Incomes

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what change there has been in the income of an average working family *(a)* before and *(b)* after tax since May 1997. [135951]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The before-tax income of a single-earner family on average earnings with two children is expected to increase by 6 per cent. in real terms over the Parliament. After tax, it is expected to increase by 10 per cent. in real terms.

Tax Credits

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the rates and thresholds to the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit will be from April 2001. [138179]

Dawn Primarolo: The main WFTC and DPTC rates and income thresholds will be increased in line with indexation from April 2001. There will be further increases aimed at helping disabled people. The information requested is contained in the table.

Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and Disabled Person's Tax Credit (DPTC)

£ per week

	2000–01	*2001–02*
WFTC—basic tax credit	53.15	54.00
DPTC—single person basic tax credit	55.15	56.05
DPTC—lone parent/couple basic tax credit	84.90	86.25
30-hour tax credit (for both WFTC and DPTC)	11.25	11.45
Child tax credits (for both WFTC and DPTC)		
Under 16	25.60	26.00
16–18	26.35	26.75
Disabled Child Tax Credit (for both WFTC and DPTC)	22.25	30.00
Enhanced Disability Tax Credit (lone parent/couple)	n/a	16.00
Enhanced Disability Tax Credit (single person)	n/a	11.05
Enhanced Disability Tax Credit (child)	n/a	11.05
WFTC income threshold	91.45	92.90
DPTC income threshold—single person	71.10	72.25
DPTC income threshold—lone parent/couple	91.45	92.90

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to his Department's departmental expenditure limits and running costs limits for 2000–01. [138054]

Dawn Primarolo: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates for Class XVI, Vote 1 (HM Treasury) and Class XVI, Vote 3 (HM Treasury: Office of Government Commerce), the Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £17,230,000 from £246,793,000 to £264,023,000.

The increase for Class XVI, Vote 1 (HM Treasury) is the net effect of the take up of end-year flexibility (EYF) of £1,000,000 comprising £980,000 for other current provision and £20,000 for capital, and provides for the drawing of £1,300,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund for the continuing costs associated with the setting up for Partnerships UK; and an increase in running costs of £541,000 to draw down the monies allocated from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund. The running costs limit for HM Treasury will accordingly be increased by £541,000 from £63,523,000 to £64,064,000.

The increase for Class XVI, Vote 3 (HM Treasury: Office of Government Commerce) is the net effect of the take up of EYF for PACE of £15,000,000 comprising £14,175,000 other current provision and £825,000 for running costs for expenditure related to the disposal of vacant property; the take up of EYF for CCTA of £797,000 comprising £686,000 other current provision and £111,000 for capital due to costs related to increased business; an increase in running costs of £325,000 to draw down the monies allocated from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund for OGC Headquarters; and a reduction in other current provision to record two transfers, of £663,000 for the cost of ownership of Harmsworth House to Class IV, Vote 3 (Charity Commission), and of £1,070,000 for the cost of ownership of Fleetbank House to Class IX, Vote 8 (Office of Fair Trading). As a result of take up of £825,000 EYF and drawing down £325,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund, the running costs limit for HM Treasury Office of Government Commerce will accordingly be increased by £1,150,000 from £23,402,000 to £24,552,000.

The increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Mortgage Repayments

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the average household in mortgage repayments were current interest rates at the average level between 1992 and 1997. [135971]

Miss Melanie Johnson: If mortgage interest rates were now at their average level between 1992 and 1997, the average mortgage holder would be paying about £480 more a year in mortgage interest than they currently are.

Fuel Duties

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received on the level of fuel duties; and if he will make a statement. [135970]

Mr. Timms: The Government have received representation from many different organisations and groups as well as a large number of letters from members of the public.

All were carefully considered in the run up to yesterday's pre-Budget Statement.

Macdougall Report

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the conclusions of the Macdougall report regarding the share of GDP to be raised and spent centrally in any currency zone. [136416]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Agenda 2000 agreements confirmed that a ceiling of 1.27 per cent. of Community GNP would continue to apply for member states' contributions to the EC budget and this will remain.

Tax Definitions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will define the terms *(a)* tax harmonisation and *(b)* tax co-ordination. [136414]

Dawn Primarolo: The only reference to tax harmonisation in the European Communities Treaty is in Article 93 which provision formed part of the revised Treaty under the Single European Act signed in 1986.

A reference to co-ordinated action to tackle harmful tax competition was contained in the ECOFIN Council conclusions of 1 December 1997. These conclusions followed a period of discussion initiated by the Commission at the Verona informal ECOFIN in April 1996.

Endowment Policies

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of *(a)* how many endowment policies sold on the basis that they would on completion pay off home loans will now not do so and *(b)* the total shortfall; what steps he is taking to address this issue; and if he will make a statement. [136973]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The selling and marketing of endowment policies is regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). In a progress report published on 3 October, the FSA estimated that some 60 per cent. of the 11 million endowment policies in force might not meet their targets. The total value of the policies in force, and the projected shortfall, are not held centrally.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the number of recipients of the Working Families Tax Credit. [137388]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my right hon. Friend to my answer given to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 196W.

Capital Gains Indexation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1016W, on capital gains indexation, if he will revise his estimate *(a)* giving yields for the next five financial years assuming that asset values are constant in real terms, and *(b)* giving yields for the next five financial years assuming that retirement relief is reintroduced at its previous level and asset values are constant in real terms. [136296]

Dawn Primarolo: Consistent with the assumptions of the March 2000 Budget forecast, the net revenue yield from re-introducing indexation and abolishing taper is estimated to be £400 million for the first year, or £350 million if retirement relief were reinstated also, most of which would be received in the following year. Further information in the form requested on the yield for subsequent years can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which recommendations of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review have not been fully implemented. [135877]

Dawn Primarolo: Sixty-four of the recommendations have been implemented, including 14 which have been implemented by other means than that directly envisaged in the report, and three of which have been implemented in part; four will not be progressed and work is continuing on a further 23. A schedule reporting progress on each of the recommendations has been placed in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

De-trunking Programme

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional resources the Government will allocate to local authorities from 2003 following the Government's de-trunking programme. [136428]

Mr. Hill: De-trunking of non-core routes will be phased over a number of years with the first significant transfers taking place in 2001–02. We are committed to ensuring a fair transfer of resources from the Highways Agency to local authorities, which will take on responsibility for de-trunked roads. Arrangements have been agreed with the Local Government Association for ensuring such a transfer takes place. This will involve the making of special grants for routine maintenance and issue of supplementary credit approvals for capital maintenance when the roads are actually transferred. These arrangements will operate pending the outcome of the review of local government finance for which options were set out in our green paper "Modernising Local Government Finance" published on 19 September.

Street Lighting

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number and percentage of street lighting columns that are unsafe and require replacement within the next 12 months. [136426]

Mr. Hill: DETR are aware that, of the 5 million street lighting columns in England, 27 per cent. (1.3 million) are more than 30 years old now. However, the Department does not currently have sufficient information to determine the number of columns which are unsafe.

Local authorities have agreed that a national condition survey for street lighting should be introduced, and that information from this should be used to compile a national inventory. Progress on this is still at an early stage although local authority representatives have agreed to submit proposals to DETR.

The Highways Agency consider that current funding levels are sufficient to allow them to maintain the condition of the trunk road network at a level where there is no backlog of maintenance (either for structural maintenance or for street lighting).

Road Noise (A5)

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the A5 at Wibtoft on the Warwickshire and Leicestershire border to be resurfaced to reduce traffic noise. [136284]

Mr. Hill: The A5 at Wibtoft was resurfaced about five years ago. I would not expect resurfacing to be required until around 2006. As announced previously, lower noise surfaces will be used for virtually all future surfacing work on trunk roads.

Flooding (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make available funds towards the repair of listed buildings and other buildings in the conservation area of Lewes affected by the recent flooding. [136569]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Emergency financial assistance is available for local authorities under the Bellwin scheme to help with uninsurable clear-up costs following a disaster or emergency in their area which involves destruction of, or danger to, life or property.

Government compensation is not generally available to private household or businesses following storms and flooding. These are insurable risks, and successive Governments have taken the view that to underwrite insurable costs would remove any incentive for people to take out appropriate insurance cover and would penalise those who had acted prudently.

Bellwin schemes are intended to prevent an undue burden falling on local taxpayers as the result of local authorities taking immediate action to safeguard life or property, or to prevent suffering or severe inconvenience, in their area or among its inhabitants. Grant is normally paid at a rate of 85 per cent. on authorities' qualifying expenditure above a threshold but for the present emergency grant will be paid at 100 per cent. of amounts above the threshold. The threshold is the provision that a prudent authority might reasonably be expected to make for contingencies and emergencies (approximately 0.2 per cent. of its revenue budget).

In the case of the recent flooding the following adaptations to the Bellwin scheme will apply:

assistance under Bellwin will be available for all authorities making valid claims resulting from the October/November floods and storms;

Government support above the threshold will be increased from 85 per cent. to 100 per cent. but there is no change to the 0.2 per cent. threshold or to the definition of eligible costs;

valid claims will be settled within 15 working days of receipt by the Department of a valid grant claim form;

claims for payments in advance of audit reports being received by the Department may be made; and

claims for grant of less than £10,000 will be accepted on presentation of details of expenditure certified by the Chief Financial Officer and will not require a separate audit report.

Lewes District Council inquired about assistance under the Bellwin scheme the day following the initial floods. We are ready to trigger that assistance and officials await the detailed claim. We will consider all applications speedily and sympathetically against the criteria that apply in these circumstances.

Hatfield Derailment

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for how long the Health and Safety Executive has required its buffet carriage to be left on the railway at Hatfield. [137204]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive did not require the GNER buffet carriage to be left on the accident site at Hatfield. Inspectors gave instructions to Railtrack Ltd. on 19 October that the damaged carriage should be taken to Crewe for examination along with the other coaches and locomotive.

Deprivation Indices

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the index of deprivation by ward as it relates to *(a)* the West Midlands area and *(b)* Coventry, South; and what plans there are to address the inequalities highlighted. [136578]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Indices of Deprivation 2000 (ID2000) revises, extends and updates the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation. It is based on 33 ward level indicators of deprivation covering six domains: low income, employment deprivation, education and training deprivation, poor health and disability, poor housing and poor geographical access to services. Because it is based on ward level information it is more effective than previous indices in identifying pockets of deprivation across England and is a more effective means of targeting help at the most deprived areas. The indices show that there are 69 wards in the West Midlands in the 10 per cent. most deprived wards in England, of which five wards are in Coventry and two wards (St. Michael's and Binley and Willenhall) are in Coventry, South. The indices are considered to be the best means of measuring area deprivation currently, but will be kept under review and revised when significantly better information for small areas becomes available.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the recent deprivation indices produced by his Department, by ward. [136699]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to him earlier today, column 345W.

Damascus House

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government Office for London will make a decision on the planning application for Damascus House, Mill Hill. [136940]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State's decision on whether he should call in the planning application for his own determination is at an advanced stage and will be issued shortly.

Oil Industry

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations his Department made to the Department of Trade and Industry regarding the recent decision to hold a new round of oil licensing. [137173]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department will be making representations in due course in response to the consultation paper issued by the Department of Trade and Industry on 25 October.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 451–56W, concerning the single regeneration budget, if he will provide details of the geographical area covered by each bid. [137117]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the timetable is for developments in the National Air Traffic Services PPP from 3 November until the completion of the process. [137507]

Mr. Mullin: The Government announced the three consortia to go forward to the next stage of the bidding process on 3 November. These three bidders for the role of Strategic Partner in the NATS PPP will have until early next year to prepare final and binding bids. The Government will then evaluate these bids with a view to selecting a preferred bidder. Subject to the passage of the Transport Bill, the Government's firm intention is to have the PPP in place in the spring of 2001.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria Raytheon failed to satisfy in their bid to be considered as the strategic partner under the National Air Traffic Services PPP. [137506]

Mr. Mullin: Raytheon's indicative bid to be considered as Strategic Partner in the NATS PPP was submitted to the Government on a confidential basis. As such it is not appropriate for the Government to release details of the content of that bid. All bids received were evaluated against a comprehensive set of evaluation criteria that were made available to bidders in the tender documentation. DETR officials and its advisers have subsequently discussed the evaluation exercise and the reasons behind its decision not to accept the indicative offer submitted by Raytheon with the company.

The Government have in the past publicly stated that their firm intention was to select three bidders from those who submitted indicative offers to be taken forward to the next stage of the bidding process. That is what the Government have done and we announced our shortlist on 3 November 2000.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide an analysis of the component expenditure underlying the projected investment of £1,300 million required over 10 years for National Air Traffic Services. [137504]

Mr. Mullin: The Government do not make forecasts for NATS' capital expenditure. Earlier this year NATS produced its first ten year investment plan, for the period 2000–10, and it is still consulting with its customers on this document. The views of the successful bidder for the role as NATS' strategic partner will of course be taken into account, and the form, timing and appropriateness of the plan will be reviewed by the CAA before it is approved. The final plan will be issued around the middle of next year.

The Government believe that the Public/Private Partnership for NATS is the best way to deliver the investment needed. It will provide the additional management expertise to ensure that NATS' capital programme is achieved on time and on budget for the benefit of NATS' customers and for the Government as shareholder.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the incidents of NATS software and systems failure since 31 July 2000, indicating the duration and severity of their effects. [137528]

Mr. Mullin: The Flight Data Processing System (FDPS) at West Drayton has failed three times since 31 July. On none of these occasions was safety impaired. These failures were:

(i) On 12 August 2000, FDPS was suspended for one hour and thirteen minutes following the rejection of an incorrect flight plan. This resulted in the imposition of short term restrictions which necessitated some flights being held at London airports;

(ii) On 3 November 2000, FDPS was suspended for 17 minutes following the rejection of a flight plan. This resulted in six aircraft being delayed by 30 minutes; and

(iii) On 4 November 2000, controllers noted FDPS was failing to print accurate data strips for flights using Stansted. A decision was taken to revert to a previous version of the software known to be free of faults. This took 2 hours and 10 minutes to install successfully and during this period aircraft experienced delays of up to one hour.

NATS is planning to correct the failure in the software which caused the printing error as soon as possible. In spite of these failures, FDPS continues to perform well with both the performance and robustness of the system having been enhanced since the major failure on 17 June.

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the basis of the funding formula for area cost adjustment in Kent for 2001–02 will be based on 1998 figures. [137377]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have not yet taken a decision on whether to update the area cost adjustment to reflect the data from the 1999 New Earnings Survey. An announcement will be made in due course.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to amend the calculation of the area cost adjustment to reflect data from the 1999 New Earnings Survey. [137531]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have not yet taken a decision on whether to update the area cost adjustment to reflect the data from the 1999 New Earnings Survey. An announcement will be made in due course.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many responses he has received to the Consultation Paper on Telecommunication Mast Development; and from whom; [136857]

(2) if he will place copies of responses received to the Consultation Paper on Telecommunication Mast Development in the Library; [136858]

(3) when he will announce the action he proposes to take following the public consultation on telecommunication mast development. [136859]

Ms Beverley Hughes: By the end of the day, 7 November 2000, we had received 301 responses in total. Of these 45 were from members of the public; 230 were from local authorities and other public bodies; 18 were from mobile phone companies and associated businesses; and eight were from hon. Members. The Department is currently analysing the responses. We will announce any changes as soon as practicable. Copies of all responses, other than those where the respondent has indicated that the response is to be treated as confidential, will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Floods

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he was informed of the report into flood dangers by the Flood Hazard Research Centre at Middlesex University. [137400]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department received in July 2000 a copy of the "National appraisal of assets at risk from flooding and coastal erosion", a report produced for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by Halcrow Maritime, HR Wallingford and the Flood Hazard Research Centre. It was circulated at the same time to all Regional Flood Defence Committee Chairmen, Regional Directors of the Environment Agency and Chief Executives of all local authorities in England.

The report presents a generalised overview of assets at risk in order to inform investment planning for flood and coastal defence. It demonstrates that some 10 per cent. of the population of England live within areas potentially at risk from flooding and property worth over £200 billion is also potentially at risk. It also confirms the value for money of past and present investment in flood and coastal defence but concludes that existing practices for undertaking and funding flood and coastal defence should be reappraised.

The results were used to inform the Spending Review 2000 and have been taken into account in the revision of the new draft planning guidance on development and flood risk in PPG25, which we issued for consultation in April 2000 and hope to publish in final form in December this year.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had in the past six months with Ministers of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about flood defence; and if he will make statement. [137399]

Mr. Mullin: Policy responsibility for flood defence rests with my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has had several recent discussions with Ministers from MAFF and other Departments to consider how the country can be better placed to deal with extreme weather events.

"Are You Doing Your Bit" Campaign

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he plans to measure the success of the 'Are You Doing Your Bit' campaign; and if he will make a statement. [137396]

Mr. Meacher: Both quantitative and qualitative research, looking at awareness, motivation and actions by individuals, have been commissioned to measure the campaign's impact and inform the campaign's strategic approach.

Monthly tracking research, in particular, helps us to measure public reaction carefully. Recent findings have been very encouraging and demonstrate that the campaign is raising public awareness of environmental actions with attitudes and actions becoming more positive:

- nine out of 10 people recognise the campaign;
- seven out of 10 said that the advertising made them think they should be doing their bit; and
- intentions to act are being converted into action with over seven out of 10 saying they have started or increased the frequency of campaign actions in the last 12 months.

In addition to data from the more formal research activities outlined above, the campaign has also generated many successful partnerships with commercial organisations, with campaigners in similar fields, and with many local authorities. Feedback from these has been overwhelmingly positive, and the Government's commitment and approach are welcomed.

Flooding (Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will respond to the request by Devon county council in respect of the exemption from Council Tax penalties sums given to the Environment Agency for flood defence works in excess of the relevant SSA. [137527]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We will reply to Devon's request of 6 November when we have had time to consider the implications, particularly with regard to the Local Government Finance Settlement. The timetable for the Local Government Finance Settlement is expected to be similar to last year's.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will implement section 37 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to require licensed taxi drivers to carry guide and hearing dogs in their taxis and to do so without charge. [138052]

Mr. Hill: I am pleased to announce that from 31 March 2001 all licensed taxi drivers in England and Wales will be under a duty to carry guide, hearing and other prescribed assistance dogs in their taxis and to do so without additional charge.

From 1 December 2000 local licensing authorities will be able to consider applications from taxi drivers and to issue certificates of exemption to those applicants who they consider merit a medical exemption.

I have laid before the House the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Taxis) (Carrying of Guide Dogs etc.) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000. The Regulations prescribe three additional categories of dog to which Section 37 duties will also apply and deals with the notice which must be displayed by taxi drivers who are exempt on medical grounds from Section 37 duties.

Full guidance is being sent to all local licensing authorities and a leaflet to all licensed taxi drivers informing them of these new duties and the arrangements for medical exemption. Copies of these documents will be placed in the House Library.

I understand that the Scottish Executive will be introducing similar requirements for Scotland.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans there are to amend his departmental expenditure limits and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138178]

Mr. Prescott: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates for Class III, Votes 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Departmental Expenditure Limits for 2000–01 will change as follows. All references to the take-up of end-year flexibility refer to the Public Expenditure 1999–2000 Provisional outturn White Paper presented to Parliament by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 18 July 2000 (Cm 4812).

(a) The DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £253,541,000 from £10,861,342,000 to £11,114,883,000. This increase reflects the net impact of a take-up of end-year flexibility of £142,703,000; net transfers into the DETR Main

Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit of £838,000 and a call on the DEL Reserve of £110,000,000. The changes are set out in greater detail as follows:

(i) The changes for Class III, Vote 1 are as follows: take-up of End-Year Flexibility of £80,728,000 is to be distributed between a range of established and new programmes, including: £17,589,000 for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and £8,477,000 for the Coalfields Enterprise Fund; Housing Corporation (£13,173,000 for the Major Repairs Initiative and £224,000 for the Approved Development Programme); £5,300,000 for Disabled Facilities Grants; £400,000 for housing defects grants; £5,000,000 for regeneration projects facilitated by the Social Exclusion Unit; £1,000,000 for 'Supporting People' (housing projects); £3,772,000 for English Partnerships; £3,800,000 for Housing Action Trusts; £850,000 for Rural Development Commission wind up costs; £40,000 for Nature Conservancy Council pensions; £202,000 for Single Regeneration Budget (mainly Manchester regeneration); £3,825,000 for private housing renovation grants; Regional Development Agencies (£3,000,000 for redundant building grant and £500,000 for restructuring costs); £2,500,000 to support the coal industry (regeneration costs); £2,000,000 for Neighbourhood Wardens; £1,762,000 for the Countryside Agency (including costs of £62,000 relating to Dacre House); £1,372,000 for Urban Development Corporations post-wind up costs; £1,111,000 for housing research; £1,500,000 for the launch of a register of competent and reliable builders and £1,000,000 for other construction-related expenditure (Partners in Innovation and advisory work in connection with the effects of Turkish earthquakes); £587,000 for home improvement agencies and £225,000 for the home improvement agencies' co-ordinating body; £545,000 for home buying and selling; £94,000 for City Challenge; £400,000 for EC spatial planning; £155,000 for grants to voluntary bodies through the Special Grants Programme; £50,000 for Gypsy Sites Grant; £50,000 for local authority funding of pilots for lettings; £20,000 for the Joint National Conservation Committee internet website; and £250,000 to cover planning costs related to the demolition of Sandown Hall.

Additional calls on the DEL Reserve are required for Housing Corporation capital projects (£50,000,000) and for Regional Development Agencies (£60,000,000). A further net increase of £1,332,000 arises from the following inter-vote transfers; transfers into Class III, Vote 1 of £400,000 from Class VII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security, administration) to the Housing Corporation in respect of resettlement funding; £1,166,000 from Class IX, Vote 1 (Department of Trade and Industry: programmes and administration) for Regional Development Agencies' administration costs (including £70,000 specifically for the London Development Agency); £492,000 from Class IV, Vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales) for Rough Sleepers Unit administered private sector grants; and transfers out of Class III, Vote 1 of £426,000 to Class III, Vote 3 for the Energy Saving Trust, and £300,000 to Class III, Vote 2 for minicab licensing.

(ii) The changes for Class III, Vote 2 are as follows: The take-up of end-year flexibility of: £53,824,000 for British Rail Grant (£18,000,000), civil aviation services (£15,000,000); multi modal studies (£3,000,000); Railtrack's Docklands Light Railway Royal Mint street claim (£14,500,000); London new year's eve celebration costs (£3,000,000); the transport statistics programme (£224,000); and the Mobility Unit (£100,000). A further net increase of £292,313,000 from the following inter-vote transfers: £278,325,000 from Class III, Vote 11 in respect of the Strategic Rail Authority; £14,390,000 from Class III, Vote 7 for multi modal studies (£10,000,000), road user charging (£1,500,000) and costs associated with London programmes which have transferred to Transport for London (£2,890,000). £300,000 from Class III, Vote 1 for the start up costs of minicab licensing; £150,000 from Class II Vote 1 (Department of Health) for Mobility Centres; £9,000 from Class IX, Vote 1 (Department of Trade and Industry) for VAT associated with the Framework 5 Helpline project; £784,000 to Class III, Vote 3 for various Environmental projects; £56,000 to Class IX, Vote 1 for the Framework 5 Helpline project; £6,000 to Class XII Vote 1 (Department of Social Security) for the National Listening Event for older people and £15,000 to the Class XIII, Vote 1 (Scottish Executive) for Scottish ports. An additional increase of £6,367,000 from non voted credit approvals for grant funding of the Sunderland Metro Main Extension (£5,417,000), World Squares (£650,000) and Mobility Centres (£300,000) partially offset by a transfer of £3,500,000 to non voted provision for Ports supplementary credit approvals.

(iii) The changes for Class III Vote 3 are as follows: The take- up of end-year flexibility of £6,936,000 for the implementation of the Climate Change Levy (£1,750,000), the Mersey Basin Campaign (£136,000), for the computer upgrade work for pollution emergency response services (£200,000), for costs arising from the implementation of the European Groundwater Directive (£2,000,000), clearance of the navigation backlog (£1,000,000), the Financial Management and Policy Review efficiency study (£100,000), for the British Waterways for the effective launch of The Waterways Trust (£500,000) and for an out of court settlement of a personal injury case (£1,250,000). A further net increase of £1,310,000 arises from the following transfers into the vote: transfers from Class III. Vote 2 for research work undertaken on the Environmental Efficiency Best Practice Programme (£647,000) and on the Environmental Protection research and monitoring (£137,000), transfer from Class III, Vote 1 for work to be undertaken by the Energy Saving Trust (£426,000) and a transfer from non-voted contaminated land Supplementary Credit Approvals for training work (£100,000). There is also a transfer provision to Class VIII, Vote 1 for contribution to Environmental Know How Fund (£2,000,000).

(iv) The changes to Class III, Vote 7 are as follows: A transfer of £14,390,000 to Class III Vote 2 made up of £10,000,000 for Multi-Modal Studies, £1,500,000 for Road User Charging Research and £2,890,000 settlement with the Greater London Authority. Draw down of £368,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund, of which £348,000 is an increase in running costs provision and take-up of £200,000 of running costs end-year flexibility.

(v) The changes in Class III, Vote 8 are as follows: An increase of £630,000 which comprises: £303,000 transfer from Class IV, Vote 1 (Home Office Crime Reduction

Programme) to support DVLA's vehicle crime reduction initiatives, an allocation of £385,000 from the Civil Service Reform Modernisation Fund and an increase in Appropriations in Aid of £58,000 offset by a reduction in CFERS to reflect the reclassification of sale of anonymised data receipts.

(vi) As a consequence of the changes to Class III, Vote 7 and 8, the DETR gross running cost limit has been increased by £1,226,000 from £700,928,000 to £702,154,000.

(vii) The change to Class III, Vote 11 is a transfer of £278,325,000 to Class III, Vote 2 for the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority.

(viii) Provision within the non-Voted element of the DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit will be decreased by £2,252,000 from £2,652,400,000 to £2,650,148,000. This reflects: £615,000 transfer to Class III Vote 3 for contaminated land work by the Environment Agency (£100,000), transfer of £500,000 from the Local Government DEL for Isles of Scilly water credit approvals, take-up of £215,000 end-year flexibility for air quality SCAs and £2,867,000 from Class III Vote 2 comprising a transfer of £3,500,000 for Ports supplementary credit approvals and transfers to Class III Vote 2 of £6,367,000 for grant funding of the Sunderland Metro Main extension (£5,417,000), World squares (£650,000), Mobility Centres (£300,000). Also a take-up of £800,000 end-year flexibility transferred to DfEE for credit approvals issued to Derby City council.

(ix) The net increase in the DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit will be offset by transfers to; the Department of Trade and Industry Departmental Expenditure Limit, Department of Social Security Departmental Expenditure Limit, Scotland Departmental Expenditure Limit, Department for International Development Departmental Expenditure Limit; from the DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit, Department of Social Security Departmental Expenditure Limit, Department of Trade and Industry Departmental Expenditure Limit, Home Office Departmental Expenditure Limit, Department of Health Departmental Expenditure Limit and by a charge on the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

(b) The DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £8,430,000 from £35,352,718,000 to £35,361,148,000. This increase is the net effect of a take-up of end-year flexibility of £8,630,000, and a transfer of £500,000 to the DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit, partially offset by transfers from DCMS of £300,000. The changes are set out in greater detail as follows:

(i) The changes for Class III, Vote 4 are as follows: increased provision for the Local Government Commission (Section B) by £340,000 in respect of mapping costs and for Best Value Intervention by £1,410,000 (offset by a reduction in payments to the Audit commission for work in connection with Best Value Inspection and by drawing on the end-year flexibility entitlement for DETR's Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit in Cm 4812); increased provision for Local Government Research and Publicity (Section C) by £1,280,000, comprising publicity costs in relation to Best Value and grant distribution, offset by savings on Valuation services (Section A), Best Value Inspection (Section B) and an increase of £180,000 in Appropriations in Aid; increased provision for London governance by £4,400,000 (Section D) to reflect revised estimates for the costs of preparing for the Greater London Authority and associated bodies offset by drawing on the end-year flexibility entitlement for DETR's Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit announced in Cm 4812 and by £300,000 transferred from Department of Culture, Media and Sport; provision of £494,000 for emergency financial assistance to local authorities in connection with flooding emergencies (Section H) offset by saving on Section A and by drawing on the end-year flexibility for DETR's Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit announced in Cm 4812; reclassification of certain direct current expenditure in Section B as direct capital expenditure and certain capital expenditure in Section C as current grants and transfers.

(ii) Provision within the non-Voted element of the Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £3,135,000 from £135,952,000 to £138,087,000. This reflects a take-up of end-year flexibility of £3,635,000 and the transfer of £500,000 to DETR's Main Programme DEL.

(iii) The net increase in the DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be offset by a charge on the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

(c) The Office of Water Services Departmental Expenditure Limit will increase by £611,000 from –£45,000 to £567,000 and it's running cost limit will be reduced by £1,214,000 from £12,391,000 to £11,177,000.

(i) This change for Class III, Vote 10 will be partly effected by the take-up £485,000 of end-year flexibility comprising £40,000 for capital and £445,000 for running costs etc. The supplementary also includes a claim on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve of £126,000 in respect of part of the pension costs of the former Director General of the Office of Water Services.

The increase in the Office of Water Services Departmental Expenditure Limit will be offset by a charge on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve and will therefore not add to the planned total of public expenditure.

(d) The Office of the Rail Regulator Departmental Expenditure Limit will increase by £78,000 from £1,000 to £79,000 and its running cost limit will be increased by £78,000 from £13,690,000 to £13,768,000.

(i) This change for Class III, Vote 9 will be effected by the take-up of £78,000 running costs end-year flexibility to meet increased requirements associated with the Competition Act and Ladbroke Grove inquiry.

The increase in the Office of the Rail Regulator will be offset by a charge on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve and will therefore not add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Red Routes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how

many instances of illegal parking on Red Routes in London have been recorded, and how much was spent on policing them, in each year since their inception. [135911]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

I understand that the Metropolitan police have issued the following number of Fixed Penalty Notices for illegal parking on Red Routes in London:

1992—26,136
1993—22,130
1994—22,166
1995—23,362
1996—37,303
1997—50,235
1998—98,289
1999—108,659
2000—48,197 (January-March).

For the financial years 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the Metropolitan police have budgeted about £19 million for Red Route enforcement. Budget information for the previous years is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Leslie: To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has to amend the Privy Council Office Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [137634]

Mrs. Beckett: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate for Class XVII, Vote 5, the Privy Council Office Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) for 2000–01 will be increased by £373,000 from £2,578,000 to £2,951,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £373,000 from £2,618,000 to £2,991,000.

The increase in the DEL is to fund the new Business Co-ordination Unit (BCU) (£320,000) which I announced on 11 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 433W, and to take up money granted from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund (£53,000).

The increase will be a charge on a DEL reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

CABINET OFFICE

Electronic Communications Act

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what use has been made of the powers in section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000. [138177]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Electronic Communications Act 2000 contains in section 8 a power to amend legislation by statutory instrument, to authorise or facilitate electronic communication or storage. The first order laid before Parliament under this section is the Companies Act 1985 (Electronic Communications) Order 2000 amending company law, of which a draft was laid before the House on 23 October under the affirmative resolution procedure.

The second order to be laid before Parliament is planned to be an order by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, to allow electronic communication between the Department of the Environment; Transport and the Regions (DETR) and local authorities of Housing Revenue Account subsidy determinations and decisions.

In her memorandum submitted to Parliament during the passage of the Electronic Communications Bill in January 2000, my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce said:

> the Government envisage that the first Order would be subject to an affirmative resolution, but that Orders under clause 8 would normally be subject to a negative resolution. After the first Order therefore the affirmative resolution procedure would be used only exceptionally, with any Orders that raised major issues of principle.

As no major issues of principle are raised by the DETR order, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions proposes to make it subject to the negative resolution procedure. This will enable it to come into force in time for the annual determination of Housing Revenue Account Subsidy. In this case it is likely to be made, and could come into force, before the company law order.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to change the 2000–01 Departmental Expenditure Limit or running cost limit for the Cabinet Office. [137363]

Marjorie Mowlam: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates:

The Departmental Expenditure Limit for Cabinet Office (Class XVII, Vote 1 and Vote 3) will be increased by £51,988,000 from £194,960,000 to £246,948,000 and the gross running costs limit will be increased by £18,192,000 from £95,562,000 to £113,754,000. Also the net running costs limit will be decreased by £3,000,000 from £2,827,000 to -£173,000.

This is mainly to take account of the following changes:

(a) A transfer payment from Inland Revenue (Class XVI, Vote 5) (£15,000,000) towards development of the Government Gateway part of the Corporate IT Strategy for Government; and a payment to the Department of Social Security: administration (Class XII, Vote 3) (£5,000) in respect of Inter-Ministerial Group on Older People.

(b) An investment in the Modernising Government agenda and Cabinet Office Action Plan (£2,788,000) to be funded from the Invest to Modernise Fund; an investment is the infrastructure for e-government, including the Knowledge Network, as part of the Corporate IT Strategy to be funded from the Capital Modernisation Fund (£21,000,000).

(c) The Cabinet Office has taken up end-year flexibility (£13,205,000) from its entitlement (£24,388,000) as set out in the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper Cm 4812 published on 18 July 2000. This is to fund ongoing activities within the Cabinet Office including establishing the e-Envoy and funding slippage in programmes from the previous year.

The increase will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Internet Access

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what percentage of the United Kingdom population has internet access at home; what plans she has to extend home internet access; and how she intends to achieve such goals. [135816]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Seven million UK homes, 28 per cent., are now connected to the internet with almost one million new homes going on line in the last quarter.

We will continue to follow telecommunications competition policies that have helped the UK become the cheapest country in Europe for unmetered off-peak internet access, and among the cheapest for metered off-peak access. The rapid growth of digital TV in the UK—21 per cent. of UK households currently subscribe—will also increase home internet access.

In addition, the Department for Education and Employment is piloting ways of providing low-cost recycled computers to unemployed people and those with low incomes.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will issue his strategic guidance to the new Learning and Skills Council. [138053]

Mr. Blunkett: I have today sent my remit letter to Bryan Sanderson, the chairman of the Learning and Skills Council, setting out my strategic vision and the key priorities for the first three years of the LSCs operation. Copies of the remit letter have been placed in the Library.

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the formula for Area Cost Adjustment for Kent schools for 2001–02 will be based on 1998 figures. [137378]

Ms Estelle Morris: Ministers are currently considering a decision on this issue and will make an announcement in due course.

Teacher Vacancies

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by LEA in descending order the percentage of *(a)* teaching posts currently vacant and *(b)* children attending schools in the LEA entitled to free school meals. [137371]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

A DfEE survey of maintained secondary schools in England in the first week of September 2000 indicated that there were about 1,000 secondary teacher vacancies; the equivalent figure at January 2000 was 1,200.

General information on schools has recently been published in a statistical volume 'Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000', a copy of which is available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 16 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 100W, on the relocation of civil servants, when the contract with Cendant Relocation (UK) Ltd. was last renewed; where the contract was advertised; and what the length and value of the contract is. [137170]

Mr. Wills: The contract with Cendant Relocation (UK) Ltd. was last renewed on 23 March 2000. The contract was put out to competitive tender on the basis of nine national and locally sourced companies. The contract is for a period of three years. The contract value is dependent upon the number of departmental staff who use the service offered by Cendant.

Teacher Contracts

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he gives to local education authorities on providing written contracts; and what redress an employed teacher has against a local education authority that fails to provide a contract of employment. [137101]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has not given any guidance to local education authorities on the provision of written contracts of employment. He has given guidance to school governing bodies about their obligation to provide a written statement each year to teachers of how their pay has been determined.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what statutory provisions govern the provision of written contracts by local education authorities on the *(a)* part-time and *(b)* full-time employment of teachers. [137100]

Ms Estelle Morris: Local education authorities are under the same requirements as other employers to provide written particulars of employment to employees. In addition, authorities, or the governing bodies of schools with delegated budgets, are required under the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document to provide written statements each year to teachers of how their pay has been determined.

Pupil Referral Units

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with disaffected young people about the framework and curriculum of pupil referral units. [137084]

Jacqui Smith: Officials from my Department regularly meet disaffected young people, including as part of the recent review of the Social Inclusion: Pupil Support Standards Fund grant. We are also reviewing standards at pupil referral units (PRUs) and are arranging to meet pupils who have been excluded from school to find out from them what worked in PRUs. Ofsted inspection of PRUs usually includes discussion with students about the education they receive. The recently established Children's and Young People's Unit is considering how we can increase the involvement of children and young people in the design and delivery of policies and services that affect them.

My officials are also working with a number of voluntary sector partners to develop innovative programmes for disaffected pupils.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidelines he has issued on pupil/teacher ratios in pupil referral units; [137083]

(2) what guidance he has given pupil referral units about reintegrating pupils into mainstream education; [137080]

(3) what special training is given to staff working in pupil referral units. [137078]

Jacqui Smith: As part of comprehensive guidance covering pupil attendance, behaviour and exclusion my right hon. Friend issued detailed guidance in July 1999 on staffing and training in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and re-integration into mainstream education of pupils attending PRUs.

Staff in PRUs must be qualified teachers. Teachers in their induction year may require additional training in meeting the needs of difficult and disruptive children. A PRU's management committee should help identify staff development needs and the local education authority should provide opportunities for career development and in-service training. Training should include national curriculum courses, behaviour management and, where relevant, guidance from subject advisers on the curriculum.

Following exclusion, an individual re-integration plan should be drawn up for the pupil. Where possible, excluded pupils should be re-integrated as quickly as possible. It is expected that primary pupils will be re-integrated within one term. By 2002 all excluded pupils must be offered full-time education.

Staffing levels in PRUs should allow time to plan for individual pupils; helping pupils' re-entry into education or employment; building relationships with pupils and parents and administrative tasks. It is considered good practice for a PRU always to have at least two members of staff on site. In 2000 the pupil:teacher ratio in PRUs was 4.3 compared to 4.5 in 1999.

The money available from the Social Inclusion: Pupil Support Standards Fund Grant to help schools and local education authorities tackle poor behaviour and provide education outside school for those who have been excluded will increase tenfold from £17 million in 1996–97 to £174 million in 2001–02.

Copies of the guidance mentioned above, DfEE Circulars 10–99 (Chapter 7) and 11–99 (Chapters 4 and 5), are available in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many young people *(a)* are receiving and *(b)* have received an education in a pupil referral unit in each of the last three years; [137081]

(2) how many pupil referral units there are in *(a)* England, *(b)* Nottingham and *(c)* Nottinghamshire. [137082]

Jacqui Smith: Provisional figures for 2000 show that there were 8,479 pupils registered at pupil referral units (PRUs). This compares with 7,530 in 1997, 7,740 in 1998 and 8,263 in 1999. This means an increase of nearly 1,000 places since 1997. In addition, the number of pupils dually registered at both school and PRU increased from 4,166 in 1998 to 4,586 in 2000.

Latest figures show that there are nearly 300 PRUs in England. Nottingham City LEA has two PRUs. Nottinghamshire LEA has four PRUs. A number of LEAs are amalgamating pupil referral units to bring them under one management structure in order to rationalise and improve provision. As indicated above, there has been an increase in the scale of provision for pupils at PRUs.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria are used to evaluate the effectiveness of pupil referral units. [137079]

Jacqui Smith: OFSTED inspects pupil referral units (PRUs) using the framework of inspection for schools, adapted for PRUs. The inspection includes looking at quality of teaching; pupils' progress; management and value for money. Following an OFSTED inspection, the LEA must prepare a written action plan, in consultation with the management committee of the PRU and the teacher in charge. A recent OFSTED analysis of inspection reports from 38 inspections undertaken in 2000–01 highlights: improved teaching; improved pupil progress and achievement; better management; better value for money and some improved accommodation.

Class Sizes (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure that Leicestershire LEA meets his target that no infant is taught in a class size of 30 or more by September 2001. [137058]

Ms Estelle Morris: For the huge majority of infants, the Government have secured early delivery of their pledge to limit infant class sizes to 30 pupils. In September 2000, as few as 30,000 five, six and seven-year-olds remained in infant classes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1998 was 485,000. The pledge is supported by over £600 million, and allocations so far to Leicestershire LEA amount to nearly £4 million—enough to support 71 additional teachers this year, and 24 additional classrooms. This has enabled the authority to make steady progress towards meeting the pledge: in September 2000, over 94 per cent. of five, six and seven-year-olds in Leicestershire were in infant classes of 30 or below, compared with 89 per cent. in September 1999. The figure in January 1998 was 78 per cent.

School Playing Fields

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide a breakdown by region

of the number of state schools which sought approval from his Department for the sale of playing fields between 1990–2000. [136752]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]*: The information is not available in the form requested.

Prior to October 1998 only grant-maintained schools were required to seek consent from the Secretary of State before selling any land. Since the introduction in October 1998 of section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, local authorities and governing bodies of all maintained schools, including foundation schools, have been required to obtain the Secretary of State's consent before disposing of playing fields or any part of a playing field. The Secretary of State will grant such approval only if the application meets the tough criteria against which all applications are considered.

Before the change in the law, local authorities could and did sell playing fields as and when they chose to do so. An estimated 40 playing fields a month were sold in this way under the previous Government.

Since October 1998 there have been 180 applications from local authorities and governing bodies to sell a playing field or part of a playing field. The following table provides a breakdown of these applications by local education authority.

Table showing by local education authority the number of applications for consent to the sale of playing fields from 1 October 1998 to 6 November 2000

Local education authority	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Barking and Dagenham	—	—	—
Barnet	1	—	—
Barnsley	—	—	1
Bath and North East Somerset	—	1	—
Bedfordshire	—	1	—
Bexley	—	—	1
Birmingham	—	—	—
Blackburn with Darwen	—	—	—
Blackpool	—	—	—
Bolton	—	—	—
Bournemouth	—	—	—
Bracknell Forest	—	—	1
Bradford	—	—	1
Brent	—	—	—
Brighton and Hove	—	—	—
Bristol	1	—	—
Bromley	—	—	—
Buckinghamshire	—	4	4
Bury	1	1	—
Calderdale	—	—	1
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—
Camden	—	—	1
Cheshire	1	6	1
Co. Durham	—	2	2
Cornwall	—	—	1
Coventry	—	1	—
Croydon	—	1	—
Cumbria	—	4	1
Darlington	—	—	—
Derby City of	—	—	—
Derbyshire	1	1	2
Devon	—	2	—
Doncaster	—	—	1
Dorset	1	—	1
Dudley	—	—	—
Ealing	—	1	—
East Riding of Yorkshire	—	—	—
East Sussex	—	1	—
Enfield	—	—	—

Table showing by local education authority the number of applications for consent to the sale of playing fields from 1 October 1998 to 6 November 2000

Local education authority	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Essex	1	1	1
Gateshead	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	1	2
Greenwich	—	—	—
Hackney	—	—	—
Halton	1	—	—
Hammersmith and Fulham	—	1	—
Hampshire	—	1	5
Haringey	—	—	—
Harrow	—	—	—
Hartlepool	—	—	—
Havering	—	—	—
Herefordshire	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	2	3
Hillingdon	—	—	—
Hounslow	—	—	—
Isle of Wight	—	—	—
Isles of Scilly	—	—	—
Islington	—	—	—
Kensington and Chelsea	—	—	—
Kent	—	4	4
Kingston upon Hull	—	—	—
Kingston upon Thames	—	—	—
Kirklees	—	1	—
Knowsley	—	—	—
Lambeth	—	—	—
Lancashire	1	3	1
Leeds	—	1	—
Leicester, City of	—	—	—
Leicestershire	—	—	—
Lewisham	—	—	—
Lincolnshire	—	—	—
Liverpool	—	—	—
London, Corporation of	—	—	—
Luton	—	—	—
Manchester	—	1	2
Medway Towns	—	—	—
Merton	—	—	—
Middlesbrough	—	—	—
Milton Keynes	1	2	—
Newcastle	1	2	1
Newham	—	—	—
Norfolk	—	1	1
North East Lincolnshire	—	—	—
North Lincolnshire	—	—	—
North Somerset	1	—	—
North Tyneside	1	—	—
North Yorkshire	1	3	—
Northamptonshire	—	—	1
Northumberland	—	2	1
Nottingham	—	2	1
Nottinghamshire	—	2	1
Oldham	—	—	—
Oxfordshire	—	2	1
Peterborough	—	—	1
Plymouth	—	—	—
Poole	—	—	—
Portsmouth	—	—	—
Reading	—	—	—
Redbridge	—	—	—
Redcar and Cleveland	—	—	—
Richmond upon Thames	—	—	—
Rochdale	—	1	—
Rotherham	—	—	—
Rutland	—	—	—
Salford	—	2	—
Sandwell	—	—	—
Sefton	—	—	—
Sheffield	—	1	—
Shropshire	—	1	—
Slough	—	—	—

Table showing by local education authority the number of applications for consent to the sale of playing fields from 1 October 1998 to 6 November 2000

Local education authority	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Solihull	—	—	—
Somerset	—	2	—
South Gloucestershire	—	—	—
South Tyneside	—	—	—
Southampton	—	1	—
Southend-on-Sea	—	—	—
Southwark	—	—	—
St. Helens	—	—	—
Staffordshire	—	2	—
Stockport	—	—	—
Stockton-on-Tees	—	—	—
Stoke-on-Trent	—	—	—
Suffolk	—	—	—
Sunderland	—	—	—
Surrey	3	6	3
Sutton	—	—	—
Swindon	—	—	—
Tameside	—	—	2
Telford and Wrekin	—	1	—
Thurrock	—	—	—
Torbay	—	—	—
Tower Hamlets	—	—	—
Trafford	—	—	1
Wakefield	2	2	—
Walsall	1	1	2
Waltham Forest	—	—	—
Wandsworth	—	1	—
Warrington	—	—	—
Warwickshire	1	6	4
West Berkshire	—	—	—
West Sussex	1	3	1
Westminster	—	1	1
Wigan	—	3	3
Wiltshire	—	2	1
Windsor and Maidenhead	—	1	—
Wirral	—	—	—
Wokingham	—	—	—
Wolverhampton	1	1	—
Worcestershire	—	—	—
York	—	—	1
Total	23	94	63

Note:
School playing fields means school playgrounds and other pupil recreation and social areas as well as grassed playing fields. It also means small areas of playing fields as well as whole playing fields.

Teacher Training

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy to include English and maths key skills qualifications within the curriculum 2000 programme at an equivalent level to GCSE English and maths for the purpose of initial teacher training. [135929]

Ms Estelle Morris: It is for initial teacher training (ITT) providers to decide which qualifications meet the Secretary of State's entry requirements and can be accepted, including those relating to the key skills of communication and application of number. Qualifications must, however, be of the equivalent standard to a GCSE grade C, or above.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many trainee teachers were recruited to initial teacher training courses from 1995–96 to 2000–01, broken down between *(a)* primary and secondary trainees, *(b)* undergraduate and postgraduate and *(c)* secondary by subject; and if he will list the Government's target for teacher recruitment in each category. [134344]

Ms Estelle Morris: Data on recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) courses starting in 2000–01 for each provider in England are not yet available. I hope they will be shortly. I will write to the hon. Member with the information as soon as possible, and will place a copy of the response in the Library.

Teacher Recruitment

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many new teachers were recruited in the last academic year. [134713]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of full-time and part-time teachers recruited to the maintained sector in England during the two most recent financial years for which data are available are shown in the table:

	1997–98	*1998–99*
New entrants	23,000	21,200
Re-entrants	29,300	27,500
Total entrants	52,300	48,700

All numbers have been rounded to the nearest 100.

The number of retirements from teaching was unusually high in 1997–98 because of changes to the Teachers Pensions Scheme introduced by the previous Administration in 1997, which meant that more teachers than usual had to be recruited for September 1997.

The number of regular teachers in the maintained sector has increased by 6,900 since January 1998 and by 3,400 since January 1999.

The gap between the spending plans of the previous Administration and the increase in unavoidable pay, price and other pressures facing schools in 1998–99 was equivalent to employing 25,000 fewer teachers. But as a result of the extra £835 million increase in both education SSA and revenue support grant, teacher numbers (including supply teachers) increased by over 4,000.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many physics graduates were recruited into teacher training in 2000–01. [134348]

Ms Estelle Morris: Data on recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) courses starting in 2000–01 for each provider in England are not yet available. I hope they will be shortly. I will write to the hon. Member with the information as soon as possible, and will place a copy of the response in the Library.

WALES

Electricity Supply

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of Welsh electricity supply was provided by nuclear power stations for each of the last 10 years. [137217]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The electricity supply in Wales is mainly provided through the national grid and it is not possible to distinguish separately the source of the electricity.

Electricity produced by the one nuclear station in Wales (Wylfa) (the second station, Trawsfynydd, closed in 1993) may be consumed in England while nuclear electricity generated in England, Scotland or France can be consumed in Wales. In 1999 Wylfa's output to the national grid was 7.2 TWh while electricity consumption in Wales is estimated to have been 16 and 17 TWh.

Departmental Expenditure Limit

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals there are to amend his Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01. [138051]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £114,572,000 from £7,693,663,000 to £7,808,235,000. The increase is a result of:

(i) the take up of end-year flexibility entitlement of £94,895,000;

(ii) net transfers to other government Departments of £252,000;

(iii) additional support of £15,309,000 for Hill Farmers and agriculture resulting from the Agriculture Minister's statement of 30 March 2000; and,

(iv) a final allocation from the Capital Modernisation Fund of £4,620,000.

The increase includes the following transfers:

(i) £1,100,000 to Class III, Vote 1 for cattle herd registration;

(ii) £1,068,000 from Class I, Vote 1 for mature student bursaries;

(iii) £150,000 from Class IV, Vote 1 for locks for pensioners;

(iv) £536,000 to Class IX, Vote 1 for Sector Challenge; and,

(v) £166,000 from Class IV, Vote 1 for Crime Prevention.

The balance will be met by a charge on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve for the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlement and the additional agriculture provision. The Capital Modernisation Fund monies will be met from the central CMF budget. None of these changes will therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

China

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the timetable and process of review of the UK/China human rights dialogue. [135766]

Mr. Battle: We conduct formal sessions of the UK/China human rights dialogue twice a year. The next session is scheduled to take place in February 2001.

We keep the dialogue process under continuous and critical review. Our object is to develop the most effective way of helping to improve human rights in China. As far as the dialogue itself is concerned, we look for ways to make it more effective, and to identify areas where we can work with the Chinese to improve the observance of human rights in specific areas.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Government will reach a decision on sponsoring a resolution on human rights in China and Tibet at the 57 United Nations Commission for Human Rights. [135769]

Mr. Battle: The Government will review their position towards a resolution on China at the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (March 2001) following the next rounds of the UK/China and EU/China human rights dialogues, both scheduled to take place in February 2001.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the UK Government made to the troika concerning the human rights content of the EU/China summit. [135768]

Mr. Battle: The position taken by the troika on the question of human rights in China at the EU/China Summit on 23 October was based on discussions among partners in September ahead of the EU/China Human Rights Dialogue on 29 September. The Government play an active role in setting the direction for EU policy towards the human rights situation in China, including the identification of key concerns and strategy for meetings with the Chinese authorities.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy relating to (1) *(a)* the balance of responsibilities between the EU and UK Government and *(b)* the proposals to the change to qualified majority voting in relation to the choice of Common Foreign and Security Policy representatives (Article 23(2)); [136054]

(2) *(a)* the balance of responsibilities between the EU and United Kingdom Government in relation to mixed agreements and *(b)* the proposals to change to qualified majority voting on mixed agreements (New Article 300 (8)); [136043]

(3) *(a)* the balance of responsibilities between the EU and UK Government and *(b)* the proposals to the change to qualified majority voting in relation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy international agreements (Article 24); [136053]

(4) *(a)* the balance of responsibilities between the EU and HM Government and *(b)* the proposals to the change to qualified majority voting in relation to association agreements (Article 300 (2)); [136047]

(5) *(a)* the balance of responsibilities between the EU and UK Government and *(b)* the proposals to change to qualified majority voting in relation to the co-operation measures under Title IV (Article 66). [136052]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 234–38W.

Press Rebuttal Unit

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 499W, if he will estimate the cost to date of providing *(a)* rebuttals of press articles on Europe and *(b)* his Department's

Euro-myths web page; who selects the items which require a rebuttal; and from where he obtains the information to be used in the rebuttals. [136102]

Mr. Vaz: I correct press articles which contain factual inaccuracies about Government policy towards Europe or our membership of the EU drawing on information held by the FCO and other Government Departments. These correctives are sent to the publication concerned and are now also published on the FCO website. There are no dedicated FCO staff assigned to this task. The only dedicated costs are of faxing or e-mailing the corrective letters, ie the cost of a local telephone call.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the constitutional issues relating to the euro; and on what dates. [136387]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State meets his Cabinet colleagues on a regular basis and discusses a wide range of issues.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what account the Government will take of the results of the Danish referendum in the timing of a possible UK referendum on replacing the pound with the euro. [136256]

Mr. Vaz: As the Prime Minister has said, this decision is a matter for the Danish people and does not change the UK Government's position. We are in favour, in principle, of joining a successful single currency, but in practice the five economic tests must be met. Should Government and Parliament recommend joining, the final decision should be for the British people in a referendum.

European Superpower

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date it became the Government's policy to support the creation of a European superpower. [136514]

Mr. Vaz: This Government have long supported a Europe which can be a superpower in its economic and political strength. The Government are firmly opposed to the establishment of a federal superstate, as the Prime Minister made clear in Warsaw in October.

UN Human Rights Inquiry Commission

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to request that the Human Rights Inquiry Commission established by the UN Human Rights Commission *(a)* includes forensic and ballistic experts and *(b)* is given the means to conduct their investigations. [136454]

Mr. Hain: The Human Rights Inquiry Commission has yet to be endorsed by a special session of the Economic and Social Council to be convened in New York.

(a) It is for the UNCHR Inquiry Commission to decide who the members should be and what skills will be required.

(b) It is our understanding that a voluntary contribution has already been offered by a third party to ensure the investigations could be conducted successfully.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures Her Majesty's Government will take to support the investigation of the Human Rights Inquiry Commission established by the UN Human Rights Commission to collect information about violations of human rights and international law committed by the Israeli occupying power in the occupied Palestinian territories since 28 September. [136452]

Mr. Hain: The Human Rights Inquiry Commission has yet to be endorsed by a special session of the Economic and Social Council to be convened in New York.

However, we strongly encourage both Israelis and Palestinians to take action on any human rights abuses that might have been committed during the recent troubles. We would expect both sides to co-operate fully with an internationally approved human rights inquiry.

British Council

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future role of the British Council in Zambia. [136642]

Mr. Hain: The British Council has recently completed a strategic review of its operations around the world. It will continue to operate in Zambia with a focus on governance and education. The Council will retain its public information centre which, through modern internet facilities, will offer ready access to the widest possible range of information. Additional support services will be provided from a regional hub in Zimbabwe. Having recently visited Lusaka, I can vouch for the excellent work the Council is doing in Zambia.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future role of the British Council in Malawi. [136641]

Mr. Hain: The British Council has recently completed a strategic review of its operations around the world. It will continue to operate in Malawi with a focus on governance and education. The Council will retain its public information centre which, through modern internet facilities, will offer ready access to the widest possible range of information. Additional support services will be provided from a regional hub in Zimbabwe. Having recently visited Lilongwe, I can vouch for the excellent work the Council is doing in Malawi.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria are applied when appointing the Chairman of the British Council, with particular reference to the political views of candidates. [136238]

Mr. Hain: No criteria are applied relating to the political views of candidates when appointing the Chairman of the British Council. The criteria used include: an impressive record of achievement in the candidate's chosen field; a high level of strategic and representational skills with the vision and flair to inspire and enthuse; an international perspective and sympathy

with the Council's aims; and a personal presence commensurate with the international profile of the appointment.

Whaling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have for placing sanctions on Japanese vessels in connection with scientific whaling. [136803]

Mr. Hain: We have expressed our total opposition to the Japanese Government on numerous occasions. The UK would need to discuss any proposal for trade sanctions against Japanese vessels in connection with Japan's research whaling programme with our EU partners, since external trade matters fall within the competence of the EU. In addition, there are currently no Japanese fishing vessels operating within UK domestic waters.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place with the Government of Japan concerning their decision to expand the scientific whaling programme to the Southern Ocean Sanctuary; and if he will make a statement. [136938]

Mr. Hain: In our numerous discussions, the Japanese Government have been left in no doubt as to our total opposition to their expanded whaling programme in the North Pacific and their continued research whaling in the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. Both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have raised this issue with their Japanese counterparts. As Minister responsible for whaling issues, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food spoke very powerfully against the Japanese decision at the last IWC meeting in Adelaide in June.

International Criminal Court Treaty

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government have taken with other European Union member states to resist efforts by the United States to create an exception for US nationals in the International Criminal Court Treaty. [137324]

Mr. Hain: We have made clear to the US, both bilaterally and with our EU partners, our concerns about their proposal. We continue to hope the United States will come on board in support of the International Criminal Court. A court with the United States as a member would be very much stronger. However, any solution to their concerns must, if it is to receive support, respect the integrity of the Rome Statute and maintain the effectiveness of the court.

Pakistan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the military Government of Pakistan on its programme for returning to democracy. [137386]

Mr. Hain: We continue to press Pakistan's military regime for the early and credible timetable for the restoration of democracy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his colleagues of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group strongly underlined this to Pakistan's Foreign Minister during their meeting in New York on 15 September.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to amend his Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138156]

Mr. Hain: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class VII Vote I, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £96,723,000 from £1,113,610,000 to £1,210,333,000 and running cost limit will be increased by £17,989,000 from £513,993,000 to £531,982,000. The increase is the net effect of:

(i) additional provision of £73,935,000 on Section B for UK contributions to United Nations Missions in the former Yugoslavia (includes UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo) and the former Soviet Union, United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (Iraq), United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission, United Nations Mission for the Referendum on Western Sahara, United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor, United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, the United Nations International Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Community Monitoring Mission and Western European Union Police Mission in Albania;

(ii) take up of end year flexibility of £16,264,000 for running costs and £4,799,000 for capital expenditure;

(iii) a successful bid of £1,725,000 against the Capital Modernisation Fund approved by the Chief Secretary.

Belize

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he has taken in response to recent territorial claims on Belize by Guatemala; and if he will make a statement. [137325]

Mr. Battle: The UK has encouraged both parties to remain in constructive talks under the auspices of the Organisation of American States, in order to find a peaceful resolution to the border dispute.

The UK continues to support Belize's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We will provide legal assistance in Belize's efforts to demarcate its land and maritime. We continue to make our views clear to both sides.

Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he received between November 1999 and November 2000 on *(a)* the timing and *(b)* the content of strategic export controls legislation from (i) non-Governmental organisations including voluntary and charitable groups, (ii) commercial interests, companies and trade organisations and (iii) other categories; and if he will make a statement. [136604]

Mr. Hain: I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry today. (UIN 136001)

EU Enlargement

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those countries for which it is Government policy that they should ultimately be permitted to join the European Union. [136230]

Mr. Vaz: There are currently 13 candidates for membership of the European Union (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey).

In addition, as Articles 49 and 6(1) of the Treaty on European Union make clear, membership of the European Union is open to any European state which respects

> the principals of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law.

This includes the countries of the Western Balkans who are all potential candidates for EU membership.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which relocation companies hold contracts with her Department for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137196]

Clare Short: Crown Worldwide Ltd. provide relocation services to my Department for staff taking up or returning from assignments overseas. A three year contract, with the option of a two year extension, was signed in April 1998. It was advertised in October 1997 in the *International Freight Weekly*, *EU Journal*, *Government Opportunities* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The option for the two year extension was taken up in May 2000 and the contract will expire on 31 March 2003. The contract has no financial value, we pay for services provided. There is no contractual arrangement for relocation within the UK and staff are required to seek competitive tenders from three companies.

Misuse of Aid

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of corruption in projects administered by the United Nations. [136627]

Clare Short: The Board of Auditors, whose membership currently includes the UK Comptroller and Auditor General, acts as external auditor of the accounts of the UN, its funds and programmes.

Expenditure

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what changes will be made to the Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for her Department in 2000–01. [138012]

Clare Short: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, for Class VIII, Vote 1: Department for International Development, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £8,546,000 from £2,113,186,000 to £2,121,732,000 for voted expenditure giving a total of voted and non-voted expenditure of £2,759,768,000. The running cost limit for the Department for International Development will be increased by £3,985,000. The increase is the net effect of:

> an increase of £2,560,988 in respect of the carry forward of underspends from 1999–2000 on the International Development Vote;
>
> a DETR transfer of £2,000,000 in respect of the environmental know how fund;
>
> an allocation of £485,000 under the civil service modernisation fund allocation to the running costs budget;
>
> the drawing down of £3,500,000 from our running costs entitlement to end-year.

The increase will be met by transfers or from the DEL reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Great Lakes

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the development of a regional policy for the Great Lakes region of Africa. [136458]

Clare Short: We are strongly involved in supporting Rwanda's recovery and development and in supporting Uganda's development. We are also very supportive of the Lusaka peace process. We hope to support other countries' lead in Burundi. We have decided to undertake some analysis in the Department to deepen our understanding of the regional context. It would be an exaggeration to call this a regional policy.

Horn of Africa (Drought)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the drought in the Horn of Africa region. [136623]

Clare Short: The UN Special Envoy of the Secretary General for the drought in the Horn of Africa, Ms Catherine Bertini, visited Kenya and Ethiopia between 17–23 September. She found that there has been progress in addressing the effects of drought in the Horn of Africa region since April; food and non-food assistance provided through the United Nations, non-governmental organisations and Government has prevented a famine and set the foundation for recovery. Almost 1 million tonnes of food was delivered to drought affected people in the Horn of Africa countries between January and August 2000. She reported that the crisis is not over and millions of people are still at risk, and recommended that relief needs in the region should be reassessed this month with a new Interagency Relief Drought Appeal for the Horn of Africa being issued in December. We continue to respond to needs as they arise.

Cambodia

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding her Department has given in each of the last three years to Cambodia,

indicating the projects for which aid was given; what recent request she has received for aid for flood relief; and if she will make a statement. [137323]

Mr. Foulkes: The table provides the detail on our funding and projects in Cambodia:

Cambodia	*1997–98 (£000)*	*1998–99 (£000)*	*1999–2000 (£000)*	*Total (£000)*	*Status*
Secondary English Teaching Project (CAMSET I and II)	808	764	863	2,090	Active
Phnom Penh Urban Poverty Project, Phase I	281	238	280	799	Complete
Health Sector Reform Project, Phase II and III	256	790	964	1,793	Active
Social Marketing of Contraceptives, Phase I and II	252	777	239	1,226	Active
Reproductive Health/Family Planning and Sexual Health	800	509	55	1,809	Complete
Malaria Project, Phase II	362	61	—	423	Complete
CONCERN Rural Development Project	—	—	117	117	Active
Support for Elections—UNDP Trust Fund	—	448	40	488	Complete
Support to Illegal Logging Unit	—	—	200	200	Complete
HIV/AIDS Care in the Community Support	63	12	28	28	Active
VSO EQIP (Education) Project	—	—	11	11	Active
Small Grants Scheme: Projects	102	120	120	342	Active
UNDP Reconciliation Project, Anlong Veng	—	150	—	150	Complete
Demining	—	200	—	200	Complete
Humanitarian Mine Action	442	693	2,810	3,945	Active
Joint Funding Scheme	694	629	522	1,845	Active
Other	712	171	364	1,247	Active
Total	4,772	5,562	7,058	17,392	

We have allocated £1.25 million to alleviate the suffering of flood victims in Cambodia. This includes £250,000 through the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), £500,000 through UNICEF and £500,000 for international non-governmental organisations. In addition, Cambodia will benefit from a part of the £600,000 allocated to the IFRC flood appeal for the Mekong region. We have contributed a further £125,000 as our share of the EU humanitarian aid package.

A detailed statement on our support for development in Cambodia is contained in the Country Strategy Paper published in March this year. A copy is in the House of Commons Library.

Fishing (West Africa)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of fishing by western countries off the coast of West Africa on development in that region. [136622]

Clare Short: The Government have provided substantial support to countries of the West African region for the implementation of the international Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. This is a five-year programme which is being delivered through a partnership with the FAO and countries of the region. It will strengthen West African countries' capacities to manage their coastal fisheries. It is focused on the needs of small-scale, artisanal fishers and programme resources will be available to support those communities' impacted by the activities of foreign vessels.

We are also undertaking a series of studies of the impact of foreign fishing on West Africa.

HEALTH

Synthetic Human Antibody Research

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how long he estimates it will take successfully to complete his Department's synthetic human antibody research; what is the estimated cost of completing the remaining research in the project; and if he will make a statement. [135691]

Mr. Denham: The Department is not undertaking synthetic antibody research.

Rothbury Community Hospital, Northumberland

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his latest estimate of the date by which work will have commenced on the new Rothbury Community Hospital, Northumberland. [136552]

Mr. Hutton: The new community hospital at Rothbury is part of Phase II of the redevelopment of Wansbeck General Hospital. The Full Business Case for the scheme is in the final stages of approval and a decision is expected very soon. Until then, however, a definitive start date cannot be given.

Tinnitus

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the therapies and pharmacological solutions available on the NHS to counter the effects of tinnitus; and if he will commission research on this subject. [136202]

Yvette Cooper: There are a number of therapies available to treat tinnitus. While maskers are available, which emit sounds that counteract the tinnitus noises, treatment currently focuses on an cognitive approach to the problem such as relaxation techniques to reduce stress

levels, and listening to surf sound tapes to cover the tinnitus noises. Many patients manage their condition without medical intervention.

There is currently no pharmacological solution available to treat tinnitus.

The main agency through which we support medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council (MRC). MRC always welcomes high-quality applications for support into any aspect of human health and these are judged in open competition with other demands on funding. Awards are made according to their scientific quality and importance to human health.

The Department currently has no plans to commission any research on tinnitus in relation to its Policy Research Programme and National Health Service research and development programmes.

NHS Patients

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will instruct the Chief Executive of the NHS to provide patients with the option of a disclaimer allowing them to refuse treatment in private units. [137110]

Mr. Denham: The option of a disclaimer allowing patients to refuse treatment in private units is unnecessary.

The concept of consent is implicit in the relationship between the general practitioner and the patient. The current Patient's Charter sets out the right

> to be referred to a consultant acceptable to the patient, when the GP thinks it is necessary.

This means that the GP will advise of the consultant(s) he/she considers will give the best medical treatment, on the basis of clinical need and the expertise available, and the patient can choose which of those offered are acceptable.

If a patient is offered National Health Service treatment, which the GP in his/her professional opinion considers necessary, in a setting which the patient finds unacceptable and the patient decides not to take up that treatment, that is their choice.

Private Hospitals (Standards)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures the Government are taking to ensure high standards of *(a)* medical care, *(b)* personal care and *(c)* hygiene and cleanliness in private hospitals. [136842]

Ms Stuart: Independent healthcare is currently regulated under the Registered Homes Act 1984. We recognise the deficiencies with the present system and that it has not kept pace with the developments in independent healthcare over the past two decades. We are therefore putting in place a new modern regulatory framework for the independent healthcare sector, through the Care Standards Act 2000. One of the main elements of the Act is to establish a new independent body, the National Care Standards Commission, which will regulate independent hospitals to proper modern standards. The Act will put in place a regulatory system that will ensure the delivery of quality services, proper accountability by the provider, and flexibility to allow the regulatory framework to respond to developments in the healthcare field.

To ensure consistency and quality of service provision, the Commission will inspect against national minimum standards currently being developed for private acute hospitals having regard to those standards which already apply to National Health Service hospitals. This will ensure that patients can have confidence in the quality and safety of medical and personal care, hygiene and cleanliness. The development of the national minimum standards is being undertaken in consultation with patients, providers, inspectors, healthcare professionals and specialists. Once the standards are developed they will be the subject of a full public consultation in April 2001.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to amend his Department's and the Food Standards Agency's departmental expenditure and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138157]

Mr. Milburn: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates for Class II, Votes 1 and 4 the overall Departmental Expenditure Limit for Class II which includes the Department of Health and the Foods Standard Agency, will be increased by £61,213,000 from £45,029,542,000 to £45,090,755,000.

Of this increase the Department of Health Departmental Expenditure limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £49,616,000 from £44,948,272,000 to £44,997,888,000. The increase is the net effect of changes to Class II, Vote 1 (Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England) of £48,357,000 made up £50,000,000 from HM Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund for Modernising Coronary Heart Disease services. In addition the following transfers will take place; £1,357,000 from the Scottish Executive, (£47,000) for the High Security Infectious Diseases Unit and (£1,310,000) for Out of Area Treatments. The overall increase is partially offset by a transfer of £3,000,000 to Class I, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment) for the Queen Mary Westfield Tomlinson merger.

An increase of £1,256,000 for Class II, Vote 2 (Department of Health, administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England) is the net effect of transfers (detailed below) and £6,500,000 take-up of end year flexibility (as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper "Cm 4812" published on 18 July 2000) and £1,795,000 (running costs) from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund, transfers of £75,000 (running costs) from Class IX, Vote 2 (Department of Trade and Industry: science) for the human genetics commission and £36,000 from Class IV, Vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, immigration and other services, England and Wales) for central treatment fund pilot projects. The overall increase is partially offset by transfers of £4,000,000 to Class I, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) for the standards fund, £3,000,000 to Class IV, Vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, immigration and other services, England and Wales) for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and £150,000 to Class III, Vote 2 (Environment, Transport and regions: Planning, roads, local transport and vehicle safety) for mobility centres.

Within the Departmental DEL there is also a transfer of £11,837,000 from Class II, Vote 2 (Department of Health, administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England) to Class II, Vote 1 (Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England).

The Department of Health's gross running cost limit will be increased by £1,870,000 from £300,620,000 to £302,490,000 as detailed above.

The take-up of non-voted supplementary credit approvals for personal social services (DoH/LACAP) in England has increased by £3,000 from £18,700,000 to £18,703,000 in respect of take up of end-year flexibility entitlement as mentioned above.

The Food Standards Agency Departmental Expenditure limit will also be increased by £11,597,000 from £81,270,000 to £92,867,000. The increase is the net effect of the take-up of end-year flexibility of £8,366,000 (of which £1,000,000 is running costs) from the Department of Health, an allocation of £375,000 (of which £280,000 is running costs) from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund and transfers of £2,856,000 from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food comprising £1,600,000 (of which £350,000 is running costs) to cover set up costs of the Agency which fell in 2000–01 rather than 1999–2000 as originally planned, and £1,256,000 (of which £1,125,000 is running costs) for the additional responsibilities taken on by the Agency

The Food Standards Agency's gross running costs limit will increase by £2,755,000 from £104,835,000 to £107,590,000 as detailed above.

All increases will either be offset by transfers to or from other Departmental Expenditure Limits (detailed above) or charges to the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Social Services (Overspending)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reports he has received this year from the Association of Directors of Social Services regarding overspending by local authorities on personal social services; and what the conclusions were of these reports. [137122]

Mr. Hutton: I have not formally received a report from the Association of Directors of Social Services on this matter. However, the Department is in close touch with officers of the Association on a wide range of topics. The conclusions of any work by the Association on levels of spending on personal social services are a matter for the Association.

Community Hospitals

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the role of community hospitals in the NHS 10 year national plan. [137404]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Plan announced a major programme of investment in intermediate care and related services to promote independence and improved quality of care for older people.

As part of this investment, there will be 5,000 extra intermediate care beds by 2004, and the Plan makes it clear that some of these will be in community hospitals.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what consideration he gave to the PFI bid to build a new community hospital in Lymington as a separate project from other community hospitals; [137403]

(2) for what reasons he rejected the PFI bid to build a new community hospital in Lymington; [137405]

(3) if he will make a statement about the future of the proposed new community hospital at Lymington. [137402]

Mr. Denham: Each private finance initiative (PFI) scheme is considered on its own merits and will only be approved if it is clearly demonstrated that the PFI option delivers better value for money to the National Health Service and the taxpayer when compared to the publicly funded alternative.

Despite intensive efforts by the NHS, the Lymington Community Hospital PFI proposal did not produce a viable value for money solution. It was therefore decided to terminate negotiations with the PFI preferred bidder.

The local NHS will now conduct a review with all key stakeholders to assess possible options to deliver the required facilities in Lymington. The outcome will be announced as soon as possible.

In-patient Treatment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were waiting for in-patient treatment for *(a)* cancer, *(b)* heart disease and *(c)* HIV and hepatitis in each of the last 10 years in the (i) Sutton and Cheam constituency and (ii) Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority. [134984]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We do not hold all of the information in the format required. Data are collated by health authority as opposed to parliamentary constituency.

Waiting lists for in-patient treatment for heart disease are held under cardiothoracic surgery and cardiology waiting lists. The figures for Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth are as follows. Data were collected only from 1996–97 onwards.

Total number of inpatients waiting for ordinary/daycase admission as at 31 March

Year	*Cardiology*	*Cardiothoracic surgery*
1996–97	260	84
1997–98	347	194
1998–99	313	156
1999–2000	350	149

Information on in-patient waiting times is collected by consultant speciality. Treatment for cancer, HIV and hepatitis is carried out in a number of specialities and the numbers waiting for treatment are therefore not identifiable separately.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetables

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve the access to fresh fruit and vegetables to those living in areas with limited shopping facilities. [136587]

Yvette Cooper: *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The National Health Service Plan published in July set out our plans to increase access to fruit and vegetables and make a healthy diet a real choice for everyone. We will work with producers, retailers and others to increase provision and access to fruit and vegetables, particularly in deprived communities, schools and hospitals.

Five local five-a-day pilot initiatives are already underway in Sandwell, Somerset, Airedale and Craven, County Durham and Hastings. These projects aim to increase access to fruit and vegetables across the whole population, but all have a particular focus on improving access to fruit and vegetables for the worst off. The pilots are being carefully evaluated. Based on the lessons from these pilots, and evidence of effective interventions to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, these local initiatives will be developed across the country.

The National School Fruit Scheme will make a free piece of fruit available to school children aged four to six each school day. Pilots will examine the practicalities of the scheme before national roll-out begins.

Hospital Mortuaries

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which organisation is responsible for setting the necessary minimum standard for hospital mortuaries. [137232]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Clinical Pathology Accreditation (UK) Ltd. (CPA) oversees accreditation of National Health Service pathology laboratories which include standards for mortuary and post mortem facilities. In addition, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) carries responsibility for mortuaries in the same capacity as for any other hospital facility. The HSE's Health Services Advisory Committee is currently revising its publication "Safe working and the prevention of infection in the mortuary and post-mortem room".

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the NHS hospital mortuaries which fail to meet necessary minimum standards. [137236]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Hospital mortuaries are accredited as part of the National Health Service pathology services and are not separately identified.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to establish that NHS hospital mortuaries meet the necessary minimum standard. [137233]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* National Health Service pathology laboratory services have responsibility for the standard of hospital mortuaries, as part of accreditation. The Department supported the development of Clinical Pathology Accreditation (CPA) Ltd., the main accreditation body in the United Kingdom. CPA sets standards for laboratory services, inspects laboratories, including mortuaries, against the standards and reports to hospital chief executives.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 603W, (1) when he expects remedial action to be taken to bring the mortuary at Trafford General Hospital to the necessary minimum standard; [137237]

(2) what funding will be provided to achieve the necessary minimum standards at the mortuary of Trafford General Hospital. [137238]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* £8,550 was made available in 1998 to ensure that the mortuary at Trafford General Hospital met the minimum standards. As part of this process, work carried out included:

internal and external decoration;

work on the body stores (including replacement panels and thermometers);

a full steam clean;

a repair to the roof; as well as

a revamp of the relatives' viewing area.

Trafford Healthcare National Health Service Trust is now in the process of developing a business case for a new mortuary and has the support of the North West Regional Office of the NHS Executive, in doing so.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 603W, what inquiries he has made into the reasons why expenditure on the mortuary at Trafford General Hospital in 1998 failed to bring the facility to the necessary minimum standard. [137239]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* As a result of the funding made available in 1998, the current mortuary facilities at Trafford General Hospital do meet the minimum standards.

Salford and Trafford Health Authority is satisfied that the facilities at Trafford General Hospital do not pose a risk to patients and staff alike. As in the rest of the hospital, infection control procedures are in place and are monitored regularly.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the NHS hospital mortuaries which have been visited by Ministers in his Department since May 1997. [137240]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* None of the current Ministers at the Department have so far been able to visit an NHS mortuary as part of their visits to the service. We will though keep this possibility in mind for future visit programmes.

Hospices

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what resources he plans to make available to help fund hospices.; [137251]

(2) if hospices will be eligible for financial help as part of the Government's commitment to cancer services. [137252]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* We are committed to providing an additional £50 million for hospices by 2004 as announced in the National Health Service Cancer Plan published on 27 September. This will bring the total NHS spend on hospices to £150 million, which will be equal to the amount provided by the voluntary sector. The £50 million investment will be used to end inequalities in access to specialist palliative care and enable the NHS to make a more realistic contribution to the cost hospices incur in providing agreed levels of service.

In order to ensure that the additional funding is allocated effectively and equitably, we will work with hospices and the NHS to define the core components of palliative care services.

In addition to the £50 million there will be a further New Opportunities Fund initiative for community palliative care services over the period 2001–05. A consultation document was be published on 8 November 2000.

Osteopaths

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the working of the Osteopaths Act 1993 and the composition of the Council. [137118]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* Members of Parliament raised a number of concerns about the operation of the Osteopaths Act and the composition of the General Osteopathic Council during an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall on 25 October 2000. I undertook to investigate these concerns and am now doing so.

Cancer Screening Programmes

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many lives are estimated to have been saved in each of the last three years in *(a)* Coventry, South and *(b)* nationally by (i) breast screening programmes, (ii) cervical screening programmes and (iii) cancer screening programmes. [136582]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* There are currently two national screening programmes, for breast cancer and cervical cancer, and a pilot study which is investigating screening for colorectal cancer.

No statistics are available to show how many lives were saved by breast and cervical screening in Coventry, South in the last three years.

Research published in 1999 estimated that the NHS Cervical Screening Programme saved over 8,000 lives between 1988 and 1997. It is estimated to have prevented up to 3,900 cases of cervical cancer each year.

No information is available on how many lives have been saved in total by all the cancer screening programmes.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ministerial Engagements

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on how many occasions he has made official visits to *(a)* the opera and *(b)* the ballet since May 1997. [136392]

Mr. Chris Smith: Since May 1997 I have attended 20 operas and six ballet performances in an official capacity. I have also attended numerous opera and ballet performances privately.

Sports Clubs

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about (1) tax relief and exemptions for community and amateur sports clubs; and if he will make a statement; [135649]

(2) charitable status for community and amateur sports clubs; and if he will make a statement. [135648]

Kate Hoey: Since 21 June 2000, I have received representations from the following sports clubs and organisations regarding both tax exemptions and charitable status for community and amateur sports clubs; Sefton Sports Council, Thanet Local Sports Council, Waltham Forest Sports Council, Chelsfield Park Lawn Tennis Club, Blackpool and Fylde Fullbore Pistol and Rifle Club, Portcastrian Rugby Club, Saltash Rugby Football Club, Lymm Rugby Football Club, York Cricket & Rugby Union Football Club. I have also received a number of letters from members of the public. The CCPR and Sport England have also made representations on the benefits of tax exemptions as well as a number of MPs and sport people.

Lee Valley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* the Minister for Sport have had with (i) members and (ii) representatives of the International Olympic Committee about the suitability of the proposed Lee Valley Stadium as a venue for track and field athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies of a London Olympic Games; and if he will make a statement. [134844]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Apart from discussions with Craig Reedie, in his capacity as Chair of the British Olympic Association, neither myself nor my right hon. Friend have discussed the proposed Lee Valley Stadium with representatives of the International Olympic Committee.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to amend his Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138172]

Mr. Chris Smith: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class XI, Vote 1, the DCMS Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL)

for 2000–01 will be increased by £15,679,000 from £1,014,886,000 to £1,030,565,000 and the running costs limit by £2,284,000 from £32,972,000 to £35,256,000.

This is to provide for the use of £2,240,000 of the proceeds from the sale by the British Library of 25 Southampton Buildings for meeting commitments under the Comprehensive Spending Review to various national museums and galleries; and for the use of £521,000 of the sale proceeds for meeting commitments against research, surveys and other services; to provide £2,500,000 for the development of Culture On-Line; to take up DEL end-year flexibility of £10,405,000 on programme expenditure as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper (Cm 4812) published on 18 July 2000; a transfer of £950,000 from the Department for Education and Employment (Class I, Vote 14) for awards to dance and drama students; a transfer of £300,000 to the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (Class III, Vote 4) for the maintenance of Trafalgar Square and Parliament Square following the transfer to the Greater London Authority from 1 October 2000; a payment of £210,000 from the Department of Trade and Industry (Class IX, Vote 1) for Sector Challenge funding of media projects; to take up DEL end-year flexibility of £1,448,000 on running costs expenditure as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper (Cm 4812) published on 18 July 2000; a transfer of £676,000 from the Cabinet Office for modernising Government expenses; and to provide for receipts of £1,816,000 from the National Lottery Distribution Fund to meet additional costs of the National Lottery Commission in the appointment of a new Lottery operator and the implementation of the licence.

The increases will be offset by transfers, savings or a charge on the DEL Reserve, and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals there are to amend the Scotland Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138204]

Dr. Reid: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class XIII, Vote 1 Scotland and Transfers to the Scottish Consolidated Fund, the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) for 2000–01 will be increased by £428,073,000 from £14,877,655,000 to £15,305,728,000. As I previously announced to the Scottish Affairs Select Committee on 29 March 2000, the net running costs limit for the Scotland Office will be increased by £1,047,000 from £5,455,000 to £6,502,000 (net of receipts of £120,000).

The changes in DEL include the take-up of end-year flexibility of £444,418,000, offset by a reduction of £32,583,000 for the recovery of European Structural Funds provision drawn forward from 2000–01 and other adjustments agreed in the context of Spending Review 2000; and transfers from the DEL reserve of £8,500,000 for additional funding for the Forestry Commission for lower than expected timber sales, and £150,000 for the Giving Age.

Also included in the revised DEL are transfers to and from other Government Departments amounting to a net increase of £12,619,000. These include;

(i) £13,454,000 from DfEE (Class I, Vote 1) for the Open University;

(ii) £2,527,000 from DSS (Class XII, Vote 3) for resettlement programmes;

(iii) £1,900,000 to MAFF (Class X, Vote 1) for cattle herd registration costs;

(iv) £120,000 to DSS (Class XII Vote 2) for housing benefit for intercalating students;

(v) £1,310,000 to DH (Class II, Vote 1) for the costs of Scottish residents treated in England.

The increase in DEL will be offset by transfers from other Departmental Expenditure Limits or from the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

PRIME MINISTER

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Burden: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to change the Cabinet Office: Security and Intelligence Services Vote Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01. [138154]

The Prime Minister: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for Class XVII, Vote 2 will be increased by £18,486,000 from £771,100,000 to £789,586,000 and the gross running cost limit will be increased by £10,455,000 from £412,193,000 to £422,648,000.

The change is to effect the transfer of £687,000 from the Modernisation of Government Fund, the take up of the Treasury contribution of £16,790,000 towards a capital project, the take up of running costs end-year flexibility of £500,000 and the take up of other current expenditure end-year flexibility of £509,000.

There will be an increase in Appropriations in Aid of £2,968,000 and a net increase in other current expenditure of £6,877,000.

The increases in provision will be offset by increased receipts or charged to the Reserve and therefore will not add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he received between November 1999 and November 2000 on *(a)* the timing and *(b)* the content of strategic export controls legislation from (i) non-Governmental organisations including voluntary and charitable groups, (ii) commercial interests, companies and trade organisations and (iii) other categories; and if he will make a statement. [136603]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. and learned Member to the answer given to him today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to amend his Department's Departmental Expenditure Limits and the Northern Ireland Office expenditure limits for 2000–01. [138027]

Mr. Ingram: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class XV, Vote 1 the Northern Ireland Office Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £96,362,000 from £1,025,202,000 to £1,121,564,000. The running costs limit will be increased by £37,490,000 from £227,371,000 to £264,861,000.

An increase of £36,465,000 is required for costs associated with the implementation of the Patten Report, an additional £36,300,000 to cover prison officer redundancy costs, an increase of £1,390,000 in respect of costs arising from the Good Friday Agreement and £25,174,000 is required to cover increased costs of compensation payments under the various compensation schemes. Additionally £1,733,000 will be transferred from the Northern Ireland Departments DEL to cover costs incurred during the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Northern Ireland Departments DEL decreases from £5,201,636,000 to £5,199,903,000.

At the time of the presentation of the Main Estimates the Northern Ireland Office DEL was overstated by £4,700,000 and this has been included in the revised DEL stated.

These increases will be offset by a transfer from the Northern Ireland Departments DEL and a charge on the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Solicitor-General what plans he has to amend the Law Officers' Department's Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138194]

The Solicitor-General: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates for Class V, Vote 4 (The Crown Prosecution Service) and Class V, Vote 6 (HM Procurator General and Treasury Solicitor) the Law Officers' Departments' departmental expenditure limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £18,486,000 from £351,061,000 to £369,547,000.

The Crown Prosecution Service's running costs limit will be increased by £15,540,000 from £229,625,000 to £245,165,000. This increase is required to fund diversity and equality issues, a performance improvement programme, training for the Human Rights Act 1998 and pilots on direct communication of prosecution decisions with victims. An increase in capital expenditure of £2,650,000 will be used to fund joint CPS/police criminal justice and trial units, modernisation of the CPS information technology infrastructure and better integration with police IT systems.

HM Procurator General and Treasury Solicitor's running costs limit will increase by £260,000 from £6,172,000 to £6,432,000. The increase in running costs is to facilitate action being taken by Treasury Solicitor's Department as part of their Modernising Government Action Plan. The increase in capital expenditure of £36,000 will be used to fund continued expansion of the Department's IT systems.

The increases will be partly offset by a transfer of £4,650,000 from the Home Office, an allocation of £1,500,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund, an allocation of £1,000,000 from the Invest to Modernise Fund and the surrender of £36,000 of the Law Officers' Departments' end year flexibility of £4,565,000 as set out in Table 7 of the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper Cm. 4812 published 18 July 2000. The remainder of the expenditure will be charged to the Reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Road Noise (A5)

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the noise nuisance level to local residents of the surface of the A5 at Wibtoft on the Warwickshire/Leicestershire border. [136945]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

The noise level on the A5 at Wibtoft has been calculated at 75.77db(A). This is below the defined noise level of 80db(A) which forms part of the sift criteria for dealing with traffic noise on existing trunk roads. May I refer the hon. Member to the written answer on noise mitigation given on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 50–51W.

GM Food

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps have been taken to ensure that prohibited GM foods do not enter the UK market. [137349]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has written to food manufactures, retailers and local authorities pointing out that it is an offence under the Novel Foods and Novel Food Ingredients Regulations 1997 to sell foods containing non-approved genetically modified ingredients. Prosecution is a matter for local authorities.

Flax and Hemp

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if subsidy for growing flax and hemp is paid to farmers on the basis of the area harvested or the area planted. [135502]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The amount of flax and hemp subsidy paid is based on the smallest total area declared by the grower on the following documents:

the IACS declaration (area planted)

the Cultivation Declaration (area emerged)

the Harvest Declaration (area harvested).

The areas declared may be subject to a reduction following field inspections by officials of the Agriculture departments.

Sheep Dips

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the chemicals licensed for the purpose of dipping sheep; and what research he has carried out into the effects of each of these chemicals, and the solutions contained in them, used for dipping sheep, on *(a)* humans, *(b)* soil and aquatic life and *(c)* sheep, with particular reference to genetic damage caused. [136207]

Ms Quin: The exact formulations of veterinary medicinal products are subject to commercial confidentiality. The only active ingredients authorised for use in sheep dips in the UK are diazinon, flumethrin, cypermethrin, high-cis cypermethrin and amitraz.

No veterinary medicine is authorised in the UK unless it meets statutory criteria for safety, quality and efficacy. This includes assessments of the risk to humans, to animals and to the environment. All of the active ingredients currently authorised for use in sheep dips have been through such assessments and have been shown to be non-genotoxic in a range of suitable assays.

Baytril

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the resistance conferring antibiotic Baytril used in treating growing turkeys and chickens. [137179]

Ms Quin: Baytril 10 per cent. Oral Solution is an authorised veterinary medicinal product. It is used only under veterinary supervision to treat bacterial diseases of the respiratory and alimentary tracts in turkeys, broilers, broiler breeders and replacement chickens. No veterinary medicinal product may be marketed in the UK unless it meets stringent criteria of safety, quality and efficacy. For any new antibiotic, data are required to demonstrate the possibility of the development of resistance in susceptible organisms.

The advice of the independent Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) will be sought urgently on the decision by the US Food and Drug Agency's Center for Veterinary Medicines to prohibit the use in poultry of enrofloxacin, the active ingredient of Baytril. Action will be taken on the advice of the VPC.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the average farmer's income *(a)* in Wales and *(b)* broken down by the smallest regional level for which figures are available, in each of the last five years. [136839]

Ms Quin: The information requested is given in the table. The data are not available at a smaller regional level.

Table 1: Average net farm income for full-time farm businesses in Wales

Net farm income (average per farm)	*£000*
1994–95	11.6
1995–96	23.2
1996–97	18.7
1997–98	11.4
1998–99	5.8

Source:
Farm Business Survey

Flooding (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he proposes to take to aid the business community affected by the recent floods in Lewes. [136567]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have the utmost sympathy for all those affected by the flooding but no Government assistance is available, either to householders or businesses, as flooding is an insurable risk.

I have written to my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to bring to her attention the concerns expressed by the hon. Member, during the Adjournment Debate on 25 October, about deadlines for VAT and tax returns.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to amend the Forestry Commission's Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01. [138192]

Mr. Morley: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class X, Vote 3 (Forestry Commission) the Forestry Commission's Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £18,040,000 from £58,025,000 to £76,065,000 £12,600,000 of the increase is the net effect of a fall in receipts from sales of timber offset by savings in other net expenditure, and a further £740,000 has been awarded from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund. These increases totalling £13,340,000 will be a a charge on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

An award of £4,700,000 from the Capital Modernisation fund brings the total additional requirement to £18,040,000.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes are proposed to the Departmental Expenditure Limit for his Department for 2000–01. [138191]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) will be increased by £205,550,000 from £1,157,390,000 to £1,362,859,000.

The increase is the net effect of an Intervention Board (IB) increase of £5.393 million arising from delayed costs associated with IT systems and services, the introduction of facilities to UK traders across certain schemes to receive payment in euros in line with the ministerial statement of November 1998 and increased levels of charges paid to agents; and MAFF increases of

£54.3 million to implement the Action Plan for Farming; £2.669 million for successful projects under Modernising Government initiatives; £30 million in lieu of End-Year Flexibility (EYF); transfers from the Scotland Office (SERAD) and the Wales Office (NAWAD) totalling £3 million relating to work on the Cattle Herd Registration Scheme; £13 million for implementing the Agenda 2000 reforms; and £9.735 million to repay advances from the Contingencies Fund and a further £90.309 million provision in respect of payments in 1999–2000 and 2000–01 arising out of the Factortame Judgment. These increases are offset by transfers to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) totalling £2.856 million, being their share of MAFF's EYF and funding for work transferred to the Agency following its formation in April 2000.

Within the DEL there will be a transfer of £14 million from MAFF to IB to cover the costs of the Pig Welfare (Disposal) Scheme.

Chardon LL Hearing

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 472–73W, if he will make a further statement on the Chardon LL Hearing. [138193]

Ms Quin: In agreement with Agriculture Ministers in the devolved Administrations, we have asked Mr. Alun Alesbury—the person appointed to conduct the Hearing—to consider adjourning the Chardon LL Hearing until further notice pending further consideration of the testing system used by France to establish distinctness, uniformity and stability.

Details of the French testing system were given in the MAFF press notice of 31 October. Other member states in the EU also rely on French data, and the views of the Commission on the status of the French procedures are being sought.

Trawlers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many trawlers operate under the UK flag with quota; and what was the figure in May 1997. [137418]

Mr. Morley: As of May 1997 there were some 7,546 licensed UK fishing vessels, of which 2,360 were over 10 metres in overall length. In October 2000 the number of licensed vessels was 6,690, of which 1,939 were over 10 metres.

Cod Catch

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of cod caught in British waters is caught and landed by British trawlers. [137419]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is not recorded.

The United Kingdom has 47 per cent. of the EC cod quota in ICES area IV (North Sea), 53 per cent. in ICES area VI (West Scotland), 43 per cent. in ICES area VIIa (Irish Sea) and 8 per cent. area VIIb-k (English Channel and Western approaches).

Fish Conservation

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he will take to conserve stocks of *(a)* John Dory, *(b)* anchovy, *(c)* pilchard and *(d)* bream. [137417]

Mr. Morley: The revised EC Technical Conservation Regulation 850/98 which came into operation on 1 January 2000 imposes the following requirements for the species named:

Species	*Towed gear mesh size*[1] *(mm)*	*Fixed gear mesh size*[1] *(mm)*	*MLS*[2] *(cm)*
John Dory	80–99	—	—
Anchovy	16–31	—	—
Pilchard	16–31	10–30	11
Bream	80–99	—	—

[1] These bands represent the minimum mesh allowed
[2] Minimum landing size

HOME DEPARTMENT

Far East Prisoners of War

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many former prisoners of war in the Far East are still alive and reside *(a)* in the constituency of North West Norfolk and *(b)* the county of Norfolk. [136796]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces gave on 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 398W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for changes to the 2000–01 departmental expenditure limits and running costs limits within his responsibility. [138028]

Mr. Straw: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the Departmental Expenditure limit, which covers Class IV Vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales) and Vote 2 (Prisons, England and Wales), will be increased by £756,420,000 from £8,110,836,000 to £8,867, 256,000. The running costs limit will be increased by £177,549,000 from £2,176,135,000 to £2,353,684,000.

The changes are the net effect of the following transfers: £1,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for a project to develop criminal justice IT interface systems; £273,000 to the Lord Chancellor's Department (Class V Vote 1) in respect of a project to develop criminal justice IT interface systems; £150,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund

for funding criminal justice system interface development; £150,000 to the Crown Prosecution Service (Class V Vote 4) for criminal justice system interface development; £275,000 to the Department of Trade and Industry (Class IX Vote 1) in respect of crime reduction programmes; £166,000 to the Welsh Assembly (Class XIV Vote 1) for crime reduction teams; £3,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for confiscated assets; £45,000 to the Department for Education and Employment (Class 1 Vote 3) in respect of the evaluation of the progress drug project; £150,000 to the Department for Education and Employment (Class 1 Vote 3) in respect of the recovery employment project; £1,118,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund for expenditure on DNA; £492,000 to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Class III Vote 1) for the rough sleepers initiative; £36,000 to the Department of Health (Class II Vote 2) for central treatment fund pilot projects; £352,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund for grant to the Police Information Technology Organisation for the interface development fund; £303,000 to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (Class III Vote 8) for improvements in the motor registration system; £150,000 to the Welsh Assembly (Class XIV Vote 1) in respect of locks for pensioners; £1,500,000 from the DEL Reserve in relation to the setting up of the Electoral Commission; £150,000 from the DEL Reserve in respect of cross funding for voluntary bodies; £5,556,000 from the DEL Reserve for the Kosovo humanitarian evacuation programme; £666,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for asylum support including unaccompanied asylum seeking children; £113,000 to the Lord Chancellor's Department (Class V Vote 1) in respect of the Immigration Services Tribunal; £3,000,000 from the Department of Health (Class II Vote 2) for asylum support to unaccompanied asylum seeking children; £5,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for research relating to crime reduction programme and anti drugs strategy; £6,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for administrative support costs; £3,747,000 from the civil service modernisation fund; £16,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for the Kosovo special grant; £46,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for police modernisation.

The increase in the Department's running costs limit is the net effect of the following transfers: £728,000 from the DEL Reserve for a project to develop criminal justice IT interface systems; £273,000 to the Lord Chancellor's Department in respect of a project to develop criminal justice IT interface systems; £110,000 to the Department of Trade and Industry in respect of crime reduction programmes; £166,000 to the Welsh Assembly for crime reduction teams; £596,000 from the DEL Reserve in relation to setting up the Electoral Commission; £167,252,000 from the DEL Reserve for asylum support; £113,000 to the Lord Chancellor's Department in respect of the Immigration Services Tribunal; £6,000,000 from the DEL Reserve for administrative costs; £3,635,000 from the civil service modernisation fund.

These changes will be offset by transfers or a charge on the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Controlled Drugs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue guidance to Ministers in his Department on disclosing information relating to the use of controlled drugs. [136481]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have no such plans.

Myra Hindley

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many letters he has received *(a)* supporting and *(b)* opposing the continued imprisonment of Myra Hindley, since May 1997. [136388]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service records show that since May 1997 a total of 754 letters have been received from members of the public about Myra Hindley's case. Information on the number of letters which have supported or opposed her continued imprisonment is not recorded centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Police Visibility (Public Places)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with ACPO about improving the visibility of the police in public places. [136463]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I announced to the ACPO Rural Policing Conference in Lincoln on 6 November that I am discussing with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, how each police authority might better inform the public about the steps it is taking to maintain and improve police visibility and effectiveness in all parts of England and Wales.

Com (2000) 495

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy towards delineating along national lines areas of competence in which each state may determine future criminal law rules, in the context of 13.2 of Com (2000) 495. [136470]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the answer to his previous questions about Com (2000) 495 on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 519W. At present, we see difficulty in laying down rigid or binding rules for preventing conflicts of jurisdiction between the European Union member states. The experience of Eurojust will help the member states to determine what action is required, if any.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the head of the Recruitment Task Force of the Metropolitan police about his policy on recruiting people previously rejected as below standard. [136477]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I can confirm that no Home Office Minister or official has had any discussions with the Head of the Metropolitan Police Recruitment Task Force.

I understand however that the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) Recruitment Task Force has conducted a full review of the minimum standards applied to recruitment with the intention of bringing MPS standards into line with other police forces in the United Kingdom. This has resulted in significant changes being made to align standards to make them more focused to the current needs of the Service and address issues of equal opportunities.

The MPS's guidelines on age, qualifications, convictions, debts, tattoos and employment history requirements have been amended. As a result, applications made during the previous 12 months have been revisited and a number of applicants previously rejected have been invited to resume their applications to join the MPS as a constable.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the *(a)* establishment and *(b)* actual available officer numbers for each Metropolitan police divisional force for the last year period for which statistics are available; and if he will make a statement. [134990]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information requested has been provided by the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service. Each division of the Metropolitan police has a Police Budgeted Workforce Total which is set at 1 April. The divisional strength figures are those for 31 October 2000. Actual divisional strength fluctuates because of wastage and recruitment variations.

At the end of October 2000, the Metropolitan police had 25,267 police officers. Those not assigned to Divisions, of which there are 8,855, are on other duties, such as specialist squads, traffic division and other centralised operational support and organisational support functions. Many of these officers will in their other functions be available to enhance the policing of divisions.

Metropolitan police: Budgeted workforce total and actual strength

Division	*Police budgeted workforce total*[1]	*Actual police numbers at 31 October 2000*[1]
City of Westminster	1,580	1,519.4
Kensington and Chelsea	557	522.5
Hammersmith and Fulham	517	490.7
Camden	671	646
Islington	554	528.9
Harrow	295	283.5
Brent	602	584.2
Barnet	517	483.3
Ealing	611	593.3
Hillingdon	376	356.5
Haringey	533	529.2
Hackney	673	644.7
Tower Hamlets	548.5	524.3
Waltham Forest	453	431.6
Redbridge	390	381.3
Havering	320.2	295.6
Newham	582.6	566.7
Barking and Dagenham	278.5	257.8
Enfield	478	450.6
Southwark	801	769.7
Lewisham	584	571.2
Bromley	440	415.8
Greenwich	586	568.2
Bexley	310	301.4
Croydon	549	560.7
Sutton	254	267.6
Lambeth	875	849.2
Richmond upon Thames	260	254.7
Hounslow	411	400.5
Kingston upon Thames	257	247.5
Merton	290	275.5
Wandsworth	555.3	541.6
Total	16,709.1	16,113.7
Heathrow Airport[2]	304	298.3
Divisional Total	17,013.1	16,412

[1] Figures are full-time equivalents
[2] These police posts are paid for by Heathrow Airport Plc.

European Elections

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the reasons for the low turnout at the 1999 European elections. [136412]

Mrs. Roche: The 'Review of the European Parliamentary Elections 1999', published by the Home Office in May this year, includes a lengthy assessment of the causes of the low turnout at that election. A copy is available in the Library; it is also accessible on the Home Office website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

EU Administrative Law

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those areas of administrative law for which he supports the establishment of common minimum standards at EU level. [136467]

Mrs. Roche: Where the European Union (EU) Treaties provide for EU-level co-operation in areas of administrative law, the United Kingdom would support measures based on the establishment of common minimum standards on a case-by-case basis where they provided the most appropriate means of co-operation.

Scarman Centre

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what links the Scarman Centre has with police forces in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [136466]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Scarman Centre has various formal and informal links with United Kingdom police services.

The Scarman Centre provides accreditation and some academic input for the International Commanders Programme, which is run by the International Police Studies Department at National Police Training, Bramshill. The Centre also provides the academic framework for the new-style Accelerated Promotion Course (APC) which began in September 2000 and will be the awarding body for the MSc in Police Leadership and Management which may be awarded to students who successfully complete the whole APC programme.

The Scarman Centre has links with West Midlands Police who are providing consultancy to a Department for an International Development funded research project

being conducted in Russia on crime reduction. The Centre also has links with the Metropolitan Police who are providing consultancy to a Foreign Office funded research project being conducted in the Ukraine on community policing.

The Scarman Centre maintains informal contacts for the purposes of research with a number of police forces in England and Wales.

Under the terms of the Home Office contract with Ionann Management Consultants Limited for the provision of Community and Race Relations training to the police service, the Scarman Centre is providing independent research and evaluation of the effectiveness of the Community and Race Relations training and consultancy being provided by Ionann.

In addition the Scarman Centre has police officers enrolled on its degree programme in policing, criminal justice, security management and risk, crisis and disaster management.

Young Offenders Institutions

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the average number of out of cell hours for juveniles and young offenders on remand in each young offenders unit in England; [136657]

(2) what is the average number of out of cell hours for convicted juveniles and young offenders in Feltham Young Offenders Unit and for each of the other young offenders units in England. [136547]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service does not collect separately the number of out of cell hours for sentenced and remand prisoners.

The table gives the average weekday time out of cell for September 2000 for all prisoners in those establishments in England which hold male juveniles or young offenders. Figures are provisional and subject to validation by prisons.

Establishment holding male juveniles or young offenders	*Average hours out of cell weekdays*[1]
Altcourse	13
Ashfield	12
Aylesbury	8
Brinsford	6
Castington	9.9
Chelmsford	8
Deerbolt	10.1
Doncaster	11
Dorchester	11
Dover	8.3
Exeter	8
Feltham	8
Forest Bank	12
Glen Parva	5.1
Gloucester	9
Guys Marsh	8
Hatfield	13.3
Hindley	7.2
Hollesley Bay	—[2]
Hull	8.5
Huntercombe	9
Lancaster Farms	7.2
Lewes	9.3
Moorland	9
Northallerton	6.4
Norwich	8.6
Onley	11.5
Parc	8.4
Portland	10.3
Reading	8.2
Rochester	8
Stoke Heath	10
Swansea	9
Swinfen Hall	10.1
Thorn Cross	12.5
Wetherby	10
Werrington	10.8

[1] September 2000
[2] Not appropriate—open prison

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the offences for which juveniles and young offenders on remand in Feltham Young Offenders Unit have been charged over the last two years. [136653]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not available.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information is held on the previous convictions of remand and convicted prisoners in Feltham Young Offenders Unit. [136524]

Mr. Boateng: Details of previous convictions are obtained either from the court or from the Police National Computer and held on the individual prisoner's file.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of juveniles and young offenders in Feltham Young Offenders Unit sharing a cell designed for one person *(a)* at the latest date for which figures are available and *(b)* for each quarter since 1999. [136659]

Mr. Boateng: The information is in the table:

	Number
September 1999	78
December 1999	0
March 2000	26
June 2000	24
2 November 2000	24

Only young offenders share cells designed for one person.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many juveniles were on remand in Feltham Young Offenders Unit in each quarter since January 1999; and what percentage they constituted of the total number of prisoners; [136651]

(2) how many offenders between 18 and 21-years-old are on remand in Feltham Young Offenders Unit for each quarter year since January 1999 in *(a)* actual terms and *(b)* as a percentage of the total number of prisoners. [136667]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table.

Population[1] of young offenders on remand[2] at HMP Feltham

	Age		Percentage of total population in HMP Feltham	
Date/last day of month	*15–17*	*18–21*	*15–17*	*18–21*
1999				
31 March	111	275	13	33
30 June	126	261	16	33
30 September	112	337	14	41
31 December	100	283	13	37
2000				
31 March	91	286	12	38
30 June	164	288	23	40
30 September	166	293	23	40

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Includes untried and convicted unsentenced prisoners

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what studies he has conducted into the benefits of staffing young offender units with officers specifically trained in child and youth care. [136548]

Mr. Boateng: There have been no formal studies of the benefits of training staff who work with young offenders in child and youth care. However, both the Prison Service and the Youth Justice Board recognise the value of ensuring that staff working with young offenders have appropriate training.

Joint training, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board, has been undertaken by staff working with young offenders in the juvenile secure estate. This included Youth Offending Team staff as well as those working in Prison Service establishments, Local Authority Secure Units and Secure Training Centres.

The recruitment process for new prison officers to work in the under-18 estate has also been enhanced with additions to the competence questionnaire which forms part of the application form, and additional exercises at the job simulation assessment centres.

The Prison Service also trains staff in understanding adolescence through a programme designed by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines his Department has issued on the sharing of cells by inmates in young offender institutions. [136658]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service policy on cell sharing and the separation of different classes of prisoner remains as set out in Instruction to Governors 48–1995 issued on 11 May 1995, a copy of which is in the Library.

Following the murder in March of a young offender in his cell by his cellmate in Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Feltham, the establishment immediately introduced a risk assessment system to try to prevent a recurrence. The Prison Service has refined that system in the light of experience with a view to introducing it at other prison establishments.

More generally, we are currently looking at several ways to make prison establishments as a whole safer places. The Prison Service will shortly be launching the safer prisons standard which emphasises this "whole prison" approach: it will not only set out required actions on the reduction of violence and bullying in establishments, but will also look at the care of prisoners and staff/prisoner relationships.

The Prison Service has also improved the way in which the risk posed by individual prisoners is conveyed. The revised Prisoner Escort Record (PER), which accompanies every prisoner from court or when they are moved from another prison, is used to highlight different risk factors, including violence, potential hostage taking, racist behaviour or crimes such as stalking/harassing or sexual offences. The new guidance issued at the same time highlights the importance of ensuring this information is passed as soon as possible to the relevant staff and is used to inform decisions about, for instance, first night risk assessment and accommodation issues.

Stasi (British Agents)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of whether all information relevant to British secret Stasi agents has been made available by the United States from its Operation Rosewood archive; [136248]

(2) if he will make a statement about Security Service investigations into the monitoring of *(a)* pro-NATO activists and *(b)* the former Social Democratic Party by British Stasi agents; [136252]

(3) what use was made of information gained in Operation Rosewood to acquire further evidence against British Stasi spies in order to pursue prosecutions; [136266]

(4) if files obtained by the UK security services showing the identities of British agents of the Stasi will be preserved for the future use of historians; [136267]

(5) for what reason no action has been taken against any British agents now known to have covertly worked for the East German Intelligence Service. [136250]

Mr. Straw: I can add nothing further to the written answer that I gave the hon. Member on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 610W. On the question of the release of Security Service files into the public domain, I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Ms Russell) on 29 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 251–54W. It would not be appropriate to comment further on the work of the security and intelligence agencies.

Police (Lancashire)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 445W, on Lancashire Police, what changes in *(a)* to (d) have occurred since 4 April. [136860]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Lancashire Constabulary does not have a target establishment. I understand from the Chief Constable that there were 3,229 police officers in the Lancashire Constabulary on 6 November 2000. She has also told me that on the same day, 165 police officers were recorded by the Constabulary as absent from duty through sickness and 135 officers had formal restrictions placed upon the range of duties they are physically or psychologically able to perform. This latter figure does not include temporary arrangements made locally within the force as and when required.

The number of officers reported to be on light duties has changed significantly since the figure reported in my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's answer to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 445W. The Chief Constable informs me that this is due to changes in the definition of light duties by the force, which now also defines recuperative and restricted duties as "light duties".

Certificate of Identity

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) in which countries with which the UK maintains diplomatic relations, the Home Office Certificate of Identity is accepted as a valid travel document by the relevant authorities; [135758]

(2) if he will urgently replace, for grantees of exceptional leave to remain, the Home Office Certificate of Identity with a travel document accepted by all other EU member states. [135998]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office Certificate of Identity (CID) is a travel document issued to foreign nationals, other than refugees, who are resident in the United Kingdom and cannot obtain a passport from their national authorities. This type of document is not issued under an international convention but on a discretionary basis. The CID, which guarantees the holder return to the United Kingdom, has traditionally been widely accepted for travel and, as far as I am aware, still is. However, it is for the authorities of each country to decide whether they will accept the CID as a valid form of travel document and, in this connection, I am aware that a number of European Union partners are no longer doing so. My officials are in discussion with colleagues from the European Union countries concerned in order to identify their particular concerns and, if possible, give assurances, which might encourage them to accept the CID for travel.

There are no proposals to replace the CID, which was created specifically to meet the travel needs of that category of foreign national described. The issue is one of acceptability of the document rather than replacement and it is that which we are addressing with our European partners.

Firearms

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government are taking to reduce the availability and use of illegally held firearms; and if he will make a statement. [135808]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Government are committed to supporting the police and Her Majesty's Customs in their work to combat illegal firearms. Measures that form part of our strategy to deal with illegal firearms include:

Good security of legally held firearms to prevent them from being stolen;

Stricter controls on de-activated weapons to prevent them being restored to working order. The Firearms Consultative Committee (FCC) has put forward a range of proposals for improving controls on deactivated firearms;

Proactive intelligence gathering on sources of weapons used in crime through the Forensic Science Service (FSS), the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) and HM Customs and Excise;

Stronger intelligence sharing between the enforcement authorities and the reputable gun trade;

Targeted policing measures against particular groups of criminals associated with armed violence, for example known armed robbers;

Local and possibly national amnesties to reduce the number of illegal guns in the 'grey market' which might fall into criminal hands;

The establishment of a national database of certificate holders and the possibility of recording the registration details of all legally-held firearms.

The Government are also supporting international efforts to negotiate a United Nations protocol against the illicit manufacture of and trafficking in firearms.

While firearms crime is a serious problem, it remains a small proportion of overall crime figures. Action against illegal firearms should not and will not be taken in isolation from other criminal activities that may be linked with the illegal possession of firearms, for example the drugs trade.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage the return of Kosovans from the UK to Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [136797]

Mrs. Roche: Since the peace agreement was signed in Kosovo in June 1999, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has judged that it is safe for the majority of Kosovan Albanians to return to Kosovo.

The focus of Government policy toward those Kosovan Albanians who came to the United Kingdom either under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) or independently has been and continues to be to encourage and assist their voluntary return to Kosovo. To this end a permanent Kosovan voluntary assisted return programme was funded which ran from 26 July 1999 to 25 June 2000. This has been followed by a general voluntary assisted returns programme open to all nationalities including Kosovans which provides returnees with advice and a return air ticket.

Labour Conference, Brighton

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much grant was given to Sussex Police for the cost of policing this year's Labour Party Conference at Brighton. [136551]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Sussex Police Authority will receive a special grant of up to £1.6 million towards the additional costs they expect to incur in connection with the policing of this year's Labour Party Conference. The grant will be paid on receipt of the Police Authority's formal claim. This is normally received towards the end of the financial year.

Travellers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the law relating to travellers. [136410]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Chapter 5 of the joint Home Office and Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions guidance document "Managing Unauthorised

Camping" has been revised and published in order to clarify the confusing issue of "toleration" of unauthorised encampments of travellers. Further research is being undertaken into the effectiveness of the guidance, which will inform any further changes.

While I would not rule out new legislation if that proved necessary to deal with nuisance and crime associated with unauthorised encampments, I am not at present convinced that changes in the law are required.

Money Laundering

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the organisations under his control which he will assign to the National Centre for Combating Money Laundering as set out in section B.8 of the Justice and Home Affairs Meeting on 17 October. [136472]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The joint Council of European Union Justice, Finance and Interior Ministers, held in Luxembourg on 17 October, endorsed the need for the fight against money laundering to be conducted on the basis of a multi disciplinary and co-ordinated preventive and repressive approach. The joint Council also concluded that, if this were appropriate, this objective should be achieved in Member States through the creation, or strengthening, of national multi-disciplinary bodies specifically dedicated to the fight against money laundering. The Government are satisfied that in the United Kingdom these objectives are fully met by the Economic Crime Unit of the National Criminal Intelligence Service and that no organisational or other changes will be necessary.

Banking Secrecy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effect on banking secrecy of the conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 17 October. [136386]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The joint Council of European Union Justice, Interior and Finance Ministers on 17 October reaffirmed the view that bank secrecy should not be able to be invoked in the member states to frustrate criminal investigations. The Government fully share that view and, under United Kingdom law, evidence can be obtained, if necessary by means of a court order, regardless of any question of bank secrecy.

Political Groups (Foreign Funding)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to investigate funding of political groups in the UK by foreign intelligence agencies, with particular reference to the former Communist Party of Great Britain. [136265]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will ban the foreign funding of political parties in the United Kingdom.

Cannabis

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health on the advantages and disadvantages of legalising cannabis. [136233]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have had no such discussions.

Hinduja Family

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what account he took of the investigations into the involvement of members of the Hindiya family in the Bofors scandal in India, when he approved G. P. Hindiya's and S. P. Hindiya's applications for British citizenship in 1998 and 1999. [136264]

Mrs. Roche: I presume the hon. Member is referring to the applications for naturalisation made by Mr. G. P. Hinduja and Mr. S. P. Hinduja.

We were aware of allegations involving members of the Hinduja family made in 1990 but no action had been taken regarding them, by the time the decisions were made.

Freemasons

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy that police officers must disclose whether they are freemasons. [136276]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend will make a decision about this following the current Home Office consultation of the police service about how to make acceptable arrangements for registration and disclosure of freemasonry membership by police officers. A copy of the consultation document has been placed in the Library.

Wheel Clamping

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce measures to regulate wheel clamping on private property. [136668]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In the White Paper "The Government's Proposals for Regulating the Private Security in England and Wales", issued last year, we announced proposals to regulate wheel clampers as part of a package of statutory measures for the private security industry as a whole. We have been considering the responses we received to the White Paper and will introduce legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Race Relations (Amendment) Bill

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the provisions of the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill will alter the responsibilities of chief officers of police to ensure that ethnic officers and civilian staff have fair treatment and equal opportunities for promotion and for allocation to specialist units. [137205]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The provisions of the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill will, once enacted, impact upon the responsibilities of Chief Officers of Police in a number of ways. First, they will make it unlawful for them and their officers to racially discriminate when enforcing the law. They are already covered with regard to their employment function and to the extent to which they

provide goods, facilities and services. Secondly, Chief Officers of Police will be made vicariously liable for acts of racial discrimination by officers under their direction and control. Thirdly, Police Authorities are made subject in the Bill to the new duty to be placed upon specified public authorities to work towards the elimination of unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups. This duty will cover functions performed by Chief Officers' of Police other than operational ones by virtue of their implementation of Policing Plans under the Police Act 1996. Consideration is currently being given to whether Chief Officers of Police should be listed themselves in respect of their operational functions which fall outside those plans, using the order making powers contained at section 71(5) of the Bill.

The Bill will therefore reinforce the responsibilities of Chief Officers of Police to ensure that ethnic minority police officers and civilian staff and, indeed, members of the public are not discriminated against on racial grounds.

Duke of Buccleough

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make available records relating to the wartime internment of the Duke of Buccleough; and if he will make a statement. [136949]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I understand that the Home Office does not hold any records relating to the Duke of Buccleough.

Stop and Search Powers

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each of the police forces which have declared areas for use of stop and search powers under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 during this year, what has been the largest area to which the powers have been applied. [137171]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collated centrally. Use of powers under section 60 is an operational matter for individual chief officers of police.

Oakington Reception Centre

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum cases have been housed in Oakington reception centre; and what the outcome was of the decisions made in these cases. [136920]

Mrs. Roche: Since the Oakington reception centre opened on 20 March, it has housed 1,935 principal applicants and 310 dependants up to 27 October. At that date, 1,611 decisions had been made on the asylum claims lodged by the applicants, of which 1,595 were refused and 16 granted either refugee status or exceptional leave.

Criminal Certificates

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of the three new criminal certificates will be required by *(a)* a person seeking employment as a teacher in a primary school, *(b)* a person applying for employment with the police service and *(c)* a person seeking a position of responsibility within the Scout Movement; and if he will make a statement. [136801]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Part V of the Police Act 1997, under which the Criminal Records Bureau is being established, does not impose a requirement for criminal record checks. The type of certificate for which a person will be eligible will essentially be determined on a case-by-case basis, measuring the particular circumstances of a position against the criteria. A school teacher would plainly be eligible for the highest level of certificate—an enhanced criminal record certificate—under the criterion of regularly caring for, training, supervising or being in sole charge of persons aged under 18.

Many within the Scout movement would also be eligible for the enhanced level of certificate, although the matter would depend upon the precise nature of the duties and responsibilities. In practice, it is expected that police officers will continue to be subject to separate vetting arrangements, which include additional and more vigorous checks not appropriate to most other occupations.

Criminal Offence Statistics

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminal offences were reported in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales in each of the last 10 years in areas defined as rural and urban. [136745]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Details of crime reported to the police are not available. Figures of crimes recorded by the police are collected by police force area. These can include both urban and rural areas, and it is therefore not possible to give the figures requested for crime recorded by the police in rural and urban areas.

However, the British Crime Survey (BCS) does draw a distinction between rural and urban areas. As the sample size in Wales is insufficient to provide a reliable estimate for the area, the figures given are for England and Wales as a whole. The BCS asked about crime reported to the police but estimates of these over time in rural and other areas would also be insufficiently reliable. The figures are on a per capita basis for selected offences since 1991, and are as follows:

BCS incident rates 1991–99 for burglary, vehicle-related thefts and violent crime

	1991	*1993*	*1995*	*1997*	*1999*
Burglary incidents per 10,000 households					
Rural	368	481	468	429	343
Non-rural	781	976	938	859	662
Vehicle-related thefts per 10,000 vehicle owning households					
Rural	1,660	1,983	2,052	1,503	1,207
Non-rural	2,912	3,152	3,006	2,368	1,947
Violent crime incident rates per 10,000 adults					
Rural	396	511	621	597	462
Non-rural	739	1,017	1,108	887	876

Note:

For the purposes of BCS analyses, rural areas are identified by according ACORN—(A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) categories. ACORN classifies households according to the demographic, employment and housing characteristics of the surrounding neighbourhood. Rural areas are defined as those areas falling into Acorn types 1 to 9, and 27.

Source:

British Crime Survey 1992–2000

Railway Vandalism

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the railway operating companies about graffiti vandalism of rolling stock. [134996]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None. However, I understand there is regular liaison between the British Transport Police and train operating companies on this issue.

Property Hot Spots

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which police authorities have been classified as property hot spots as part of his plan to assist with police recruitment. [137414]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No such classification is used in relation to plans to assist police recruitment.

Forces are receiving assistance through the Crime Fighting Fund, which will enable them to recruit 9,000 police officers over and above the number they had otherwise planned to recruit over the three years commencing April 2000.

The first ever national advertising campaign aimed at supporting local police recruitment was launched on 30 August. It will be a three-year campaign.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Court Service

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what work has been undertaken since 1996 for the Court Service by *(a)* Information Initiatives and *(b)* Myriad. [137322]

Jane Kennedy: Since 1996, Information Initiatives and Myriad have undertaken the following work for the Court Service:

(a) Information Initiatives: supporting specific IT projects in the Royal Courts of Justice; assisting in the project which set up the Court Service HQ network (SOAP); supporting the Court Service HQ network; assisting in the implementation of the Court Service managing agents system (MANIFEST); assisting the development of a word-processing interface for the Public Trust Office system (TARA); consulting on an Immigration Appeals system; and working on Y2K issues.

(b) Myriad: advising on aspects of a PFI contract; providing support to the Crown court system (CREST); and to the County court system (CASEMAN); supporting the Court Service HQ network (SOAP); working on Y2K issues; assisting with the business case for the jury summoning system (JUROR); carrying out initial work on a bid for the Capital Modernisation Fund; and assisting with IT on the Crown Court Programme.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to amend his Department's departmental expenditure limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [138180]

Mr. Lock: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class V, Vote 1, the Lord Chancellor's Department Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be increased by £113,252,000 from £2,525,609,000 to £2,638,861,000. The increase is the net effect of take up of End Year Flexibility entitlement of; £10,000,000 to fund additional costs relating to new tasks undertaken by the Legal Services Commission; £6,000,000 to meet publicity and information costs for the Community Legal Service; £6,000,000 in respect of costs for the Public Trust Office Change Programme; £8,600,000 in respect of start up costs for the Children and Family Court Advisory Service and Support Service; £1,900,000 in respect of costs for the Libra project; £1,925,000 for the Invest to Save Budget payment to the Land Registry; £1,586,000 relating to asylum costs; a transfer from the Home Office of £113,000 in respect of contribution towards costs of the Immigration Services Tribunal; a transfer from the Home Office of £273,000 in respect of PHOENIX, a project funded by the Invest to Save Budget; £1,355,000 in respect of an award from the Invest to Modernise Fund; and £75,500,000 from the DEL Reserve to meet additional costs on asylum and immigration.

The running cost limit for Lord Chancellor's Department Class V, Vote 1 will be increased by £53,409,000 from £541,908,000 to £595,317,000. The increase is caused by take up of End Year Flexibility entitlement of; £4,000,000 to meet publicity costs for the Community Legal Service; £6,000,000 in respect of costs for the Public Trust Office Change Programme; £5,300,000 in respect of start up costs for the Children and Family Court Advisory Service and Support Service; £1,900,000 in respect of costs for the Libra project; £1,586,000 relating to asylum costs; a transfer of £6,400,000 from capital grants expenditure to meet costs in respect of the Libra project; a transfer from the Home Office of £113,000 in respect of contribution towards costs of the Immigration Services Tribunal; a transfer from the Home Office of £273,000 in respect of PHOENIX, a project funded by the Invest to Save Budget; £1,355,000 in respect of an award from the Invest to Modernise Fund; £3000,000 in respect of a correction to the accounting treatment for sundry income and £26,182,000 from the DEL Reserve to meet additional costs on asylum and immigration.

The increases will be offset by transfers from the Home Office Departmental Expenditure Limit, take up of End Year Flexibility entitlement, an award from the Invest to Modernise Fund and charges on the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 10 November 2000

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Sheep Dips

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to carry out an epidemiological study to determine the effect of organophosphorus sheep dips on *(a)* those persons who have been in contact with them when engaged in (i) dipping sheep and (ii) handling sheep dipped with such dips, *(b)* sheep dipped with such dips and *(c)* persons handling wool from such sheep; and how much his Department has spent in the last five years on such studies. [136204]

Ms Quin: In October 1995, the Institute of Occupational Health (IOM) in Edinburgh was asked to carry out a three-year epidemiological study into possible ill-health effects in sheep dippers from long-term, low-level exposure to OP sheep dips. This study cost around £500,000 and was jointly funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Health and the Health and Safety Executive. The IOM published their report in May 1999. The Government's Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) was also asked in 1998 to consider whether long-term exposure to low levels of OPs causes ill-health effects. Their report was published in November 1999. Copies of both of these reports are available in the Library of the House.

A contract has been awarded to the London School of Tropical Medicine to carry out a study involving individuals who have reported ill-health thought to be due to exposure to OPs to the OP Information Network, the Pesticides Action Network and the Northern Ireland OP Sufferers Association. The approximate cost of the study will be £290,000. The Government are currently in the process of commissioning further research to determine the causes of dippers' flu, whether there is a small group of individuals who are susceptible to OPs, what OP mechanisms of toxicity might be causing ill-health due to low-dose exposure and a review of the scientific literature on the effects of OPs on children.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much has been spent by his Department to establish a diagnostic test concerning the relationship between organophosphorous sheep dips and human health; and what progress has been made to date in this matter. [136232]

Ms Quin: A diagnostic test for the acute effects of exposure to organophosphates by testing for inhibition of the enzyme acetyl cholinesterase has been available for many years.

In addition, research is in progress and further research is being commissioned to examine other possible mechanisms of toxicity in OPs and their biological significance in man.

Sea Bass

Ms Atherton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the effect of the recent five tonne limit on bass fishing by pair-trawlers; [136955]

(2) what recent evidence he has received and evaluated regarding bass stocks off the coast of the United Kingdom; [136956]

(3) what further representations he has received on restricting the activities of pair-trawlers fishing for bass in European waters. [136800]

Mr. Morley: The licence condition restricting landings of bass introduced from 1 January applied to all UK fishing vessels in 2000 and not just to pair-trawlers. With two months of the year to go, no catches by UK vessels have approached the five tonne limit.

I will be receiving from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science shortly their report on their monitoring of the 1999 and 2000 offshore fisheries. Information on a tagging exercise conducted during the summer in the inshore fishery is also due to be delivered and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea has recently convened a Study Group to look at the status of North East Atlantic bass stocks. A preliminary report is expected next May.

I have received many letters and other representation from right hon. and hon. Members and their constituents requesting further restrictions or complete closure of the offshore fishery. I will consider what action is necessary in the light of CEFAS' reports and the ICES conclusions.

Integrated Farm Management

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government initiatives in supporting integrated farm management. [136792]

Mr. Morley: Integrated Farm Management (IFM) is an important priority for MAFF. As part of its commitment to developing more sustainable farming methods, the Department has put substantial resources into research and development relating to integrated farming systems, much of which has been in association with industry through LINK (a Government-wide scheme for joint funding R&D with industry to meet industry's needs).

My Department organised a seminar involving a wide range of interested organisations earlier this year to review the research results and to discuss the wider promotion of IFM. It was noted that the research results indicate that it is possible to reduce inputs of agrochemicals while maintaining profitability and that IFM can produce environmental benefits in the longer term such as improvements in bird numbers and biodiversity. As a result

an industry-led Working Group was set up to consider the options for future promotional activities. This will report back shortly.

Fertilisers

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the recent rise in fertiliser prices on upland farms. [136838]

Mr. Morley: The impact of the recent increase in fertiliser prices will vary between upland farms depending on the amounts utilised and extent to which alternative inputs such as manures are available.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received on the prices of *(a)* fertilisers and *(b)* veterinary products in (i) the UK and (ii) other EU member states; and if he will make a statement. [136845]

Mr. Morley: My Department has received representations on fertiliser prices in the UK from the Fertiliser Manufacturers Association and the National Farmers Union.

My Department has also received representations from a number of interested parties since we announced on 30 March last, as part of the Government's Strategy for Agriculture, an independent review of dispensing of medicines by veterinary surgeons. The Review Group is currently examining the existing dispensing practices for veterinary medicines and their impact on the supply, availability and costs of veterinary medicines. The representations received by my Department have been forwarded to the Chairman of the Review Group for consideration along with all the other evidence it receives. The Review Group will complete its task and make its report by 31 March 2001.

Following receipt of complaints from vets, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is currently conducting an inquiry into certain aspects of the supply of veterinary medicines in the UK. The inquiry will consider whether there is any evidence of anti-competitive practices.

Organic Food Production

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much he spent in each of the past five years on *(a)* organic food production and *(b)* research into organic food production. [136840]

Mr. Morley: *(a)* The expenditure on aid for conversion to organic farming in England under the Organic Aid Scheme and the Organic Farming Scheme each of the past five years has been as follows:

	£
1999–2000	12,037,000
1998–99	1,026,000
1997–98	571,000
1996–97	374,000
1995–96	261,000

(b) The expenditure on research into organic farming in each of the past five years has been as follows:

	£
1999–2000	2,035,000
1998–99	1,481,000
1997–98	908,000
1996–97	1,116,000
1995–96	931,000

Flood Defence

Mr. Green: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much of the £51 million extra allocated for flood defence will be available in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02, *(c)* 2002–03 and *(d)* 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [137401]

Mr. Morley: I made a statement to the House on 6 November about the serious flooding that has occurred in England, including an indication of the uses to which the additional funding will be put. The allocation is as follows:

	£ million
2000–01	2
2001–02	17
2002–03	17
2003–04	15
Total	51

This additional funding will mean that additional flood defence schemes can be implemented, but due to design, evaluation and planning permission, most could not be brought forward until 2001.

Mr. Green: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he took between August 1998 and August 2000 to improve the institutional arrangements for flood defence recommended by the Agriculture Committee's Sixth report of Session 1997–98, HC 707; and if he will make a statement. [137535]

Mr. Morley: The Government response to the report, published on 27 October 1998, set out the reasons why we proposed no fundamental change in the present institutional arrangements for flood and coastal defence. Since then we have, however, worked with the operating authorities—the Environment Agency, internal drainage boards and local authorities—in ensuring the present arrangements work better and best practice is shared. In particular, in November 1999 we published high level targets for the operating authorities to follow and, complementary to this, the Agency has set out how it will apply its general supervisory duty in relation to the work done by the other operating authorities. The Government have also instituted a review of the funding arrangements for the flood and coastal defence which is expected to be completed by September 2001.

The proposed Water Bill, on which the Government are currently consulting, will include amendments to the Environment Act 1995 to allow the creation of additional regional flood defence committees. This will facilitate any

future decision to create a single tier of committees, at regional level, as recommended by the Agriculture Committee.

Trawlers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research the Spanish vessels at Newlyn are carrying out; and what net size they are using. [137415]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* The Spanish vessels to which the right hon. Member refers last berthed at Newlyn on 23 October. They are now understood to be in France. They are searching for anchovy and other non-quota species in ICES Areas VIIe and VIId (the English Channel).

It is understood that the skippers intend to use mesh sizes appropriate for the species targeted. These are set out in EC Council Regulation 850/98.

Fishing Rights

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what rights UK fishermen have to fish in Spanish waters. [137416]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* UK registered fishing vessels have no rights to fish in Spanish territorial waters and fishing opportunities in other waters under Spanish jurisdiction are limited by virtue of Western Waters effort restrictions and TACs and Quota regulations. Spanish vessels also face restrictions in UK territorial waters.

GM Crops

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the first GM crop was planted in the United Kingdom under *(a)* a part B consent and *(b)* a part C consent. [136683]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

In the United Kingdom, the first GM crop plant to be released under a consent issued in accordance with Part B of Directive 90/220/EEC was in April 1993. It was an oilseed rape modified for fungal tolerance. However, over the previous five years a number of different GM crop plants had been released under the interim arrangements which were in place before the Genetically Modified (Deliberate Release) regulations came into force on 1 February 1993.

The first GM crop to be planted in the United Kingdom under a part C consent was a herbicide tolerant oilseed rape. The consent was issued in February 1996 for seed production purposes only and not for general cultivation. The legislation does not require the location and time of sowing of crops covered by Part C consents to be notified to the authorities and we do not hold this information. However, we do have an assurance from Aventis, who hold this consent, that no plants have been grown in the UK under this consent since 1997.

Information on all the consents for GM crops issued in the United Kingdom is available on the public register held in my Department.

TREASURY

Taxation Reform

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures have been recommended in the EU's draft report on taxation reform; and what response Her Majesty's Government have made to them. [136780]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* There are no current Commission proposals of this form. EC proposals for legislation are considered by the European Scrutiny Committee, and Explanatory memorandums concerning existing proposals on taxation are in the Library.

Employment Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy on the introduction of an employment tax credit in 2003. [137060]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The 2000 pre-Budget Report reaffirms the Government's intention to introduce an employment tax credit, as a complement to a new integrated system of support for children. The new tax credits will be introduced from 2003, subject to the legislative timetable.

VAT (Historic Buildings)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to set a zero VAT rate for repairs to historic buildings; and if he will make a statement. [136995]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* EC agreements mean that we cannot introduce any new VAT zero rates. However, as the Chancellor announced in the Pre-Budget Report statement on 8 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 315–27, I have written to the European Commission on the scope for reducing VAT on repairs to listed buildings that are places of worship.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Parental Leave Directive

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the cost to public funds of the Parental Leave Directive in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* the estimated cost in 2000–01. [136474]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is not possible to calculate the exact cost to public funds of public sector employees exercising this right since the Parental Leave Directive came into effect on 15 December 1999. As implemented, parental leave is unpaid and there is no statutory requirement to keep records.

The direct cost to the Department of printing and distributing information on the new right to employees and employers in general, and of operating a dedicated public inquiry point for employees and employers in the period immediately following its introduction, has been approximately £40,000.

Imported Fertiliser

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the EU in respect of the temporary tariff on imported fertiliser. [137272]

Mr. Caborn: The European Community has imposed anti-dumping measures on imports of various types of fertiliser from a number of countries; these currently include provisional duties (lasting six months) on imports of ammonium nitrate from Poland and the Ukraine. The decision on whether to impose provisional measures rests with the European Commission after consulting member states; the decision whether to impose definitive (five-year) measures rests with the Council of Ministers, acting by a simple majority.

The Government consider any proposal for anti-dumping measures on the economic evidence presented and against the criteria set out in the European Community's Anti-dumping Regulation. In cases involving fertilisers we give full weight to the impact of proposed measures on both producers and farmers, both when consulted by the Commission and in the position we take in the Council of Ministers.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the impact of the national minimum wage on wage rates in England and Wales. [138011]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Office for National Statistics latest estimates of low pay for spring 2000 (combining New Earnings Survey and Labour Force Survey statistics) show that the national minimum wage is having a direct and beneficial impact on the pay of the lowest paid workers in England and Wales. The latest data also show that it has helped close the gap between the highest and lowest earners and helped reduce the differential between men's and women's pay. This has been achieved without any discernable adverse impact on the economy.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces (Death in Service)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the posthumous recognition of members of the armed forces who are killed in service. [138265]

Mr. Hoon: I have given careful consideration to a number of ways in which the recognition of members of the armed forces who give their lives in the service of their country might be enhanced. In the light of discussion, I have concluded that the most appropriate would be the erection in central London of a memorial bearing the names of all those killed on duty and by terrorist attack since the end of the Second World War. In accordance with the long established custom for the erection of memorials, I would expect funds to be raised by public subscription. Further consultation will now take place with ex-Service organisations and other interested bodies.

Falklands War

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much time HMS Invincible had to alert other warships to the first Exocet attack during the Falklands war; what action was taken during that time; how much warning HMS Sheffield received of the attack; and if he will make a statement. [137302]

Mr. Spellar: On 4 May 1982, during Operation Corporate, the British operation to re-take the Falkland Islands after the Argentine invasion, the Type 42 destroyer HMS Sheffield was attacked by Super Etendard aircraft carrying Exocet anti-ship missiles.

Some 13 minutes before the missile impact on Sheffield, which resulted in the tragic loss of HMS Sheffield and 20 of her crew, HMS Invincible had detected a contact initially at a range of approximately 180 miles from Invincible which would have been consistent with the Argentine aircraft. However, for the previous few days, the force had experienced a high incidence of spurious radar contacts. These contacts were also assessed as spurious. There were at the time no other indications of impending attack.

Some six minutes before the Exocet hit Sheffield, her sister ship Glasgow detected the radar transmissions of the Exocet carrying aircraft—the first certain indication of imminent attack—and alerted the rest of the force to the threat. The process of detection and assessment absorbed little time and Sheffield thus had five minutes warning of the imminent attack.

Precision Bombing

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he is taking to overcome technical problems in the performance of laser-guided bombing by Harrier and Tornado aircrews. [134404]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 272W to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith).

Kosovo

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what bomb and mine-clearing operations are taking place in Kosovo; and in how many of these operations British service personnel are involved. [137381]

Mr. Spellar: When KFOR deployed to Kosovo in June 1999, the immediate requirement was to clear ordnance that would have posed a hazard to peacekeeping forces. This was KFOR's responsibility, and British service personnel were engaged in this activity. KFOR also took on the immediate task of making schools safe for the returning population of Kosovo. Two British servicemen tragically lost their lives in performing this vital task.

The United Nations Mine Action Service (MAS) is responsible for the longer term task of fully clearing Kosovo of unexploded ordnance, and has established a UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre (MACC) in Pristina to this end. The Department for International Development (DfID) has supported the UNMACC with grants, specialist staff and equipment. DfID has also, since June 1999, contracted for five organisations to supply

12 rapid reaction teams to undertake clearance tasks. These UK sponsored teams are now directed by UNMACC.

British troops do not now conduct mine or bomb clearance as a matter of routine, but are on permanent standby for clearance tasks where there is a threat to KFOR. Furthermore, we have authorised the UN to task our teams to support its own efforts to make areas safe for the return of displaced persons by surveying marking and helping clear areas hit by cluster bombs.

The UNMACC state that 2,314 areas have been cleared to date, including minefields, bomblet strikes and other dangerous areas and that there are 1,085 sites remaining to be cleared. UNMACC expect all areas that currently present a risk to life will be cleared by the end of next year.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he received between November 1999 and November 2000 on *(a)* the timing and *(b)* the content of strategic export controls legislation from (i) non-governmental organisations including voluntary and charitable groups, (ii) commercial interests, companies and trade organisations and (iii) other categories; and if he will make a statement. [136602]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry gave him on 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 326–27W.

HMS Argus

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the deployment of HMS Argus on frontline duties. [137909]

Mr. Hoon: The Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel Argus has been re-deployed from helicopter training duties off the Iberian Peninsular to join the Amphibious Task Group which is providing a presence off Sierra Leone in support of UN and UK forces there this month. The decision to re-deploy RFA Argus, and her three embarked Sea King helicopters, with the Task Group, was taken after the flagship HMS Fearless experienced a fire in her aft engine room which necessitated her withdrawal from the deployment. Her training task will not be affected. Commander Amphibious Task Group continues to lead the Task Group embarked on HMS Ocean.

The integration of RFA Argus into the Task Group will give increased operational flexibility to operations of the Amphibious Ready Group by providing a second helicopter platform from which Chinook and Sea King helicopters can operate to replace the capability lost by the withdrawal of HMS Fearless. The re-deployment of Argus at short notice serves only to reinforce the flexibility of our maritime forces and of our rapid reaction capability.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason pigs have been subjected to mustard gas exposure and a procedure involving a hand-held electric drill in an experiment conducted at Porton Down. [136609]

Dr. Moonie: Sulphur mustard (mustard gas) remains a significant chemical threat, both on the battlefield and from terrorists. The burns that result from contact with sulphur mustard heal extremely slowly and are prone to potentially life-threatening infection. Initial dermabrasion studies involving the use of hand-held abrasive material showed significantly enhanced rates of burn healing and reduced risk of infection. Later work which resulted in even more accurate removal of dead tissue and further improvements in the rate of healing were achieved by the use of a small (1 cm diameter) rotating disc of abrasive material powered by a hand-held, electric drill.

The technical details of the dermabrasion procedure are discussed in the open literature publication at the following reference:

> N. Bennett, D. L. G. Lam, P. Rice and R. F. R. Brown. Dermabrasion—a novel surgical treatment for sulphur mustard burns. Burns. 26 : 34–40, 2000.

Staff at Porton Down are now confident that dermabrasion will help save lives and reduce the suffering in any future casualties.

Although much of Porton Down's work involves the development and use of models, for these particular studies there are no valid alternatives to the use of anaesthetised pigs if the normal healing process is to be measured accurately.

All animal research at Porton Down is conducted under licence authorised from the Home Office. In addition to the statutory controls, an independent body, the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), reviews the arrangements for animal care and welfare at CBD, monitors the research programmes to ensure the highest possible standards and advises on best practice.

European Defence Industry

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Framework Agreement Concerning Measures to Facilitate the Restructuring and Operation of the European Defence Industry, signed at Farnborough in July, will be published and laid before Parliament. [137007]

Mr. Hoon: The Framework Agreement Concerning Measures to Facilitate the Restructuring and Operation of the European Defence Industry, signed at Farnborough on 27 July 2000, was published and laid before Parliament on 1 November.

Defence Aviation Repair Agency

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the contract of the Chief Executive of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency expires. [137573]

Mr. Spellar: The current contract of the Chief Executive of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency notionally expires on 1 April 2002.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the salary band is for the post of chief executive of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency. [137508]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency is paid within the Senior Civil Service Pay Band 6, the range of which is £68,840 to £107,212.

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what factors he took into consideration in deciding to make RAF St. Athan the Headquarters of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency. [137768]

Mr. Spellar: The factors taken into account were the need to locate the interim Head Office on an existing DARA site and the availability of suitable accommodation at St. Athan.

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what targets he has set for *(a)* employment, *(b)* investment and *(c)* stakeholder involvement in the Defence Aviation Repair Agency. [137769]

Mr. Spellar: The Defence Aviation Repair Agency (DARA) is charged with providing a cost effective and flexible deep maintenance service for the armed forces' aircraft. The Agency's level of employment will be maintained at a level justified by its work load and revenue stream. DARA is developing a comprehensive investment plan as part of its programme for launch as a Trading Fund and has taut Customer Service Agreements as well as an umbrella Terms of Business Agreement with its Ministry of Defence customers.

Chinook Crash

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) whether Sir John Day was aware of the incident at Wilmington, USA in 1989 concerning a Chinook HC1 at the time of the RAF Board of Inquiry into the Mull of Kintyre accident; [137390]

(2) pursuant to his answer dated 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 28W, on the Mull of Kintyre accident, if Sir John Day knew of the Department's litigation against Textron and Boeing regarding FADEC at the time of the RAF Board of Inquiry into the Mull of Kintyre accident. [137350]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* As I said in my previous answer, Sir John Day was aware there had been an incident and that legal action was being taken, but was not aware of the detail.

Troop Carriers

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troop carriers are on lease from Boeing; and at what cost. [137413]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* A contract was signed on 2 September for the lease of four C-17 aircraft for seven years, commencing in mid 2001, to meet our Short Term Strategic Airlift requirement. The exact contract price is commercially confidential, but in broad terms we expect the overall cost to be in the order of £500 million, including maintenance of the aircraft. The aircraft will be used to carry material rather than troops.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

English Partnerships

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what financial contribution English Partnerships has made towards *(a)* the regeneration of the Greenwich peninsula and *(b)* the Millennium Dome; and how much English Partnerships is expected to receive from the sale of the Millennium Dome. [135552]

Mr. Prescott: English Partnerships' financial contribution to the regeneration of the Greenwich Peninsula as a whole is some £222 million. English Partnerships has made no financial contribution to the construction and fitting out of the Millennium Dome, its contents, or associated buildings and structures.

English Partnerships paid £20 million to British Gas for the purchase of its property interest across the whole of the Peninsula. In addition, English Partnerships has incurred expenditure of £144 million in remediating, servicing, landscaping and providing the infrastructure necessary for the long term regeneration of the northern Peninsula—including provision of the central park and other permanent features. The Environment Agency made a contribution of £2.5 million towards the environmental improvements of the riverwall works. English Partnerships' expenditure included £22.8 million to meet the New Millennium Experience Company's requirements—for which the full amount is being reimbursed to English Partnerships by NMEC.

On the Southern part of the Peninsula, which is already undergoing long term regeneration, English Partnerships has incurred expenditure of some £58 million in remediating, servicing, and landscaping the site, together with the construction of a new school and health centre for use by the existing and emerging local community.

The apportionment of proceeds from the sale of the Dome will be an important factor to settle in the context of the eventual sale.

Seat Belts

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in his review of policy on children's seat belts installation and testing. [137085]

Mr. Hill: Following my hon. Friends' meeting with my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State on 2 August, we undertook to raise this matter at the Department's next MOT trade liaison meeting. This meeting will be held on 5 December which will enable us to enlist industry's views on what more might feasibly be done in this area.

In parallel with this, we are embarking on a series of measures to aid and promote safety with child seat installation. A radio and publicity campaign will be launched by the Department in February to highlight the need for vehicle owners to check the fitment of restraint belts before they are used. In addition, we will be producing 'credit card' style tips for motorists about child restraints. These cards will be passed on to motorists at MOT testing stations and we will also instruct testers to offer advice on the general condition of child restraints.

Rail Safety (Wales)

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

investigations are being undertaken into the safety of the railway track in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [137175]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) Railway Inspectorate have had meetings with each senior Railtrack zone manager following the derailment at Hatfield to ensure that the zones and their contractors are implementing the criteria for examination and inspection set down by Railtrack.

Railtrack is taking whatever action is necessary to identify all track defects and where they cannot be remedied speedily, the necessary mitigation measures (ie speed restrictions, increased inspection, traffic limitations) will be implemented to maintain the safety of passengers.

HSE is also meeting the senior management at Railtrack HQ on national initiatives being taken to maintain the infrastructure.

Unauthorised Campers

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to the Environment Agency concerning prosecutions by Agency staff of breaches of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by unauthorised campers. [136846]

Mr. Mullin: It is neither appropriate nor necessary for my right hon. Friend to issue guidance on this issue to the Environment Agency. The waste management controls of part II of the Environmental Protection act 1990 apply to campers as they do to other members of the public and businesses. It rests with the Environment Agency to take decisions about prosecutions on the facts of each case and the available evidence. Where there is evidence of contravention, we expect the Agency to take action in line with its national Enforcement Policy—which is published on its website http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/epns/epp.htm.

Civil Aviation Authority

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many inspectors are employed by the safety regulations group within the CAA; and what plans the CAA has to alter their number following the completion of the National Air Traffic Services Public Private Partnership. [137505]

Mr. Mullin: The Air Traffic Services Standards Department, within the CAA's Safety Regulation Group, currently employs 27 inspectors dealing directly with operational safety issues. This figure includes Air Traffic Service Inspectors and Engineering Inspectors, but does not include managerial, requirements production, and administrative support staff.

The CAA currently has no intention to alter the number of inspectors as a result of the completion of the National Air Traffic Services Public Private Partnership. It has, however, recently increased the number of inspectors to deal with the NATS Swanwick Centre approval and preliminary work on the New Scottish Centre Project, and will continue to adjust the numbers of inspectors according to work load, and projected demand.

Road Improvements (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 387W, on road improvements (Gloucestershire) if he will undertake feasibility studies for a Nettleton Bolter Relief Road, a gyratory system at the Air Balloon Pub and an extra lane at Crickley Hill. [137607]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* The A417 trunk road between Nettleton and the Brockworth Bypass is a particularly difficult section of road for which there are no quick or easy solutions. Any road based solution is likely to be costly and challenging given the environmental constraints of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Government Office for the South West is considering with the Highways Agency how the traffic problems of this section of the A417 might best be addressed.

Air Service Agreements

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for further negotiations with his US counterpart on air service agreements; and what timescale he proposes for their conclusion. [137534]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* My officials are in regular contact with their US counterparts. We hope to make further progress on securing our goal of a liberalised UK-US aviation market in the coming months.

Farnborough Airfield

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence about the sale of Farnborough Airfield. [137969]

Mr. Mullin: Since the early 1990s, the Ministry of Defence had been considering the sale of Farnborough Airfield. The DETR has maintained an interest in developments and there have been a number of discussions at official level between the two Departments on this issue during this period.

Private Hire Vehicles

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 will be implemented in full; and if he will make a statement. [137973]

Mr. Hill: The consultation on the text of the draft regulations and administrative rules for the licensing of London private hire vehicle operators, jointly undertaken by the Department and the Public Carriage Office, has now been completed. Having carefully considered the responses, we are currently preparing the final version of the regulations, which I expect to make this month. Transport for London will be responsible for taking forward the second and third phases of implementation which will cover the regulation of private hire drivers and vehicles.

Green Transport Plans

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the headquarters buildings in his Department which have adopted green transport plans. [137972]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Travel plans have been prepared for all 16 DETR property centres (including Executive Agencies and Government Offices where the Department has management responsibility), covering some 44 headquarters and main buildings.

House Repossessions

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses were repossessed in each of the past 20 years. [137833]

Mr. Mullin: The numbers of properties in the United Kingdom repossessed by mortgage lenders in each of the past 20 years is as follows:

Period	*Properties repossessed*
1980	3,480
1981	4,870
1982	6,860
1983	8,420
1984	12,400
1985	19,300
1986	24,090
1987	26,390
1988	18,510
1989	15,810
1990	43,890
1991	75,540
1992	68,540
1993	58,540
1994	49,210
1995	49,410
1996	42,560
1997	32,770
1998	33,820
1999	30,030

Source:
Council of Mortgage Lenders

Smoke Detectors and Water Sprinklers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the local authorities that have not installed smoke detectors in their housing stock; [137835]

(2) if he will list the local authorities which have started to install automatic water sprinklers in local authority housing in England and Wales. [137834]

Mr. Mullin: This information is not collected from local authorities, and is therefore not centrally available.

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many rough sleepers there were in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales in each of the last 15 years. [137730]

Ms Armstrong: Reliable figures are not available for the number of rough sleepers in England prior to 1998. In 1998 a methodology was developed based on a series of single night street counts and estimates by local authorities to enable this information to be collected. It was estimated that as of June 1998 there were 1,850 people sleeping rough in England in any one night. These figures are updated annually and subsequent figures showed that the number of people sleeping rough fell to 1,633 in June 1999 and 1,180 in June 2000.

Responsibility for rough sleeping in Wales is a devolved matter.

River Pollution

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many grossly polluted miles of river there were in each of the past 20 years; [137826]

(2) if he will list the rivers that failed to reach the EC Urban Waste Water Directive in each of the past nine years. [137828]

Mr. Mullin: The information available on grossly polluted rivers is as follows:

Year	*River lengths classified[1] grade F (Bad) in England and Wales (miles)*
1999	147
1998	186
1997	281
1996	263
1995	232
1994	254
1993	361
1992	424
1991	—
1990	496
1985[2]	404
1980[2]	398

[1] The General Quality Assessment (GQA) scheme bases chemical river assessments on three determinants: dissolved oxygen, ammonia and biochemical oxygen demand. Samples are taken at 7,000 sites representing 25,000 miles of rivers and canals. Rivers are classified according to one of 6 grades from "Very Good" (A) to "Bad" (F).

[2] Assessments prior to 1990 were based on a slightly different scheme. These were the lengths classified as "Bad" in that scheme.

The Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive does not set quality standards for rivers. It sets standards for the quality of treated effluent discharged from sewage treatment works, based on the size of the discharge and the nature of the receiving waters.

House Construction

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses were built, broken down by *(a)* local authority, *(b)* housing association and *(c)* private sector builds, in England and Wales in each of the last 20 years. [137735]

Mr. Mullin: The latest figures are as follows:

Number of dwellings completed—England and Wales

Year	Private enterprise	Registered social landlords	Local authorities	All dwellings
1980	116,179	20,216	78,537	214,932
1981	104,012	17,363	58,413	179,788
1982	113,893	11,970	33,539	159,402
1983	134,901	14,865	31,633	181,399
1984	145,282	14,511	31,397	191,190
1985	142,020	11,905	24,357	178,282
1986	156,065	11,158	20,535	187,758
1987	169,895	11,402	17,433	198,730
1988	185,733	11,502	16,920	214,155
1989	163,344	12,314	15,326	190,984
1990	144,849	15,625	14,625	175,099
1991	138,572	18,081	8,544	165,197
1992	127,020	23,418	3,649	154,087
1993	123,255	32,734	1,603	157,592
1994	130,066	33,823	1,321	165,210
1995	132,549	33,430	974	166,953
1996	129,278	29,582	576	159,436
1997	134,709	22,995	291	157,995
1998	127,563	21,414	289	149,266
1999	129,512	18,345	83	147,940

PRIME MINISTER

Millennium Dome

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Prime Minister what advice he has received from the Chairman of the New Millennium Experience Company as to the value of the site of the Dome if it were to be demolished; and when. [138017]

The Prime Minister: It is established practice under section II, paragraph 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose such information.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to letters from the hon. Member for Woking, dated 15 March and 26 September, concerning the asylum case of Mrs. Thu Nga Ly, reference L322968; and if he will make a statement on outstanding asylum applications of people from Vietnam. [137815]

Mrs. Roche: I have written to the hon. Member on 9 November and apologise for the lengthy delay.

Applications from Vietnamese nationals are treated in the same way as similar applications from other nationals. We have committed substantial new resources to speed up the asylum system and as these begin to deliver we expect to see significant improvements in decision times in most asylum cases, including Vietnamese.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of people who have entered the United Kingdom illegally since 1970. [137817]

Mrs. Roche: There is no estimate of the total number of persons who enter the country illegally since, by the very nature of the problem, it is not possible to establish that a person is here illegally until they have been traced and interviewed.

Information is available only on people who have been detected and served with papers as illegal entrants. This information is available from 1973.

The total number of persons detected and served with papers as illegal entrants between January 1973 and September 2000 is just over 150,000.

A more detailed breakdown of this figure for 1989–99 can be found in Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 1999, a copy of which is held in the Library. Information on the first half of 2000 is due to be published on 30 November in a Home Office bulletin, a copy of which will also be placed in the Library.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* in Norfolk; [137821]

(2) how many anti-social behaviour orders have been breached. [137820]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Over 100 orders have been made nationally since the measure came into force on 1 April 1999. Six of these have been made in Norfolk. According to provisional figures for prosecutions at the magistrates court and convictions for all courts, there have been four prosecutions for breaches of an anti-social behaviour order up to the end of June 2000. Three of these have resulted in a conviction.

Armed Robbery

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of armed robbery there were in each year from 1990. [137818]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The most recently available information has been published in 'Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1998', and is shown in the table.

Robberies recorded by the police in which firearms (including air weapons) were used

	Number
1990	3,939
1991	5,296
1992	5,859
1993	6,012
1994	4,239
1995	4,206
1996	4,013
1997	3,209
1997–98[1]	2,939
1998–99[1]	2,973

[1] Year ending March

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers whose claims were made *(a)* prior to 1 July 1993 and *(b)* between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 have been granted leave to remain, and for what periods, under the backlog clearance exercise; how many granted leave to remain had their asylum applications considered under normal procedures and refused; how many did not receive an initial determination of their asylum application; and if he will make a statement. [134877]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The information requested is given in the table.

Under the backlog clearance measures announced in the White Paper, applications lodged prior to July 1993 where granted indefinite leave to enter or remain without the asylum application being considered, provided they met specified criteria. Asylum applications lodged between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 (6,135) were considered substantively against the normal criteria; however in the event that they failed, consideration was given to granting exceptional leave under extended criteria set out in the White Paper. The number of applications still not determined (15,400) under the backlog clearance exercise is now negligible.

Decisions[1] made under backlog clearance exercise[2]

	Applications lodged prior to July 1993	*Applications lodged between July 1993 and 31 December 1995*
Granted exceptional leave with immediate settlement	6,135	—
Granted asylum and indefinite leave	—	1,290
Granted exceptional leave to remain for four years	—	14,110
Refused under backlog criteria[3]	445	2,165

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five.
[2] Cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre-1996 asylum application backlog.
[3] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* Kosovans and *(b)* Albanians were legally admitted to the United Kingdom in each month in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999 and (iv) 2000. [136935]

Mrs. Roche: I regret that the available information on passengers given leave to enter the United Kingdom does not separately identify Kosovans (other than the 4,346 Kosovans, including dependants, who were evacuated to the United Kingdom under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme in 1999). The information that is available for Albania is given in the table.

Albania: controlled landings[1,2]

	Controlled landings[1,2]
1997	
January	60
February	40
March	50
April	60
May	30
June	40
July	40
August	70
September	60
October	30
November	30
December	40
Total	540
1998	
January	30
February	20
March	60
April	30
May	30
June	50
July	50
August	50
September	80
October	60
November	30
December	30
Total	500
1999	
January	20
February	20
March	10
April	40
May	50
June	50
July	60
August	60
September	100
October	80
November	50
December	70
Total	610
2000	
January	40
February	50
March	60
April	50
May	50
June	40
Total to date	280

[1] Mainly passengers admitted for more than six months (excludes passengers returning).
[2] Figures rounded to the nearest 10.
Note:
Figures may not add up due to rounding.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Albanians *(a)* voluntarily returned and *(b)* were removed from the UK in each month since June 1999. [136804]

Mrs. Roche: The requested information is not available.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* Kosovans and *(b)* Albanians were (i) given asylum, (ii) given exceptional leave to remain and (iii) given temporary admission to the United Kingdom in each month in (1) 1997, (2) 1998, (3) 1999 and (4) 2000. [136936]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table. I regret it is not possible separately to identify Kosovans within the available statistics for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Separate records were kept however of the Kosovans who arrived in the United Kingdom under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) between 25 April and 25 June 1999. 4,346 were evacuated and they were all granted 12 months leave to enter.

Nationals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania granted asylum, exceptional leave to remain and temporary admission

	FRY			*Albania*		
	Grants of asylum	*Grants of ELR*	*Temporary admission*[1]	*Grants of asylum*	*Grants of ELR*	*Temporary admission*[1]
1997						
January	75	*	50	—	—	5
February	150	*	70	—	—	5
March	160	*	65	—	—	20
April	140	*	125	—	—	30
May	95	*	105	—	—	35
June	90	40	90	—	—	25
July	100	35	110	—	—	20
August	100	45	175	*	—	25
September	120	40	230	—	*	30
October	145	40	185	—	—	40
November	85	*	250	—	—	30
December	95	5	345	—	—	20
Total	1,355	210	1,800	*	*	285
1998						
January	120	*	300	—	—	20
February	95	*	280	—	—	40
March	100	15	535	—	—	55
April	100	20	400	—	—	45
May	120	10	250	—	—	60
June	110	5	350	—	—	40
July	50	20	335	*	—	55
August	50	—	375	—	—	75
September	40	—	430	—	—	90
October	55	—	360	—	—	40
November	80	—	245	—	—	25
December	10	—	280	—	—	55
Total	935	75	4,140	*	—	600
1999						
January	n/a	n/a	270	n/a	n/a	60
February	n/a	n/a	245	n/a	n/a	90
March	n/a	n/a	240	n/a	n/a	75
April	n/a	n/a	220	n/a	n/a	155
May	n/a	n/a	355	n/a	n/a	265
June	n/a	n/a	505	n/a	n/a	425
July	n/a	n/a	490	n/a	n/a	305
August	n/a	n/a	130	n/a	n/a	80
September	n/a	n/a	165	n/a	n/a	95
October	n/a	n/a	120	n/a	n/a	80
November	n/a	n/a	100	n/a	n/a	40
December	n/a	n/a	70	n/a	n/a	45
Total	6,290	85	2,910	25	*	1,715
2000						
January	n/a	n/a	80	n/a	n/a	30
February	n/a	n/a	60	n/a	n/a	20
March	n/a	n/a	60	n/a	n/a	40
April	10	165	80	*	*	35
May	20	50	120	—	—	20
June	25	20	50	5	5	15
July	30	35	45	*	—	20
August	45	40	60	*	5	30
September	30	70	60	5	10	35
Total to date	160	385	615	15	15	245

[1] Data relate to the largest 12 ports and include non-asylum cases

Note:

Figures rounded to the nearest 5, with '*' = 1 or 2

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Kosovans *(a)* voluntarily returned to Kosovo and *(b)* were removed from the UK in each month since June 1999. [136790]

Mrs. Roche: Of the 4,346 Kosovan Albanians who were evacuated to the United Kingdom on the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) between 25 April and 25 June 1999, 2,396 returned on the Kosovan voluntary assisted programme which ran from 26 July 1999 to 25 June 2000. In addition, records show that 113 Kosovans have returned to Kosovo on the general voluntary assisted returns programme which is open to all nationalities. Individual records are not kept of Kosovans or any other nationality choosing to make their own arrangements to leave the United Kingdom.

Figures are not available on a monthly basis but 25 Kosovans have been returned to Kosovo since June 1999.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the success of the dispersal policy for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [136789]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has now been in operation for seven months. Applications for support and therefore dispersals were lower than predicted. We have revised down the number of bed spaces required from 65,000 to 44,000 for this financial year. However, NASS has been able to extend the new support arrangements to all new destitute asylum seekers earlier than anticipated. The scheme has also been extended to those asylum seekers who prior to 3 April were in receipt of social security benefits but who on or after 25 September receive a first negative decision but who continue to be eligible for support. At the outset the accommodation requirements for NASS were supplied by the private sector and one housing association but NASS has now secured contracts with four local authority consortia and negotiations are at an advanced stage with three more. The dispersal process is bedding down as NASS, the Voluntary Sector and the Accommodation Providers settle into their new roles.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 456W, on animal experiments, what measures his Department is taking to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised when project licences are considered and granted while trying to make the process more efficient; and if he will make a statement. [137536]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No changes will be made to the licensing arrangements that might compromise animal welfare.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for changes to the 2000–01 Departmental Expenditure Limits and running costs limits within his responsibility. [138028]

Mr. Straw *[pursuant to my answer, 9 November 2000, Official Report, c. 390–91W]:* The increase of £660,000,000 in the Departmental Expenditure Limit, subject to the Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, is for processing asylum cases, detention, and support costs including unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The increase of £167,252,000 in the Department's running costs limit is for asylum case processing.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many decisions the Immigration and Nationality Department made in the last month for which figures are available. [136921]

Mrs. Roche: The number of decisions taken by the Integrated Casework Directorate in respect of applications for asylum, after-entry extensions of stay, right of abode, British citizenship, Travel Document, and European Economic Area cases, was 44,200 in September. This includes cases dealt with by the Public Callers Unit which did not involve a decision, such as a return of passport following a withdrawn application and the transfer of conditions from an old to a new passport.

Licensing Laws

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the cost to an applicant of applying for *(a)* a personal licence and *(b)* a premises licence under the proposals contained in the Government's publication "Modernisation of our licensing laws". [137091]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Appendix 4 of the White Paper "Time for Reform: Proposals for the Modernisation of Our Licensing Laws", published on 10 April this year, sets out a full regulatory impact assessment, including details of our estimates of the fees, costs and charges likely to arise in obtaining both personal and premises licences. We are continuing to discuss these estimates with the Local Government Association and the hospitality and leisure industry, and more detailed work will be needed before final decisions are made in respect of the fee and charges structure.

HEALTH

Recruitment

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what costs the Government expect to accrue as a result of recruiting an extra 6,500 members of professions allied to medicine; and if he will make a statement. [135746]

Mr. Denham: The recruitment of more staff will lead to greater salary and associated costs. Some or all of these costs will be offset by better patient care, reduced turnover, less money spent on agency fees, greater productivity and reduced costs for recruitment activity.

Hospital-acquired Infection

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to combat hospital-acquired infection. [136686]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Action to tackle the problem of hospital acquired infection (HAI) has been set as a "must-do" for the National Health Service and is specifically identified in the National Priorities Guidance. An action plan to strengthen the management and control of infection in hospitals was issued to the NHS in February 2000. Regional directors of public health will ensure that robust infection control arrangements are in place and they are currently assessing progress. All hospitals will take part in national surveillance of HAI from April 2001.

Nurses

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much it cost the NHS to employ agency nurses *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* in London, between 1990 and 2000. [137113]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The table shows the total expenditure on non-NHS nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in England, for the financial years 1991–92 to 1999–2000. These figures include all agency staff and any staff not directly employed by individual trusts and health authorities. It also shows the same information for the London region. Prior to 1994–95 the London region was calculated using the former North East, North West, South East and South West Thames regional totals. Similarly for the years 1994–95 to 1997–98, the North and South Thames regional totals have been used. The information relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Analysis of expenditure on non NHS staff (agency, etc.) nursing, midwifery and health visiting—1991–92 to 1999–2000

£

Year	*Expenditure England*	*Expenditure London*
1999–2000[1]	361,656,683	180,665,901
1998–99	272,225,162	130,573,228
1997–98	216,338,567	134,735,613
1996–97	191,496,635	128,727,083
1995–96	166,631,981	111,509,427
1994–95	132,836,673	94,021,002
1993–94	106,149,571	76,801,024
1992–93	102,433,822	72,269,339
1991–92	103,456,872	68,178,839

[1] 1999–2000 data are provisional

Note:

The line in the financial return refers to "Non-NHS staff (Agency etc.)" which may include other nursing staff not employed directly by the NHS

Sources:

1. Annual Financial Returns of NHS Trusts, 1991–92 to 1999–2000

2. Annual Financial Returns of Health Authorities, 1996–97 and 1998–99

3. Annual financial returns of district and region health authorities and the special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals, 1991–92 to 1995–96.

NHS Patients

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what external legal advice he has sought on the responsibility for care of NHS patients transferred to the private health sector. [137111]

Ms Stuart: I can conform that my officials are not aware of any instance in which the Department has sought external legal advice on this matter.

Where National Health Service bodies make arrangements with private sector health care providers for the treatment of NHS patients by those providers, the patients are not transferred to the private health sector. The patient may receive treatment in a private hospital, but the patient remains an NHS patient. They remain the responsibility of the NHS and have the NHS complaints system available to them. The NHS simply uses available private sector facilities. The treatment will continue to be NHS treatment and free to the patient. This will remain the case where the NHS makes arrangements with the private sector in accordance with the recently concluded Concordat between the Department and the Independent Healthcare Association.

Community Hospital (Lymington)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the proposed new community hospital at Lymington. [137932]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 377–78W.

Dystonia

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people affected by dystonia in the United Kingdom. [137816]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not routinely collect statistics on the prevalence of individual conditions. The Dystonia Society however, estimates that around 38,000 people in the United Kingdom currently have the condition.

Child Workers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate how many children were working illegally in each of the last 10 years. [137824]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the number of children employed is not collected centrally. Local authorities regulate children's employment through byelaws which are confirmed by the Secretary of State for Health in England, and the National Assembly for Wales in Wales. It is the responsibility of individual local authorities to ensure enforcement of their byelaws.

Out-patient Clinics (Consultants)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of new patients referred to *(a)* medical, *(b)* surgical, *(c)* oncological, *(d)* gynaecological and *(e)* other out-patients clinics were seen by a consultant as opposed to a junior doctor in the last 12 months. [136513]

Mr. Denham: Information is available only on the number of first attendances at consultant led out-patient clinics. This information does not differentiate between new patients who were seen by the consultant in charge of the clinic or by one of the consultant's team.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 5 September regarding a constituent (reference POH(2)5608/53). [135459]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A reply to my hon. Friend's letter was sent on 7 November.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schools (Sutton)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many bids have been received from schools in the London Borough of Sutton since 1 May 1997 for centrally allocated spending, broken down by *(a)* capital funding, *(b)* Standards Fund funding and *(c)* other funding; how many of such bids have been (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful; and if he will make a statement. [134887]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Centrally allocated funds, including the Standards Fund and funding for capital work, are usually distributed on a formula basis or as a result of bids from local education authorities, not via bids from individual maintained schools. Non-maintained special schools can bid directly for capital grant, but there are no such schools in Sutton. Until March 1999 grant maintained schools bid to the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) for capital grants on a rolling programme. Between May 1997 and March 1999, 46 bids from grant maintained schools located in Sutton were successful. The FAS maintained no record of the number of unsuccessful bids.

Since 1997–98 total Standards Fund allocations in Sutton have increased from £1,428,000 to £4,406,000 while capital fund allocations have increased from £5,755,000 to £9,767,000.

University Chemistry Departments

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the university departments of chemistry that have *(a)* closed and *(b)* amalgamated with other departments in the period 1980 to 2000. [136164]

Mr. Wicks: This information is not collected centrally. Decisions about closures or amalgamations of departments are for individual higher education institutions.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the measures he proposes to take to speed up the processing of individual learning accounts. [136181]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* Individuals receive application packs within seven working days from their first inquiry. They will also receive their Individual Learning Account within seven days of their completed application form being received at the Individual Learning Centre. 200,000 Individual Learning Accounts have been opened by the Individual Learning Account Centre since June. 80 per cent. of these people were sent applications and their accounts within two days.

As the Individual Learning Account Centre became fully operational at the same time as peak enrolment we have introduced a one-off measure to help people whose account did not arrive before they started their course. These special arrangements have been put in place with learning providers to enable those individuals to benefit from a discount. These arrangements apply to people who started their learning by 6 October.

Schools (Internet)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in England and Wales are connected to the Internet. [136214]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* 88 per cent. of schools are currently connected to the Internet. The numbers of schools connected are: 15,610 Primary Schools (86 per cent.); 3,470 Secondary Schools (98 per cent.); and 1,100 Special Schools (92 per cent.). In March 1998, 83 per cent. of secondary schools, 17 per cent. of primary schools and 31 per cent. of special schools were connected to the Internet.

For matters relating to schools in Wales I refer the hon. Member to the Welsh Assembly.

Political Debate (Schools)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what obligations in respect of impartiality schools are required to observe when allowing politicians to discuss politically controversial subjects with pupils. [136237]

Jacqui Smith: We regard it as valuable that Members of Parliament and local councillors take an interest in education and look for opportunities to visit schools and meet pupils. From 2002 Citizenship will become a statutory subject in secondary schools, and this will require all pupils to be taught about parliamentary government and the democratic process. Open and informed debate about current issues is, of course, vital for a healthy democracy.

There are, however, legal safeguards in place to protect against attempts at political indoctrination. Section 407 of the Education Act 1996 requires teachers to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to pupils' attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

New Deal (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many young unemployed in Hendon have suffered a reduction in benefit for non-compliance with the New Deal; [136953]

(2) how many young unemployed in Hendon have refused to co-operate with the New Deal; and if he will make a statement. [137029]

Ms Jowell: Since April this year 10 young unemployed people have received a benefit sanction in Hendon as a result of non-compliance with New Deal. That is the only period for which figures are immediately available.

The great majority of young people taking part in the New Deal do so to improve their employability and find a job without the necessity to impose any benefit sanctions.

University Course Lengths

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of university courses have changed from three years to four years in each of the past five years. [136262]

Mr. Wicks: The information is not held centrally. The available data on course lengths are shown in the following table.

Percentage distribution of undergraduates in UK HE institutions by length of course[1]

	Less than or equal to 1 year	*More than 1 year and less than or equal to 2 years*	*More than 2 years and less than or equal to 3 years*	*More than 3 years and less than or equal to 4 years*	*More than 4 years and less than or equal to 5 years*	*More than 5 years*	*Total*	*Total (thousand)*
Full-time								
1994–95	3.5	6.7	54.1	31.9	3.4	0.3	100.0	927.3
1995–96	3.1	6.4	55.2	31.6	3.5	0.3	100.0	947.4
1996–97	2.9	5.7	56.2	31.5	3.4	0.3	100.0	973.1
1997–98	2.9	5.1	56.8	31.1	3.8	0.3	100.0	1,004.9
1998–99	2.9	4.8	57.6	30.5	3.9	0.4	100.0	1,007.6
Part-time[2]								
1994–95	20.7	29.0	13.0	10.9	15.4	10.9	100.0	161.1
1995–96	23.7	23.9	13.5	12.0	16.1	10.8	100.0	186.4
1996–97	27.7	23.7	13.1	10.2	15.0	10.3	100.0	201.8
1997–98	26.1	21.4	13.4	10.5	16.8	11.7	100.0	206.6
1998–99	26.5	20.3	10.9	11.1	18.2	12.9	100.0	210.1

[1] Excluding students with unknown course length
[2] Short, continuing education courses became part of mainstream provision from 1995–96, hence the increasing proportion of courses of less than one year

Zacchaeus Centre, Birmingham

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the work of the Zacchaeus Centre in Birmingham. [136402]

Jacqui Smith: The Zacchaeus Centre has been assessed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools as a unique and successful provision for Key Stage 3 pupils at risk of exclusion from the 10 Roman Catholic secondary schools in Birmingham. The Centre does not cater for permanently excluded pupils. Rates of re-integration are high. That is why we included the Centre as an example of good practice in Circular 10/99 "Social Inclusions: Pupil Support". Unlike the previous Government, we have been supporting the Centre through the Standards Fund: £53,600 in 1998–99 and £94,000 in 1999–2000. The Centre is receiving a similar amount this year and will do so in 2001–02.

Our support for the Zacchaeus Centre complements the increased provision we are making for both in and out of school support. We are making resources available to establish over 1,000 on-site Learning Support Units by 2002. These take disruptive pupils out of the classroom quickly and ensure that they start to behave better. Where an exclusion is necessary, provision for excluded pupils is being greatly increased. There are 1,000 more places and 250 more teachers in Pupil Referral Units than in 1997. Their quality is improving and by 2002 all local education authorities will be required to provide a full timetable for excluded pupils.

Disabled Children

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the availability of funding from his Department for Schools for Parents for parents of children with severe disabilities aged 1 to 5 years. [136820]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* There are a variety of funding streams available to schools and the voluntary organisations with which they work, including Standards Fund and the Department's Special Educational Needs Small Programmes Fund. We are not aware of any approach to the Department for funding from School for Parents.

Thurlow Park School, Lambeth

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) when he last visited Thurlow Park School in Lambeth; [137227]

(2) what discussions he has had with Lambeth Council about the proposed closure of Thurlow Park School. [137225]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities visited Thurlow Park School on 2 March this year.

In October 2000, officials from the Department for Education and Employment met officers from Lambeth local education authority to discuss the authority's plans for the reorganisation of educational provision for pupils with moderate and complex special educational needs, including the proposed closure of Thurlow Park School.

Recycled Computers (Wirral)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many subsidised recycled computers will be made available at low personal cost to low-income families living in each of the four constituencies of Wirral over the next three months; [137727]

(2) how many subsidised recycled computers have been made available at low personal cost to low-income families *(a)* in total and *(b)* living in each of the four constituencies of Wirral, since March 1999. [137728]

Mr. Wills: I announced the commencement of the Computers Within Reach scheme on 25 october 2000 for those on certain benefits who were seeking to gain or retain employment. The first phase of the scheme will provide up to 35,000 recycled PCs in various areas in England until 31 March 2001. Potential applicants have been asked to contact the free telephone helpline 08080 100 900 in the first instance. The PCs will be delivered following the applications being processed by the relevant regional contractor. I am writing to all hon. Members with details of the scheme and the pilot areas to be covered in this first phase. The PCs will be provided in areas where there are locally based groups that made a successful bid to be part of the scheme. The Wirral constituencies are not in an area currently covered by a bid.

The first phase pilots are located in areas within the following locations: Birmingham, Bradford, Hull, Leeds, Knowsley, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Plymouth, Portsmouth, and Sheffield.

Apprenticeships

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many workers on apprenticeships there were in each of the last 15 years; and what is the estimated number for the next three years. [137733]

Mr. Wicks: Figures from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) on the number of apprentices in employment for each of the last 15 years is given in the table. There are no projections on the number of apprentices there might be in the future.

Labour Force Survey, 1986–2000, United Kingdom

Thousand

Year	*All*	*Males*	*Females*
1986	316	261	55
1987	322	264	58
1988	341	268	73
1989	373	308	65
1990	357	298	59
1991	339	270	69
1992	318	254	63
1993	236	191	45
1994	209	167	42
1995	180	141	40
1996	174	138	36
1997	176	141	35
1998	191	154	37
1999	197	166	30
2000	215	179	35

Sure Start

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to expand Sure Start. [136586]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I am delighted to say that following the Spending Review, the number of Sure Start programmes will be increased from 250 to 500 programmes by 2004 reaching a third of all children aged under four living in poverty. The budget for Sure Start will rise from £184 million a year in 2000–01 to £499 million a year in 2003–04.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to amend the Departmental expenditure limit and gross running costs limit for 2000–01. [138397]

Mr. Wills: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates for Class 1, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) and Vote 3 (the Employment Service), the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) for 2000–01 (excluding Welfare to Work) will be increased by £640,856,000 from £18,355,519,000 to £18,996,375,000.

This overall increase is made up of DEL increases on Votes 1 and Vote 3 of £627,511,000 and £36,075,000 respectively and an decrease of £22,730,000 in non-voted expenditure. As a result, the Voted element of the Departmental Expenditure Limit (excluding Welfare to Work) will be increased by £663,586,000 from £16,806,467,000 to £17,470,053.000. The non-Voted element will be decreased by £22,730,000 from £1,549,052,000 to £1,526,322,000.

The changes in Vote 1 are the result of the take up of £608,950,000 of the end-year flexibility entitlement announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in Table 7 of the 1999–2000 Public Expenditure Outturn White paper (Cm 4812); transfers of: £1,068,000 to the National Assembly of Wales for mature student bursaries and the administration of the mature student bursaries, of £860,000 to Class XII, Vote 2 (Department of Social Security: Housing, benefit subsidies, council tax benefit subsidies and administration, payments to the National Insurance Fund and the Social Fund and other grants) for intercalating students, of £13,474,000 to the Scottish Executive in connection with Scottish Open University

(OU) students, access funds for Scottish OU students and the European Social Fund (Verification and Audit Service), of £3,738,000 from Class 1, Vote 3 (Employment Service) for Employment Zones, work-life balance, the salary of a Grade 7 lawyer, the new agency policy division, the manual girocheque reconciliation function and ONE marketing, of £3,000,000 from Class II, Vote 1 (Department of Health: Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England) for the Tomlinson project at Queen Mary and Westfield College, of £4,000,000 from Class II, Vote 2 (Department of Health: administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England) as a contribution to Education and Health Partnerships, of £950,000 to Class XI, Vote 1 (the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) for dance and drama students; the draw down of £825,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund and the draw down of £23,350,000 from the Department's non-Voted Departmental Unallocated Provision (DUP).

The increase in the provision on Vote 3 is the result of the take up of £35,779,000 of end-year flexibility entitlement; the draw down of £250,000 from the DUP to help fund New Deal Action teams; transfers of £195,000 from Class IV, Vote 1 (Home Office) for the Recovery Employment and Progress Drug Projects, of £3,738,000 to Class 1, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) for Employment Zones, Work-life balance, the new agency project, ONE marketing, legal advice and the manual girocheque reconciliation function and of £2,374,000 from Class XII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security: administration) to cover Decision Making Advice costs connected with adjudication work; an increase of £1,670,000 to cover the cost of administering allowance payments for work based learning for adults in Scotland and Wales (offset by matching increase in receipts); and the draw down of £1,215,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund.

The Departmental running costs limit (excluding Welfare to Work) will be increased by £19,793,000 from £1,072,601,000 to £1,092,394,000. The changes on Vote 1 are as a result of the transfer of £20,000 to the Scottish Executive, the movement of £600,000 out of running costs into programme provision, and the draw down of £825,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund. The changes on Vote 3 are the result of the take up of £17,261,000 of end-year flexibility entitlement, the transfer of £2,374,000 from the Class XII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security: administration), the addition of £1,670,000 to cover work on allowance payments for Work Based Learning for Adults in Scotland and Wales and the draw down of £1,215,000 from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund. The Supplementary Estimates also include transfers of £3,738,000 of running costs from Vote 3 to Vote 1, of which only £806,000 increases the Vote 1 running costs provision.

The Department's Welfare to Work provision is being increased by £111,414,000 from £1,144,281,000 to £1,255,695,000. The increase is made up of changes on Votes 1 and 3 of £90,251,000 and £21,163,000 respectively. The change on Vote 1 is as the result of the take up of £75,472,000 of end-year flexibility; draw down of new provision of £8,494,000; net transfers from Class 1, Vote 3 (the Employment Service) of £6,300,000, a transfer of £15,000 to the Class XII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security) and an increase in running cost expenditure for New Deal Task Force projects and corresponding receipt of £750,000. The change on Vote 3 is as a result of the take up of £13,350,000 of Windfall Tax end-year flexibility entitlement, the draw down of £6,746,000 of Windfall Tax provision to fund additional expenditure on the New Deal for 50plus and the New Deal for Lone parents, net transfers of £6,300,000 to Class 1, Vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) for New Deal for Partners, Action Teams, The Training Standards Council and the Government Office's financial monitoring of New Deal and of £7,367,000 from Class XII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security: administration) for the New Deal for Lone parents.

The Departmental Welfare to Work running costs limit will be increased by £12,865,000 from £184,011,000 to £196,876,000. The change on Vote 1 is as a result of the take up of £478,000 of new provision, the increase of £750,000 for the New Deal Task Force and the transfer of £15,000 to the Department of Social Security. The change on Vote 3 is a net result of the take up of £7,000,000 of Windfall Tax end-year flexibility entitlement, the draw down of £6,134,000 of Windfall Tax provision to fund additional expenditure on the New Deals for 50plus and Lone Parents and a transfer of £4,550,000 from Class XII, Vote 3 (Department of Social Security: administration) for the New Deal for Lone parents. The Supplementary Estimates also include transfers of 6,480,000 from Vote 3, of which only £448,000 increases the Vote 1 running costs provision.

The decrease in non-Voted expenditure within DEL arises from the draw down of £23,600,000 of DUP and an increase in credit approvals due to a transfer from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions of £870,000 in connection with the overpayment of Annual Capital Guideline to Derby City Council.

The increases are the result of transfers or will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support (Mortgage Interest Payments)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what schemes exist to enable unemployed households in receipt of Income Support covering mortgage interest payments to take up job opportunities available to them. [136815]

Mr. Bayley: In addition to the range of work incentives already available to recipients of Income Support and income based Jobseeker's Allowance, specific help to support home owners moving into full-time work was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in his Budget Statement.

From April 2001 home owners who have been receiving Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance continuously for 26 weeks and who have help with their mortgage interest payments will continue to receive help with their mortgage interest for a further four weeks after starting full-time work. This measure will

help to ease the transition into work by offering a financial cushion for the first few weeks in employment when people may have to wait for their first earnings: 60,000 home owners are expected to benefit from this help each year with average gains of between £30 and £35 per week.

In addition, we want to encourage home owners to try work. From April 2001 benefit-linking arrangements will be extended from the current 12 weeks to 52 weeks for home owners taking up employment. Home owners will be able to take up short-term or seasonal work secure in the knowledge that if they need to reclaim Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance within a year, they will immediately qualify for help with their mortgage interest payments.

CSA

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the categories of expenditure covered by the CSA maintenance payments. [136811]

Angela Eagle: Child support maintenance assessments, which set the level of child support liability, do not specify categories of expenditure covered by maintenance payments. It is for the parent with care to decide how best to spend the money in the interests of her children.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many men have been eligible to receive a backdated Winter Fuel Payment, broken down into those who *(a)* have received the payment and *(b)* are still waiting to be paid. [135720]

Angela Eagle: Following the changes made to the Winter Fuel Payment scheme, the number of men who may now be eligible for payments in respect of previous years is around 1.7 million.

Payments in respect of previous years must be claimed and it is open to those who are now eligible to choose whether they wish to make a claim.

An information campaign has been running since April to inform potential customers about the changes to the scheme and what, if anything, they need to do.

To date, we have received 950,000 claims from men who have chosen to claim these payments, and around 930,000 payments have already been issued in respect of these claims. Outstanding claims from this group (currently estimated to be around 15,000) are being dealt with and payments will be issued on successful claims, in early December. Claims for past winters are not subject to any time limits and we continue to receive them daily.

War Pensions

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the changes made to the level of war pensions in each of the last 20 years; and what was the cost or saving to public funds of each change. [137836]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the tables.

The weekly rates of the maximum basic war disablement pension and the weekly rates of standard war widow's pension over the last 20 years

£

Uprating month and year	*War disablement pension*[1]	*War widows pension*[2]
November 1980	44.30	35.30
November 1981	48.30	38.45
November 1982	53.60	42.70
November 1983	55.60	44.25
November 1984	58.40	46.55
November 1985	62.50	49.80
July 1986	63.20	50.30
April 1987	64.50	51.35
April 1988	67.20	53.50
April 1989	71.20	56.65
April 1990	76.60	60.95
April 1991	84.90	67.60
April 1992	89.00	70.35
April 1993	97.20	72.90
April 1994	98.90	74.70
April 1995	101.10	76.35
April 1996	105.00	79.35
April 1997	107.20	81.00
April 1998	111.10	83.90
April 1999	114.70	86.60
April 2000	116.00	87.55

[1] Rate for those 100 per cent. service disabled
[2] Rate for widow of a private

Estimated expenditure resulting from uprating war pensions

£ million

From	*To*	*Estimated increase in full year*
November 1980	November 1981	69
November 1981	November 1982	46
November 1982	November 1983	52
November 1983	November 1984	18
November 1984	November 1985	28
November 1985	November 1986	37
July 1986	April 1987	6
April 1987	April 1988	12
April 1988	April 1989	23
April 1989	April 1990	34
April 1990	April 1991	48
April 1991	April 1992	48
April 1992	April 1993	48
April 1993	April 1994	38
April 1994	April 1995	27
April 1995	April 1996	26
April 1996	April 1997	47
April 1997	April 1998	26
April 1998	April 1999	48
April 1999	April 2000	37

Benefits (Wales)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the amount by which benefit was under-claimed in Wales in each of the past 10 years. [137827]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is not available.

Attendance Allowance

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims for Attendance

Allowance were received in the last 12 months for which statistics are available; how many were refused; and how many were subsequently granted on appeal. [137275]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Attendance Allowance claims in the latest 12 months

	Number
Claims received[1]	405,313
Claims refused[1,2]	98,657
Claims granted on review or appeal[3,4]	13,900

[1] Figures based on 100 per cent. data relate to the 12 months ending September 2000.
[2] Figures include claims received before the 12 months ending September 2000.
[3] Figures based on 5 per cent. data relate to the 12 months ending August 2000.
[4] Figures relate to claims awarded as a result of review, reconsideration, supersession or appeal.
Source:
DSS Information Centre

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums and Galleries

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what additional funding he is making available to museums and galleries sponsored by his Department over the next three years; what provision this additional funding includes for free access and quids-in at the charging museums; what resources he has set aside in reserve for further allocation; and if he will list the resources that he is making available. [138398]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am increasing the funding available for the museums and galleries sponsored by my Department from £229 million this year to £275 million in 2003–04. Included in the increase is additional capital funding of £10 million in 2002–03 and 12 million in 2003–04. Not all of this funding has yet been allocated.

The bulk of the extra revenue funding available is to support the continuation of free access for children and pensioners at the charging museums and to provide compensation for the introduction of quids-in (a reduced charge of £1 for adults) from 1 September 2001.

Within the total I have allocated £7 million in 2003–03 and £8 million in 2003–04 for urgent capital repairs. I am holding back £3 million of capital funding in 2002–03 and £4 million in 2003–04 from which I shall invite bids for improvement projects and I am also holding back £4 million of revenue funding in 2002–03 and £10 million in 2003–04 to meet particular requirements as they arise.

The allocations made for 2001–02 to 2003–04 are set out in the table for comparison with the allocations for 1998–99 to 2000–01 and show the significant increase achieved. The table does not include the funding for work in the regions which I announced in the House on 25 July 2000.

Grant-in-aid to sponsored museums and galleries

£ million

	1998–99[1]	*1999–2000*[1]	*2000–01*[2]	*2001–02*[3,4]	*2002–03*[3,4]	*2003–04*[3,4]
British Museum	33.921	34.721	34.881	35.969	[5]36.469	[5]36.469
Natural History	26.960	29.583	30.408	33.108	[5]37.360	[5]38.478
Imperial War	10.573	12.149	11.744	13.110	14.072	14.126
National Gallery	18.689	19.478	19.215	19.949	[5]20.449	[5]20.449
National Maritime	10.184	10.923	11.660	12.820	13.371	13.420
National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside	12.696	13.714	13.910	15.237	[5]16.169	[5]16.382
National Portrait Gallery	4.997	5.115	5.138	5.462	[5]5.562	[5]5.712
National Museum of Science and Industry	20.281	24.576	25.481	27.341	[5]30.598	[5]31.712
Royal Armouries	3.723	5.096	5.148	5.820	6.042	6.056
Tate Gallery	19.218	19.727	24.881	26.877	26.979	26.986
Victoria and Albert	29.147	30.084	30.458	32.690	33.471	33.514
Wallace Collection	1.916	2.463	2.073	2.163	[5]2.413	[5]2.413
Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester	2.178	2.717	2.677	2.822	3.016	3.029
Museum of London	4.210	4.361	4.429	4.681	[5]5.236	[5]4.842
Sir John Soane's	0.567	0.630	0.593	0.699	[5]0.874	[5]0.874
Horniman	3.144	3.062	3.226	3.106	3.106	3.106
Geffrye	1.047	1.172	1.176	1.124	1.124	1.124
Tyne and Wear	—	—	0.994	0.994	0.994	0.994
National Coal Mining Museum England	—	—	—	1.332	[5]1.882	[5]1.928
Design Museum	—	—	0.200	0.200	0.200	0.200
24-Hour Museum	—	—	0.149	0.149	0.149	0.149
Unallocated Reserve Revenue	—	—	0.141	0.158	4.575	9.098
Unallocated Reserve Capital	—	—	—	—	3.375	3.725
Other	—	0.200	—	—	—	—
Government Indemnity Scheme	0.015	0.098	0.150	0.150	0.150	0.150
Total	203.466	219.869	228.772	245.986	267.636	274.936

[1] Outturn
[2] Provision
[3] Plans
[4] SR 2000 allocations 2001–02 to 2003–04
[5] Includes a capital allocation

National Lottery Grants Review

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the review of the National Lottery grants application process is due to be published. [137767]

Kate Hoey: The Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (QUEST) published the first phase of its review of Lottery application processes on 3 August. The report focuses on applications for grants of up to £100,000 and includes recommendations for improving application and assessment procedures in order to ease the administrative burden for small organisations applying for grants. Copies of the report are available in the Library of the House. QUEST will shortly begin the second phase of its work, which will investigate the costs inherent in the application process for larger grants, both to applicants and Lottery distributors.

Athletics Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the value is of public funds *(a)* spent and *(b)* committed, to date, on the proposal to build an athletics stadium at Picketts Lock. [137838]

Mr. Chris Smith: No Exchequer funding has been committed to the development of the National Athletics Stadium at Picketts Lock. The English Sports Council have so far far made a grant of £240,000 from the Sports Lottery Fund towards initial feasibility studies. On 6 November, the English Sports Council agreed to provide a further grant of £1.3 million towards the costs of design, site investigation, and cost planning.

Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the legal position in relation to the agreement between Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and Sport England concerning the return of Lottery funds to Sport England. [137840]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 328W.

CABINET OFFICE

Better Regulation Task Force

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recommendations the Better Regulation Task Force made in respect of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. [136448]

Mr. Stringer: The independent Better Regulation Task Force supported the overall aim of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 to legislate to combat serious crime conducted on the internet. It was concerned that, like all other new Government regulation, it should meet the five principles of good regulation: transparency; accountability; consistency; proportionality; and targeting. The Bill was amended considerably during its passage and the Task Force's concerns were broadly met. The Task Force nevertheless hopes that the Home Office will review the effectiveness of the Act in time, taking account of its impact on UK e-businesses.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate she has made of the amount the Better Regulation Task Force has saved business; and if she will make a statement. [136449]

Mr. Stringer: The independent Better Regulation Task Force is an advisory body and can not itself directly reduce costs on business. It works by making recommendations, including to Government. To date, the majority have been accepted. Since its creation in 1997, the Task Force has influenced many changes in the regulatory environment. For example, all new regulation must be checked against the principles of good regulation developed by the Task Force.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement in respect of the administrative and running costs of the Better Regulations Task Force, including the autumn 2000 Task Force review. [136606]

Mr. Stringer: The administrative and running costs of the independent Better Regulation Task Force for the six months of the financial year 2000–01 to September 2000 have totalled £191,581. The printing costs of the Better Regulation Task Force's Annual Report 1999–2000, which was published in October 2000, were £6,815.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 November 2000

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made on the establishment of the UK Sports Institute. [135647]

Kate Hoey: The UK Sports Institute's aim is to provide our best sportsmen and women with the facilities and support services that they need to compete and win at the highest level. It will provide much needed world class facilities and a higher standard of co-ordinated support services than the UK has ever had before.

Recruitment of the key staff of the UKSI Central Services team has been completed. From November 2000, sports will have access to the technical, operational and programme support provided through the UKSI Central Services Team.

The UKSI is also made up of a network of Institutes operated by the home country sports councils. The establishment of the English Institute of Sport of the UKSI is on-going. The Badminton Centre in Milton Keynes, the Aquatics Centre and the Velodrome in Manchester and the Ice-Centre in Nottingham are already available to athletes. In May-June 2000, the water-based hockey pitches in Birmingham and Cannock were among the first completed new projects. At Loughborough, Lottery funding of up to £2.1 million has been agreed for the development of swimming facilities, an indoor athletics centre, international hockey pitches, a gymnastic centre, facilities for badminton and netball together with athlete support services. Over £50 million of new Lottery funding has been committed by Sport England to date for additional facilities for the English network. It is expected that the majority of the remaining Lottery applications, representing over £60 million of further investment in network facilities in England, will be made in the next six months. Once the full building programme has been completed, there will be over 80 facilities that go to make up the English Institute of Sport network.

In addition, the UKSI Scottish Institute of Sport, funded by Sport Scotland, has been established and operating for 18 months and The Sports Council for Wales has been operating and developing UKSI Cymru for sometime. Both have been providing a range of services direct to athletes including technical training and support, conditioning guidance and supervision, preventive and reactive sports medical support and sports science. The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has identified the University of Ulster as their preferred partner to develop in partnership the UKSI network centre for Northern Ireland. Initial principles of agreement have been signed by both parties and work is under way to identify the most appropriate format to operate the network centre.

Copies of the UKSI Quarterly Update report for August 2000—produced by UK Sport—have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses to provide further information on progress of the UK Sports Institute.

National Lottery

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reason he has not dismissed the National Lottery Commissioners who were in post at the time of the decision which resulted in the resignation of the Chairman of the Commission. [136243]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have no grounds for dismissing the National Lottery Commissioners. The former Chairman of the National Lottery Commission, Dame Helena Shovelton, resigned from the Commission for personal reasons. I appointed Lord Burns to take her place on the Commission, and gave him a clear remit, alongside the other Commissioners, to conduct the selection process with absolute fairness and impartiality between the applicants. The Government have every confidence in their ability to do so.

Millennium Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 476W, what undertaking was sought by the Millennium Commission from *(a)* the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office, Lord Falconer or *(b)* the New Millennium Experience Company in return for its most recent award of grant. [137222]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I will write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Looted Cultural Assets

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what response he plans to make to the proposal of the Vilnius International Forum on Holocaust Era Looted Cultural Assets that Governments establish a central reference point to provide information and help on queries regarding looted cultural assets and claims. [137409]

Mr. Chris Smith: My officials are in contact with Resource (the Council for Museums Libraries and Archives) to discuss the outcome of the study they have commissioned into the feasibility of an advisory unit to offer expertise and advice to help museums, galleries, libraries and archives in handling this issue.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the timetable is for consultation on the case for legislation to permit national museums and galleries to return human remains and objects which were wrongfully taken during the period 1933 to 1945; and if he will list the organisations which are being consulted. [137410]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am currently consulting the Chairman of the National Museum Directors' Conference (NMDC), the Chairman of the NMDC's standing Repatriation Committee and the Chairman of the

NMDC's Working Group on Spoliation, together with the Director of Resource and the Director of the Museums Association.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his plans for the use of the Millennium Dome. [136989]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on 6 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 55–56W.

Chess

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to designate chess a sport. [137992]

Kate Hoey: I have currently no plans. Any decision to recognise chess as a sport would have to be agreed by all four home country sports councils and departments.

Regional Theatre

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for funding regional theatre in the areas covered by *(a)* the South East Arts Board, *(b)* Waverley district council and *(c)* Mole Valley district council, with particular reference to (i) the Redgrave Theatre, Farnham and (ii) the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead. [137687]

Mr. Alan Howarth: This is a matter for the Arts Council of England, as the main funding body for the arts in England, in collaboration with South East Arts, as the regional arts board, to decide within the context of their current review of theatre. The Arts Council have already announced additional funding for theatre from 2002–03, and decisions on how this will be distributed will be made in the near future.

Television Subtitling

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 330W, on subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing on digital, cable and satellite television, for what reason the scope of his Department's review has been extended to include satellite and cable TV; and what other aspects of provision and reception of subtitling, signing and audio description services are also being reviewed. [137919]

Janet Anderson: The review was widened to include other aspects of the provision and reception of subtitling, signing and audio description services in order to inform Government in the development of future broadcasting policy and legislation in this area. Other aspects being considered are the possibilities of different targets for different broadcasters, the prioritisation of certain programmes/channels, the costs of providing and receiving these services and the availability of skilled subtitlers, signers and audio describers.

European Union Baroque Orchestra

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the level of *(a)* Government and *(b)* European Communities support for the European Union Baroque Orchestra is. [138084]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The European Union Baroque Orchestra is an official cultural training initiative of the European Parliament and the European Commission, and receives funding from the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture. The orchestra also receives major sponsorship from industry and other organisations and individuals. The level of that funding is for those organisations to determine; no additional support comes from Government.

Government Sports Strategy

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what targets he has for getting more people regularly to take exercise; and if he will make a statement. [134150]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

Experts recommend that all adults should participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity five times a week and children should be active for at least an hour every day. In each case, physical activity can include activities like brisk walking, cycling and swimming.

The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease set out key milestones for the implementation of a range of prevention programmes at a local level. These milestones state that, by April 2001, all NHS bodies, working closely with local authorities, will have agreed and be contributing to the delivery of local programmes on physical activity. By April 2002, all local health communities will have quantitative data on implementation of these policies. The Health Development Agency has compiled a guide for implementing the preventive aspects of the NSF. This will be sent to Health Authorities in November and will provide examples of the projects they can set up in order to reach NSF milestones.

Several Government initiatives are promoting opportunities for people to be more physically active. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has made safer roads a priority in their White Paper 'A New Deal for Transport'. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport have outlined their commitment to improve access to services in their 'Sports Strategy'. There is also a joint DH/DfEE programme to implement the objectives of the 'National Healthy School Standard', which includes physical activity as a component.

Initiatives are in place to promote physical activity among children. The Safe and Sound Challenge, which encourages children to walk or cycle to school along safe routes, has run successfully for two years. In 2000–01, the aim of the scheme will be to offer schools in socially deprived areas the opportunity to develop healthy active modes of travel to school.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Office Furniture

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what the cost is of each item of portable office furniture *(a)* in offices in Portcullis House and *(b)* in other offices in the Parliamentary Estate. [136816]

Sir Sydney Chapman: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms; I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

PRIME MINISTER

Biodiversity

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those aspects of biodiversity which are potentially under threat as a result of the use of GM crops, to which he made reference in his speech on environmental policy at the Joint Green Alliance/CBI Forum on 24 October. [135436]

The Prime Minister: The Government take a precautionary, evidence-based approach to the possible impact on biodiversity of growing GM crops, whether through the herbicide regime, as a result of gene flow, or some other effect.

Core Environmental Principles

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the set of common values as part of core environmental principles to which he made reference in his speech on environmental policy at the Joint Green Alliance/CBI Partnership meeting on 24 October. [135435]

The Prime Minister: As is set out in the Sustainable Development Strategy, 'A Better Quality of Life', published in May 1999, the Government's core aim is:

> to ensure a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come.

Key values are best expressed by four objectives: social progress which recognises the needs of everyone; effective protection of the environment; prudent use of natural resources; and maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

Chapter 4 of the strategy also sets out 10 guiding principles and approaches which provide additional background on our common values with regard to achieving sustainable development.

More specifically, we need to build a new coalition for the environment that works with the grain of consumers, business and science, not against them, so that we can continue to grow and share the benefits of that growth. However, the negative impact of growth on the environment has to be reduced and a more productive use of environmental resources developed. To do this we need to: address problems at the right level—international, national, regional and local; harness consumer demand, not stifle it; stimulate science and innovation to provide solutions to environmental problems; use environmental resources more efficiently and become a low-carbon, recycling economy; and see protecting the environment as a business opportunity.

Our goal is therefore to combine the benefits of continued economic growth with the creation of a fairer society and a cleaner environment.

Hon. Members' Pay

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 68–69W, what plans he has to include in the forthcoming review a review of pension arrangements for hon. Members and Ministers and the additional costs allowances. [136420]

The Prime Minister: The review of parliamentary pay and allowances to which I referred in my previous answer will not cover pensions. That is the subject of a separate review which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has asked the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) to conduct and which we expect to receive early in the New Year.

In addition to its commitment to review Members' pay this year, I have specifically asked the Review Body to look at the Office Cost Allowance because of representations I have received asking that this be done. I have not specifically requested the SSRB to look at other allowances.

European Federation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the answer from the Minister for Europe of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 557W, on European federation, if he will define the difference between the two types of Government mentioned; and if he will make a statement. [137683]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave his hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

EU Council, Biarritz

Mr. Cash: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the information EU Council held in Biarritz. [138248]

The Prime Minister: A Statement on the Information European Council in Biarritz was made at the earliest opportunity in the other place by my right hon. and noble Friend, the Lord Privy Seal, in a written reply to the noble Lord Faulkner of Worcester, 16 October 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns WA63–65.

I repeated this statement when the House of Commons returned from the Summer Recess in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), *Official Report*, columns 69–70W.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his policy towards COM(2000)644. [135578]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

COM(2000)644 is a Commission Communication, published on 11 October, "on the legal nature of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union".

The Commission advocates that the Charter should be incorporated in the Treaties of the European Union. The Government reject this view, and incorporation will not happen unless all member states agree.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 555–56W.

DEFENCE

Baltic States

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* ministerial contacts and *(b)* military exchange contacts there have been in the past 12 months with (i) Lithuania, (ii) Latvia and (iii) Estonia; and if he will make a statement. [138094]

Mr. Spellar: We have well-developed defence relations with all three countries. These include extensive contacts at both ministerial and military levels. During the last 12 months contacts at ministerial level have included meetings between the Secretary of State for Defence and the Latvian and Estonian Presidents, a meeting between my colleague the Minister for Defence Procurement and the Latvian Defence Minister, Mr. Girts-Valdis Kristovkis, and my own meetings with Mr. Kristovkis, the former Lithuanian Defence Minister, Mr. Ceslovas Stankevicius, and the Estonian Foreign Minister, Mr. Toomas Ilves. In addition, following a very successful visit to the Baltic States in July 1999, the Chief of the Defence Staff has received senior visitors from Estonia and Latvia. The Chief of the Naval Staff visited all three Baltic States in June this year.

Central to our relationships with all three countries are bilateral programmes of defence co-operation, which form part of our Defence Diplomacy mission. These programmes cover the provision of a wide range of assistance, including advice on defence management, English language training and military training. In addition, my Department supports a number of joint Baltic defence projects, including the Baltic Defence College, located at Tartu in Estonia, the Baltic peace-keeping battalion and the Baltic naval squadron. Our aim is to support the establishment of democratically accountable, cost-effective armed forces capable of contributing to national and regional security and, increasingly, international security through peace support operations.

DERA Porton Down NBC Training Facility

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list for each of the past three years the military units which have used the DERA Porton Down NBC training facility, indicating how much each unit was charged; [136073]

(2) what the cost is to a customer of using the DERA Porton Down NBC training facility; and on what basis it is calculated. [136075]

Mr. Spellar: During the past three financial years, the following military units have used the NBC Training facility known as the Battle Run at DERA, Porton Down.

Financial year	*Military units*
1997	7 Battalion Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers (71 Aircraft Workshop) 1 Royal Anglian Regiment Joint Helicopter Support Unit 47 Regiment Royal Artillery 16 Regiment Royal Artillery
1998	Royal Wessex Yeomanry (Territorial Army) 243 Field Hospital Unit 10 Parachute Regiment
1999	Royal Wessex Yeomanry (Territorial Army) 16 Regiment Royal Artillery Royal Household Cavalry

The charge to customers for the use of the NBC Training Facility at DERA Porton Down, known as the Battle Run, comprises range maintenance and manpower operational costs as well as an element of profit as agreed between DERA and MOD in their Terms of Business Agreement (TOBA). The actual amount of usage and the associated cost are agreed on a yearly basis within an agreed limit of liability which is specified in the contract for use. The basis for the calculation of charges for each of the three years and the current year is the same apart from adjustments for inflation, the amounts of which are also agreed between MOD and DERA. The charges to HQ Land Command, the Ministry of Defence budget holder for these units, for each of the three years were £48,928, £42,118 and £51,715 respectively. Costs are not attributed to individual units. Costs include elements for facility maintenance and improvements to overall capability as well as the actual operational cost for the conduct of the Battle Run training.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in each of the past three years on how many days the DERA Porton Down NBC training facility has been *(a)* available for use and *(b)* used for training. [136074]

Mr. Spellar: In each of the last three financial years the NBC training facility known as the Battle Run at DERA Porton Down was contracted by HQ Land Command to provide 20 days of training in blocks of two days. The take-up of the sessions was as follows:

Financial year	*Sessions*
1997	Six two-day
1998	Four two-day
1999	One two-day and two four-day

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 73–76W, on ministerial directions, if he will place in the Library the text and supporting documentation of the directions made by Ministers in his Department in 1998 and 2000; and if he will make a statement. [137298]

Mr. Spellar: I have considered this request under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and concluded that providing this information would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion within government. The request therefore falls within the terms of exemption 2 of the Code of Practice.

Tomahawk Missile

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which variants of the Tomahawk land attack missile have been purchased by his Department; and if his Department has taken steps to purchase further variants. [137689]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has purchased only one variant of the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile, the Block IIIC, which has a conventionally armed blast warhead. It is currently deployed in RN submarines. Although we are studying future Tomahawk developments, and joint work with the United States Navy has shown that a Torpedo Tube Launch version is possible, we have made no commitment to buying the next generation Tactom Block IV variant.

RAF Coltishall

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the future of RAF Coltishall. [137930]

Mr. Spellar: Over the next few years, my Department will be carefully considering possible roles for RAF Coltishall once its current task as base for the Jaguar Force comes to an end.

Islamic Terrorists

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the islamic terrorist threat to *(a)* Royal Naval ships and *(b)* British service personnel in foreign ports. [137911]

Mr. Spellar: The recent attacks in Yemen highlight the continuing terrorist threat to UK and allied forces and interests. The threat is under constant assessment and prudent measures are in place to ensure the safety of our ships and personnel, wherever they may be.

Kursk

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date military assistance was first *(a)* offered to, *(b)* accepted and *(c)* provided to Russia in respect of the Kursk disaster; and what the nature has been of the assistance provided since that date. [137925]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence offered the assistance of the UK Submarine Search and Rescue Service (UKSSRS) to the Russian rescue effort in a letter to the Russian Defence Minister, which was delivered by the British Embassy Moscow on 14 August. With time being of the essence, we approved the forward deployment of the UKSSRS to Norway on 15 August. The Russian Ministry of Defence accepted our offer, through our Naval Attaché in Moscow, on 16 August. On 21 August, Russian authorities confirmed that all on board the Kursk had died. Our further assistance was not therefore required and the UKSSRS was withdrawn. The Russians have made no further official requests to the UK for assistance in connection with the Kursk.

HMS Fearless

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his assessment is of *(a)* the damage to and *(b)* the period needed for repairs to HMS Fearless. [137910]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Fearless sustained fire damage to her After Machinery Space. The full extent of the damage will not be known until detailed surveys, which are currently under way, have been completed.

It is planned that repairs will be undertaken during a programmed maintenance period at Fleet Support Ltd., Portsmouth, commencing in December. However, until the full extent of the damage is assessed, the period needed to complete the repairs cannot be given.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (Balkans)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about British unmanned aerial vehicles lost in the Balkans theatre since March 1998. [137906]

Mr. Spellar: The Phoenix Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) was first deployed to the Balkans theatre between June-August 1999. No UK UAVs were deployed before this date. At the request of KFOR Headquarters, the system was deployed again in May 2000 and remained in-theatre until 1 November 2000. Since June 1999, some 270 missions have been flown in-theatre. In total there have been 29 occasions where either the airframe and/or the sensor payload has been lost or written off due to damage incurred. Reasons for losses include hostile action, landing damage and equipment failure. The attrition rate, including losses to hostile action, is not inconsistent with that expected during peacetime usage. The costs associated with the losses need to be set against the risks of using alternative means of surveillance and reconnaissance such as manned aircraft or personnel on the ground. Operational reports continue to indicate that Phoenix is both reliable and highly effective as a general reconnaissance and surveillance system with the capability to conduct safe surveillance over areas which might otherwise be inaccessible.

European Security and Defence Identity

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on the proposal under the European Security and Defence Identity on the mechanism for consultation before deployment of British troops. [137837]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The European Council at Helsinki decided that all member states would be entitled to participate fully, and on an equal footing, in all decisions and deliberations of the Council and Council bodies on EU-led crisis management operations. The Council also decided that commitment of national assets by member states to such operations will be based on their sovereign decision.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the sites of former *(a)* chemical weapons factories and *(b)* chemical weapons stores in the United Kingdom. [137832]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Pensions (Armed Forces)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the level of pensions payable to former members of the armed services who retired in the 1970s. [136117]

Mr. Spellar: Former members of the armed services who retired during the mid 1970s were affected by policies under which increases in pay were limited, but pensions in payment continued to be fully protected against price inflation. People who retired when price inflation was running at a higher rate than pay increases could therefore receive lower pensions than those retiring before or after them.

These policies affected all those employed in the public service. The Government have no plans retrospectively to change the pensions of those who retired during this period. The pensions of all such individuals have, like those of other public servants, been fully protected against inflation since their retirement.

Royal Navy

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* reviews and *(b)* studies his Department is conducting on the operational capability of the Royal Navy; and if he will make a statement. [138241]

Mr. Spellar: The operational capability of the Royal Navy is kept under continual review. This allows the RN to take into consideration changing circumstances. In addition, at any one time, it is likely that a number of more formal reviews or studies with a wider remit will be taking place, any one of which may impact on the area of operational capability. It is the nature of operational issues that much of this work is classified.

Missile Barge (Brixham)

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the status is of the missile test firing barge at Brixham; and how much has been spent in berthing fees in each of the past three years. [138242]

Mr. Spellar: The missile test barge Longbow, previously used for Sea Wolf trials, has been moored at Brixham pending its conversion for use in missile firing trials for the Principal Anti Air Missile System (PAAMS) Programme. Berthing fees paid during 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 were £23,824, £24,734 and £25,834 respectively. It has been more cost-effective to retain Longbow than arrange for its disposal and then have to purchase anew for the PAAMS Programme. The barge is now expected to be handed over to the PAAMS contractor in 2002.

Sea Harriers

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Sea Harrier aircraft are operationally available. [138225]

Mr. Spellar: The requirement for Sea Harrier operational aircraft is 24, of which 14 are in front-line squadrons. As of 9 November 2000, all 24 aircraft were available at the required readiness.

Foreign Military Equipment

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much he has spent in the last year on the hire and use of foreign military equipment. [138239]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

RAF Pilots

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many RAF pilots have indicated that they wish to leave the service in each of the past 12 months. [138226]

Mr. Spellar: The number of RAF pilots who have indicated that they wish to leave the Service in each month during the 12 month period from October 1999 are shown in the table.

Year	*Number of RAF pilots*
October 1999	8
November 1999	3
December 1999	3
January 2000	6
February 2000	8
March 2000	8
April 2000	4
May 2000	9
June 2000	8
July 2000	3
August 2000	3
September 2000	4

Falklands Patrols

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Royal Navy ships are on patrol in Falkland Islands waters. [138238]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Dumbarton Castle and Grey Rover are currently on patrol in Falkland Islands waters. The Type 23 Frigate HMS Iron Duke will arrive in the area later this month.

Harrier Pilots

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Fleet Air Arm Harrier pilots are combat ready. [138224]

Mr. Spellar: As of 9 November 2000, there were 18 combat ready Fleet Air Arm Harrier pilots in front-line squadrons. A further 15 pilots were at their planned lower states of readiness.

HM Forces Overseas

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the number and location of HM forces overseas; and if he will make a statement. [138095]

Mr. Spellar: The following table shows the number of UK Regular Forces and Gurkhas overseas at 1 October 2000.

	UK Regular Forces				
Region	*Naval Service*	*Army*	*Royal Air Force*	*Gurkhas*	*Total*
Continental Europe	826	24,798	3,595	0	29,219
of which Germany	3	17,135	2,031	0	19,169
Gibraltar	365	87	115	0	567
Cyprus	7	2,543	1,137	0	3,687
Gulf	49	220	703	0	972
Far East	681	213	24	1,197	2,115
Canada	3	3,401	143	0	3,547
United States of America	76	291	136	0	503
Elsewhere[1]	2,958	1,779	780	1	5,518
All overseas	4,965	33,332	6,633	1,198	46,128

[1] All defence attachés and their staffs are included under "Elsewhere" and not identified within specific areas

These figures exclude Full Time Reserve Service personnel and reservists mobilised for service in the former Yugoslavia.

Japanese POWs

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will (1) make it his policy to pay a gratuity to British ex-service survivors of former Japanese prisoner of war camps; [136188]

(2) estimate the cost of paying a one-off £10,000 gratuity to all surviving former Japanese prisoners of war and their widows. [136189]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to my statement in the House on 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 159–70.

Anti-tank Landmines

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the stocks of anti-tank landmines which are being refurbished. [137746]

Mr. Spellar: Part of the anti-tank stockpile is being refurbished to rectify an identified fault. The refurbishment programme began in March 2000 and is scheduled to be completed by October 2001.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Imports

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the *(a)* quantity, *(b)* category and *(c)* age of beef imported into the UK from France in the last 12 month period for which figures are available. [134513]

Ms Quin: The table shows *(a)* the quantity and *(b)* the category of beef imported from France for the 12 month period from August 1999 to July 2000, as recorded by the Overseas Trade Statistics. These statistics do not identify the age of the animal from which the beef was derived, but the sale for human consumption of any meat from animals aged over 30 months at slaughter is prohibited by the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No. 2) Regulations 1996. The country from which these imports originated is not recorded in the Overseas Trade Statistics; therefore not necessarily all beef shown as being imported from France will be of French origin.

Imports of beef from France August 1999-July 2000

Description of beef	*Tonnes*
Bone-in, fresh or chilled	146
Boneless, fresh or chilled	504
Bone-in, frozen	543
Boneless, frozen	1,497
Offal, fresh, chilled or frozen	377
Corned beef	2,491
Other meat and offal preparations	90
Total	5,647

Note:

The data are provisional and subject to amendment

School Milk

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to raise the level of take-up of milk in schools. [134400]

Ms Quin: While the decision whether to offer subsidised school milk is essentially for the schools themselves or for the LEA, we have had and continue to have contact with local authorities and others interested in the use of the scheme. One barrier to take-up has been the perception that the scheme administration is particularly complicated. We are working with the Commission in its current review of administration to see whether there are ways this can be simplified for schools.

Farm Bankruptcies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many bankruptcies of farmers there were in each year from 1990 to 1999; and what percentage this represented of the total number of farmers in England. [136592]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Data on bankruptcies are available only for England and Wales combined, and are given in the table. Estimates of the number of farmers in England and Wales are not directly available. Instead, bankruptcies have been expressed as a proportion of the number of registered agricultural holdings.

Number of bankruptcies[1] in the agricultural and horticultural sector: England and Wales 1990–99

Year	Bankruptcies of self-employed individuals	Company insolvencies[2]	Total	Bankruptcies as a percentage of number of holdings[3]
1990	198	111	309	0.2
1991	266	135	401	0.2
1992	313	191	504	0.3
1993	277	157	434	0.2
1994	231	166	397	0.2
1995	218	99	317	0.2
1996	168	89	257	0.1
1997	155	51	206	0.1
1998	157	65	222	0.1
1999	149	75	224	0.1

[1] *Source:* Department of Trade and Industry
[2] Including partnerships
[3] *Source:* June Agricultural and Horticultural Census

Fertilisers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received about the effect of import tariffs on ammonium nitrate upon the price of fertilisers for agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [136963]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have received representations from the Fertiliser Manufacturers Association and the National Farmers' Union on this matter. We have registered concern with the Commission at the possibility that it may seek to impose anti-dumping measures on a range of fertiliser products and have called for an assessment of the wider state of competition in the fertilisers market.

Cattle Passports

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the unit cost is of each passport issued by the British Cattle Movement Service. [136844]

Ms Quin: The unit cost of each passport issued by the British Cattle Movement Service is £7.73.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many replacement passports have been issued by the British Cattle Movement Service; and what income has been received from charges for these replacements, since the establishment of the service. [136843]

Ms Quin: The British Cattle Movement Service has re-issued 380,779 passports since it was established on 28 September 1998. 4,133 have been charged for, generating an income of £206,650. BCMS does not charge for replacement passports that are reported as lost in the post within one calendar month of being issued.

Eggs

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the extent of the United Kingdom's self-sufficiency in egg production. [137581]

Ms Quin: In 1999 the United Kingdom produced 94 per cent. of its egg market requirements.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many registered egg producers have traded in each of the past 10 years. [137579]

Ms Quin: Under EC egg marketing legislation egg producers are required to register their premises only if they intend to use any of the Special Marketing Terms such as Free Range or Barn. Producers of eggs from cage systems are not included in the table.

Financial year	Number of premises
1992	1,168
1993	1,162
1994	1,046
1995	1,057
1996	1,027
1997	1,055
1998	1,081
1999	1,161
2000	1,252

In 1998, MAFF data show over 25,000 holdings with laying hens.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what volume of eggs was imported into the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years. [137582]

Ms Quin: The quantity of eggs imported into the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Million dozen

Year	Number of eggs imported
1990	73
1991	50
1992	41
1993	49
1994	67
1995	66
1996	72
1997	70
1998	64
1999	69

Data include shell egg equivalent of whole (dried, frozen and liquid) egg, egg yolk, and albumen.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the trend in ex-farm prices for fresh eggs over the past 10 years. [137580]

Ms Quin: The average ex-farm price for all egg types for each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Pence per dozen

Year	*All egg type average*
1990	42.6
1991	36.3
1992	36.8
1993	41.9
1994	42.4
1995	38.3
1996	45.8
1997	39.6
1998	36.3
1999	34.2

Wheat

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the average *(a)* market price and *(b)* cost of production, per tonne of wheat in the last 12 months. [136965]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The average farm-gate price of bread-making wheat in the UK during the last 12 months was £82.39 per tonne. The average price of feed wheat was £68.86 per tonne. Current prices are, however, lower than this. In addition to receipts from the sale of the crop, most producers received revenues from area payments and straw sales.

Estimates of production costs are published in "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom". The latest published information relates to the 1998–99 marketing year. Estimates for the 1999–2000 marketing year will be published in the next edition in March 2001. The publication does not include information on fixed costs, because of the difficulty of allocating these items between commodities.

BSE

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the results of research involving embryos from BSE-affected cows fertilised by BSE bulls, implanted into heifers imported from New Zealand. [137575]

Ms Quin: Preliminary results from this research project have already been published[1]. All of the post mortem results obtained to date for implanted heifers and their offspring have been negative for BSE. The experiment is still on-going and will continue until June 2001 when the offspring will have reached seven years of age. Full results will be published once the analysis of the data is complete.

[1]Wrathall, AE(2000): Livestock Production Science 62.287–316

Swine Fever

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce legislation to provide for a levy from pig farmers as part of a package of compensation for swine fever. [138098]

Ms Quin: The industry is about to begin consultations on a levy-based Development Scheme that will be used to top up Government payments under the Pig Welfare (Disposal) Scheme. On completion of that consultation exercise, including addressing any objections, Ministers will be asked to decide whether to put a scheme before Parliament for approval. I cannot anticipate the outcome of these procedures, but in general terms we support efforts by the livestock industry to protect itself from the consequences of outbreaks of exotic animal diseases.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many rural communities have been provided with Government funds for CCTV since 1997; and how many of such communities have populations of *(a)* less than 5,000 and *(b)* less than 2,000. [136757]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Since 1997, under the Crime Reduction Programme, the Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Initiative and the final round of the CCTV Challenge Competition, this Government have awarded nearly £1.7 million to 23 CCTV schemes serving rural communities. These include coverage in small towns and villages and mobile units that can be deployed across wider rural areas. Information is not available as to the sizes of the populations covered.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137434]

Mr. Mandelson: The Government fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers and in April of this year I volunteered for a day at Hartlepool hospice.

Mr. Sam Marshall

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received concerning the death of Mr. Sam Marshall in Lurgan; and when he expects an inquest to be held into his death. [134882]

Mr. Ingram: This matter was raised by the Irish Government through the British Irish Secretariat. The listing of any inquest is a matter for the Coroner. In respect of the death of Mr. Marshall I understand that consideration is presently being given to the arrangements for a pre-inquest hearing.

Prisoner Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many prisoners released following the Good Friday Agreement are no longer resident at a permanent address which is known to the authorities. [138189]

Mr. Ingram: The only licence conditions imposed on a prisoner given early release is that they do not become a supporter of a specified organisation, do not become concerned in the commission, preparation, or instigation of acts of terrorism connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland; and, in the case of a life sentence prisoner, do not

become a danger to the public. There is no requirement to provide the authorities with a permanent address. Irrespective of residence, arrangements are in place to ensure that the Secretary of State is notified when an individual breaches the terms of his licence.

Sentence Review Applications

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many fugitives from justice who have previously been convicted of terrorist-related offences have made an application to the Sentences Review Commission; and if he will list their names. [138101]

Mr. Ingram: To date, no fugitives from justice who have previously been convicted of terrorist-related offences have made an application to the Sentence Review Commissioners.

Dalai Lama (Belfast Visit)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* uniformed and *(b)* plain clothes RUC officers were present during the visit of the Dalai Lama to the Springfield road, Belfast. [136036]

Mr. Ingram: During the visit of the Dalai Lama to the Springfield road, Belfast, on Thursday 19 October 2000, 119 uniformed police officers and 12 plain clothes officers were present.

Bomb Scares

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many bomb scares have there been in town centres in each police division in Northern Ireland in each week since 1 April; and, of these, how many were *(a)* Republican-inspired and *(b)* Loyalist-inspired. [136040]

Mr. Ingram: The table shows the number of hoax bombing incidents recorded in Northern Ireland during the period 1 April to 27 October 2000. These are incidents where an Army Technical Officer (ATO) was in attendance. It is not possible to define a town centre and so the table gives the location of each recorded incident. It is also not possible to give attributions for hoax bombings.

Week	*Address*
1–7 April	Nil
8–14 April	Dromore Road, Hillsborough
15–21 April	20 Abbeyhill Drive, Bangor
	University Avenue, Belfast
	Adelaide Street, Belfast
	Belleek
22–28 April	Serpentine Road, Greencastle
	43 Ballyhampton Road, Larne
29 April-5 May	Drumsurn Road, Limavady
	Paradise Walk, Templepatrick
6–12 May	Fortwilliam, Group Lane, Belfast
13–19 May	Junction Workman Avenue/Forth Parade, Woodvale, Belfast
	Junction Linen Hall/Clarence Street, Belfast
20–26 May	Devon Square, Rathenraw, Antrim
27 May-2 June	1A Fanad Walk, Larne
3–9 June	Balmoral, Black's Road, Belfast
10–16 June	Nil
17–23 June	Nil
24–30 June	Nil
1–7 July	Gortnasore Road, Dungannon
	Edenmore Park, Limavady
	McClure Street, Sandy Row, Belfast
8–14 July	103 Whitehorn Brae, Dromara, Banbridge
	Garrison Place, Charlemount, Moy
	105 Whitehorn Drive, Dromara
	M1, Derryadd Bridge, County Armagh
	19 Spring Lane, Greyabbey
	Fortwilliam Roundabout, Newtownabbey
	Kilmore Orange Hall, Moira
	Orange Hall, Moira Road, Magheralin
	Milltown Road, Dungannon
	St. Comgall's Church of Ireland, Church Lane, Newtownbutler
	Broadway Tower, Belfast
	Orange Hall, Whitewell Road, Greencastle
	Flax Street, Belfast
	Mayogall Road, Bellaghy
15–21 July	Sorting Office, Stormont Castle
	4A Mill Road, Clady
22–28 July	184 Ballyutoag Road, Clady
	Mountainview Place, Belfast
29 July-4 August	13 Elizabeth Avenue, Larne
5–11 August	Nil
12–18 August	Nil
19–25 August	12 Barra Drive, Ballymena
26 August-1 September	Willow Bank Terrace, Stranocum, Ballymoney
	Levan Road, Lurgan
2–8 September	Nil
9–15 September	Nil
16–22 September	Nil
23–29 September	New Street, Newry
30 September-6 October	Public House, Perry Street, Dungannon
7–13 October	Nil
14–20 October	Nil
21–27 October	57A Kilkeel Road, Annalong

Police Force

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what assessment he has made of trends in Catholic applications to the police force in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement; [137328]

(2) what *(a)* proportion and *(b)* number of applicants to the RUC/Northern Ireland police force were (i) Catholic, (ii) Protestant and (iii) from other communities from 1995 to date; and if he will make a statement. [137503]

Mr. Ingram: The following table provides the information requested, by recruitment competition from 1995. Under the terms of section 31 of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 (now Article 55 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998) this matter is continuously under review and requires the Royal Ulster Constabulary to identify under-representation and establish appropriate affirmative action to address any imbalances. The Royal Ulster Constabulary fully recognises the benefits and the need to be more representative of the communities it serves and its goal is to reflect the composition of those communities. The Government are committed to taking all appropriate steps as are necessary, in line with the recommendations contained in the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, to bring about an increase in full cross-community representation within the police service.

Applications to RUC by community background since 1995

Year	CB1	CB2	CB3	Total	Percentage CB1	CB2	CB3
RUC							
CompC 1995	1,449	467	142	2,058	70.41	22.69	6.90
CompD 1995	1,774	438	188	2,400	73.92	18.25	7.83
CompE 1996	1,571	369	155	2,095	74.99	17.61	7.40
CompF 1996	2,054	406	269	2,729	75.27	14.88	9.86
CompG 1997	2,173	412	212	2,797	77.69	14.73	7.58
CompH 1998	2,134	431	260	2,825	75.54	15.26	9.20
CompI 1998	2,312	750	297	3,359	68.83	22.33	8.84
Full-time RUC Reserve							
CompB 1995	1,042	282	130	1,454	71.66	19.39	8.94
CompC 1996	1,075	255	101	1,431	75.12	17.82	7.06
CompD 1997	1,155	184	135	1,474	78.36	12.48	9.16
CompE 1997	612	106	55	773	79.17	13.71	7.12
CompF 1997	1,132	197	128	1,457	77.69	13.52	8.79

Note:
CB1—Perceived to be Protestant
CB2—Perceived to be Roman Catholic
CB3—Non-determined

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Payroll Administration

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the costs of payroll administration in his Department and associated agencies and non-departmental bodies in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [135993]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The estimated payroll administration costs for DETR and its agencies for 2000–01 is £2.2 million.

Payroll administration of non-departmental public bodies is decentralised so the above information could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when contracts for the Public-Private Partnership for London Underground will be signed; and if he will make a statement. [137038]

Mr. Hill: As we have made clear in the past, we have not given specific deadlines. We have learned the lessons of the rail privatisation debacle when best value was compromised by working to a politically driven timetable. The position on the PPP is that bids have been received for the sub-surface lines contract, and best and final offers have been invited for the two deep tube contracts. Contracts will be signed when the bids have been evaluated and negotiations are complete, subject to the bids representing best value.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the cost to date of *(a)* legal and *(b)* financial consultancy fees incurred in relation to the Public-Private Partnership for London Underground. [137037]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 18 May 2000, *Official Report,* column 252W. I shall shortly be reporting London Transport's expenditure on external consultants for work on the PPP and restructuring London Underground up to the end of the first half of the current financial year, and a forecast of the expected final outturn.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the findings of the Independent Review of the Public-Private Partnership carried out on behalf of the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority by Mr. Will Hutton; and if he will make a statement. [137009]

Mr. Hill: The review contains a wide-ranging discussion of issues relating to London Underground funding, and has a great deal that is positive to say about the PPP. It says,

"The PPP will provide a framework in which higher investment can be insulated from Treasury cuts and planned over a 30-year period."

It goes on to say that,

"The contract outlines we have inspected offer a workable framework for improved performance for most aspects of the Underground,"

and that the

"rewards and penalties together should incentivise investment, cost control and good management."

I particularly noted its statement that

"The Review does not subscribe to the argument that the PPP structure is inherently unsafe and it recognises the special effort made by Government in ensuring that safety is managed centrally and rests ultimately in public sector hands."

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received on the quality of service on the Circle Line in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [137046]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has received no specific reports in the past 12 months on the quality of service of the Circle Line. However we do monitor the service across the whole network and I meet regularly with London Underground senior management.

Crematoriums (Emissions)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned into emissions from crematoriums; and what plans he has to conduct further research. [137039]

Mr. Meacher: Emissions from crematoriums are regulated under the air pollution control system established by Part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. As such, emissions must be controlled in accordance with the Best Available Techniques Not Entailing Excessive Cost. Guidance on BATNEEC for crematoriums was published in 1991 and revised in 1995. A second review of the guidance by the Environment Agency's Local Authority Unit is currently in progress and the revised guidance will also be applicable when crematoriums become regulated under the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999.

My Department, on behalf of Government and the devolved Administrations, has established a programme of monitoring levels of airborne lead and heavy metals (cadmium, arsenic, nickel and mercury) in the UK. This includes measurement in the vicinity of the Sutton Coldfield crematorium. Weekly measurements started in October 1999, and interim results will be posted on the internet shortly (www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual/). A fuller report of the work will be published on the internet, at the same internet address, early next year.

In 1997 my Department commissioned Entec UK Ltd. to carry out tests to investigate the effectiveness of selenium ampoules as a means of abating mercury emissions from crematoria.

My Department has commissioned a report on sources, sinks and levels of atmospheric mercury from DERA. The report will include a review of knowledge of UK emissions of mercury into the atmosphere, details of all the available sources of data on concentrations of mercury in the atmosphere, and a review of the current state of knowledge on the behaviour of mercury in the environment.

The DERA report is expected shortly from the research report pages of the National Air Quality Information Archive on http://www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual/. In the light of that and the advice of the Environment Agency's Local Authority Unit, we will consider commissioning further work on whether any action needs to be taken to reduce mercury emissions from crematoriums and what options are available and in line with BATNEEC.

The most recent air emissions inventory for mercury can be found in the National Air Quality Information Archive at the web address given above.

You may also like to be aware that the Health and Safety Laboratory has carried out mercury analysis on a small number of urine and dust samples collected in crematoriums, and levels have been found to be low.

Climate Change

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what strategic measures he is taking to allow for environmental changes induced by climate change. [137180]

Mr. Meacher: We published our first assessment of the impacts of climate change in 1990, and our second in 1995. In 1997, my Department established the UK Climate Impacts Programme to help organisations assess their vulnerability to climate change and assist them in planning responses to adapt to it. In addition actions have already been taken by Government to build adaptation into its own policies, in sectors such as flood defence, land use planning and water resources.

The Government's forthcoming Climate Change Programme, which presents a strategy for delivering our commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, also considers how the UK might adapt to what is now unavoidable and continues the debate on priorities for adaptation.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with other Governments concerning action to reduce the harmful effects of climatic change and global warming, in advance of the Hague summit in November; and if he will make a statement. [138069]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have continued to play a leading role in the international response to climate change. The Conference of the Parties in The Hague later this month will be a crucial step towards our goal of effective international action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In recent months, the Deputy Prime Minister has discussed climate change with Governments from 14 countries, including China, India, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Algeria, Malaysia and Jamaica, as well as with the Prime Minister of Japan and Vice-President Al Gore. On 7 November, the Deputy Prime Minister and I attended the Special EU Environment Council on climate change. I discuss climate change regularly with my EU colleagues, and take the opportunity of raising it whenever I meet Environment Ministers from around the world. In June and October I also attended preparatory meetings organised by the President of the forthcoming negotiations, Minister Jan Pronk of the Netherlands, in Warsaw and Muiden. These informal consultations were attended by around 30–40 Ministers from key countries in the climate negotiations. Discussions focused on the central issues in the negotiations and a range of possible options for resolving them, in advance of the key political choices which will have to be taken at The Hague summit.

GM Crops

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from Leicestershire local authorities about farm scale evaluations of GM crops; and if he will make a statement. [137070]

Mr. Meacher: Officials from my Department attended a meeting in October, at the invitation of Woodhouse parish council, to explain the nature of the farm scale evaluation of GM oil seed rape being conducted in their parish. The borough of Charnwood, which includes Woodhouse, has also invited an official to attend a future meeting on GM crops.

Oil Industry

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action

his Department *(a)* has taken and *(b)* intends to take to address the environmental impact of using oil as an energy source. [137220]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are taking action to tackle climate change by reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, including those from the use of oil and other fossil fuels as an energy source. The climate change programme, which will be published shortly, will outline the scale of the challenge facing the UK and make clear that emission reductions of 60–70 per cent. or more are likely to be needed globally in order to avoid dangerous climate change. The programme will set out the policies and measures that will begin to move the UK towards a low carbon economy. And it will detail how the Government intend to help and assist the development of new, sustainable and renewable technologies.

One area where oil is still used as a primary energy source is in the transport sector. The Government are taking forward a range of policies that will improve the fuel efficiency and emissions performance of vehicles, encourage people to buy smaller, cleaner and more fuel-efficient cars, and stimulate the development and use of alternative fuels and technologies. The Government are also addressing the environmental impact of traffic growth through the Ten Year Plan for transport and planning policies.

The use of oil as an energy source can also have serious air quality impacts. The Government and the devolved Administrations published the Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in January 2000. This sets out a programme of action that will be taken at international, national and local levels to tackle air pollution from all sources. In the transport sector, the fuels that are used today are significantly cleaner than those used only a few years ago. This is largely the result of progressively tighter European fuel quality standards, but is also due in part to our incentivisation of the use of cleaner fuels (such as ultra-low-sulphur petrol and diesel) across the UK through favourable duty rates. This has led to significant reductions in emissions of the most harmful air pollutants. We will continue to play an active role in discussions at a European Union level on the possible further tightening of vehicle and fuel standards.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the adequacy of the supply of appropriately trained and qualified technical and inspection staff at the Health and Safety Executive; and if he will make a statement. [137370]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) regularly and systematically recruits a range of inspection and technical staff. HSE is satisfied with the adequacy of supply for the majority of the posts it seeks to fill. There have been problems filling some very specialist posts where the pool of likely candidates is small, eg Medical Inspectors (Doctors). HSE reviews the outcome of each recruitment exercise and takes whatever steps are necessary to meet its overall professional requirements.

Construction Directorate (Standards)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the standards laid down by the Construction Directorate, attainment of which is necessary for registration on the Constructionline UK Register of Qualified Construction Services. [137318]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* Applicants to Constructionline must have three satisfactory technical references for each work category that they are applying to be registered under. They are also assessed for their financial strength, by means of their accounts or other financial documentation. This information is also used to calculate a recommended maximum contract size, or notation value. All applicants must have a valid tax certificate.

Constructionline has also been piloting in certain sectors a system of devolved technical assessment which is intended to raise the system's technical standards. This procedure is due to be opened up to the whole of Constructionline shortly.

Neighbourhood Revenue Fund

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the financial settlement for each London local authority would have been if the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation had been used as the key determinator of the allocation of resources under the Neighbourhood Revenue Fund. [137513]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The proposed allocations for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund cannot be calculated using the old 1998 Index of Local Deprivation in exactly the same way that they have been determined using the new Indices. The new Indices of Deprivation are very different from the old Index. The new Indices are based on ward level information whereas the old Index relied heavily on district level information and did not adequately capture pockets of deprivation. It would not therefore be appropriate to use the same method to calculate the NRF allocations if only the old Index was available.

Council Tax Regulations

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what mechanisms his Department is using to monitor the changes to council tax regulations; and when he will publish the results of his review of the changes; [137496]

(2) when he expects to publish the findings of his Department's review of changes to council tax regulations. [137512]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We carried out a review of the council tax in preparation for our 1998 White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People". In this we said that the council tax is working well as a local tax and that we have no plans to make major changes to the council tax during the course of this Parliament.

We also said that we would keep the operation of the council tax under review and have done this through liaison with key players such as local authorities, the Local Government Association and other interested parties. As a result we have made a number of minor changes to the council tax since the White Paper. The main ones extended relief under the reduction for disabilities scheme to occupiers of band A dwellings;

exempted households comprising students and people with a severe mental impairment; restricted the exemption for empty dwellings in need of major repair works to 12 months; and introduced owner liability in respect of certain dwellings occupied by asylum seekers.

We also invited views on certain aspects of the council tax in the Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance", which we published in September. The deadline for responses is 8 December.

Byker Heat Station

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Environment Agency has completed its investigations into the spreading of toxic ash from the Byker Heat station. [137603]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency has completed its investigation into the production and disposal of ash from Byker Combined Heat and Power Plant in Newcastle. A case file has been prepared for submission to the Agency's legal department. The file will be considered in accordance with the Agency's Scheme of Delegation and a decision on enforcement action is expected at the beginning of December.

Merseyside Objective 1 Programme

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to minimise delays in the Merseyside Objective 1 programme as a result of rulings made by the Competition Directorate in the European Commission. [137523]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There is no delay in implementing the Merseyside Objective One programme. It is proceeding well in line with the timetable agreed with the European Commission and the first projects to receive funding will be announced in the next couple of weeks.

Some of the projects intended to deliver part of the programme include substantial physical works involving identified private sector developers. Such projects must adhere to the EC's rules on state aid.

Proposals for securing approval of projects of this kind have been put to the European Commission. We are in constructive dialogue with the EC on this issue and we expect a positive response to our proposals shortly.

Ultrasonic Technology

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the efficacy of ultrasonic technology in detecting gauge corner cracking defects; and if he will make a statement. [137486]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) Railway Inspectorate has reviewed the relevant ultrasonic rail testing procedures, as described in Railtrack Line Specification RT/CE/S/055 Issue 1A, February 1998. These procedures are highly detailed and appear to be robust. Nevertheless, HSE intends to commission an independent third party review of these procedures as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the funding provided to Railtrack by the Government, over what timescale, will be allocated to the further development and introduction of alternatives to ultrasound; and if he will make a statement. [137411]

Mr. Hill: Since privatisation, no public money has been paid direct to Railtrack. I understand that Railtrack is considering the procurement of a scoping study to evaluate the suitability for rail inspection of all known forms of non-destructive testing (NDT). The study is to be undertaken by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. Railtrack will fund development of any NDT technique with the potential to improve current techniques for testing rails.

Mineral Extraction (Bristol Channel)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the report, commissioned by his Department and the Welsh Office, concerning extraction of mineral aggregates from the Bristol Channel. [137510]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The research report entitled "Bristol Channel Marine Aggregates: Resources and Constraints", commissioned by my Department and the National Assembly for Wales, was published by Posford Duvivier and ABP Research and Consultancy in October 2000. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

Biggin Hill Airport

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take *(a)* environmental, *(b)* Green Belt and *(c)* conservation considerations into account in reaching his decision over Bromley council's request to him to bring into the normal planning regulations the application by Biggin Hill Airport to build a hangar under the permitted use rules. [137337]

Ms Beverley Hughes: All relevant considerations will be taken fully into account in considering whether to approve the proposed direction.

Overhead Transmission Lines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 607–25, on severe weather disruption, when he will write to the hon. Member for the Vale of York on the impact of overhead transmission lines on global warming; and if he will make a statement. [137366]

Mr. Prescott: There is no significant connection between global warming and electricity power lines. Some very minor effects on atmospheric particles have however been noted and I am writing to the hon. Member with further information.

NDPBs (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him

which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137487]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following executive NDPBs sponsored by my Department have duties relating to Scotland: the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Northern Lighthouse Board.

The remaining information is not all held centrally in the form requested, but information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the library of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office's Public Appointments Directory website, "www.cabinet-office.gov.uk".

Trichloroethylene

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on listing Trichloroethylene as a Category II carcinogen under the Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994. [137392]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* Trichloroethylene is listed as a Category 3 carcinogen in the Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994. These regulations implement an EC single market directive, and negotiations are in progress which could result in a change to the classification from 3 to 2. The United Kingdom's final position on the full set of proposals is not yet settled.

Number Plates

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to lay regulations bringing in the new style of number plate for motor vehicles; and what the reason is for the delay in laying the regulations. [137532]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* It is anticipated that new number plate regulations will be laid before Parliament early in the new year. The delay in laying these regulations has arisen as a result of the need to revise the draft regulations following public consultation in August 1999 and January this year. In accordance with EC Directive 98/34/EC, as amended by Directive 98/48/EC, we have submitted the revised regulations to the European Commission. The regulations may be made after the end of the three-month consultation period with the Commission, which expires on 22 January 2001.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason details of the font to be used on the new style of number plates for motor vehicles announced in March have not been released to manufacturers of number plates. [137533]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* Details of the font to be used on the new style number plates, to be introduced from the revised date of 1 September 2001, were included in the Department's original consultation letter issued on 5 August 1999. This was sent to over 180 organisations and was placed on the Department's website. Copies have also been available from the Department on request.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the planning law relating to mobile phone masts. [138024]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A consultation exercise seeking views on possible changes to the planning laws relating to mobile phone masts and associated guidance ended on 31 October 2000. The Department is currently analysing the responses. We shall announce any changes as soon as practicable.

Drainage

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage the use of sustainable urban drainage systems in new housing developments. [138002]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Sustainable drainage systems (SUDS), which deal with rainwater as near its source as possible, are recognised as assisting in the control of both the quantity and quality of run-off from developed areas, as well as contributing to amenity, biodiversity and good design. My Department is actively encouraging the development of sustainable drainage systems for housing and other developments in a number of ways. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), gave the keynote message at a conference on SUDs earlier this month.

We consulted earlier this year on new Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 25 "Development and flood risk", which refers to the need for local planning authorities to consider the run-off implications of proposed development and encourage more sustainable drainage systems. This guidance is likely to be confirmed and strengthened when the final version of PPG 25 is issued shortly.

We are currently also revising PPG 23 "Planning and pollution control". The new version will recognise the potential contribution of SUDS and we hope to consult on a draft next year.

We are currently consulting on the Review of Part H of the Building Regulations. This includes a recommendation that infiltration drainage be provided, in most situations, to absorb rainwater from buildings within the site.

The Highways Agency, in consultation with the devolved Administrations is developing advice for inclusion in the "Design Manual for Roads and Bridges" on "Vegetative Treatment Systems for Highway Runoff". This is expected to be published next year.

We and other interested parties, including the water industry and house-builders, have also supported research projects in this area, leading to the production of design manuals and a forthcoming best practice manual. We will continue to support research necessary to assist in overcoming any perceived barriers to the implementation of SUDS on a more widespread basis.

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes he plans to make to the calculation of the area cost adjustment for local authorities in the south-east; and if he will make a statement. [138005]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Ministers have not yet taken a decision on whether to update the area cost adjustment to reflect the data from the 1999 New Earnings Survey. An announcement will be made in due course.

Farnborough Airfield

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about the removal of trees on hills near Farnborough Airfield. [137970]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* My right hon. Friend received some 125 representations that he should call in for his own determination the planning application for the development of Farnborough Airfield for civil aviation. Of these 25 specifically mentioned the removal of trees and/or the re-profiling of Miles Hill and Eelmoor Hill West, while the other 80 referred more generally to the environmental impact of the planning application. We gave careful consideration to the issues raised by the application but concluded that it did not raise issues which would justify my right hon. Friend's intervention.

Flood Plains

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he gives to local authorities on the desirability of building new houses on flood plains. [138058]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In addition to the general guidance at present in Circular 30/92, which is to be updated in PPG25, guidance on housing is given in PPG3 "Housing", published in March 2000. This requires local authorities to assess the suitability of land for housing against a range of physical and environmental constraints, including flood risk, and the fact that such risks may increase as a result of climate change.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he gives to local authorities considering a planning application to build on flood plains. [138057]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Guidance is at present given in DOE Circular 30/92, "Development and Flood Risk". This requires local planning authorities to take flood risk considerations into account in determining planning applications. They should also take into account the results of surveys of flood defence issues prepared by the Environment Agency under section 105 of the Water Resources Act 1991, and the views of the Environment Agency on individual applications. This guidance is currently being revised and strengthened in Planning Policy Guidance Note 25. A consultation draft was published in April 2000 and the final text is expected to be published in December.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a map showing the flood plain of the Ouseburn/Jesmond Dene, Newcastle upon Tyne, and the location and date of *(a)* flooding of property and *(b)* storm sewer overflows in the last 10 years. [138022]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Indicative flood plain maps prepared by the Environment Agency were distributed to all local authorities in 1999. These are currently being revised and the Agency intend to place them on their website in December in a form that will enable searches by postcode. While the Environment Agency could supply the current flood plain map, my hon. Friend may wish to await publication of the revised maps in December.

My Department does not hold records of flooding of property and storm sewer overflows. Operational flood matters are for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Environment Agency and other drainage authorities. I would expect the information to be available from one or more of the local authorities, the Environment Agency and the sewerage undertaker for the area.

Workplace Accidents (Children)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children were *(a)* involved and *(b)* killed in workplace accidents in each of the past 20 years. [137830]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The table shows the number of fatal and non-fatal injuries to children in workplace accidents reported to HSE and local authorities for the period 1986–87 to 1999–2000. The figures include both children at work and those not at work, but whose injuries arise out of or in connection with work activities. Data prior to 1986–87 are not available from HSE's databases.

Injuries to children[1] reported to HSE[2] and local authorities 1986–87 to 1999–2000

Year	*Fatal injuries*	*Non-fatal injuries*
1986–87	36	10,510
1987–88	34	8,651
1988–89	39	8,271
1989–90	42	6,547
1990–91	29	5,716
1991–92	24	6,420
1992–93	62	5,272
1993–94	44	5,626
1994–95	45	6,132
1995–96	22	6,255
1996–97	35	17,200
1997–98	30	13,941
1998–99	19	11,210
1999–2000[3]	23	10,298

[1] Children are defined as individuals aged one year and up to and including 15 years of age. A search criterion of 0 years produces records where age is not known, as well as children under the age of one. These data cannot be dissagregated.

[2] Injuries reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 1985 (for the years 1986–87 to 1995–96) and RIDDOR 1995 (for the years 1996–97 to 1999–2000). Data reported to HSE's Field Operations Directorate, Nuclear Safety Division, Hazardous Installations Directorate from 1999–2000 (Chemical and Hazardous Installations Division 1996–97 to 1998–99) and local authorities. Data reported to HSE's Railway Inspectorate can be searched only by passenger or employee and therefore have not been included.

[3] Provisional.

Notes:
1. Non-fatal includes major and over three day injuries as defined by RIDDOR 1995.
2. Data from 1 April to 31 March.
3. Injury figures from 1996–97 cannot be directly compared to previous years' figures due to the introduction of RIDDOR 1995.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions there were involving *(a)* workplace accidents and *(b)* workplace deaths involving children in each of the past 20 years. [137831]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The table shows the number of prosecutions involving *(a)* workplace accidents to children and *(b)* workplace deaths involving children for the period 1996–97 to 1999–2000. Data prior to 1996–97 are not readily available.

Informations laid by HSE following reportable[1] injuries to children
1996–97 to 1999–2000

	Informations laid	
Year	*Following a fatality*	*Following a non-fatal injury*
1996–97	—	9
1997–98	12	16
1998–99	8	7
1999–2000[1]	1	36

[1] Provisional

Notes:
1. Reportable means as reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR 1995).
2. For 1996–97 to 1999–2000 proceedings instituted by HSE's Field Operations Directorate (excluding Railways Inspectorate), Nuclear Safety Division, Hazardous Installations Directorate (Chemical and Hazardous Installations Division before 1999–2000). In the time available, data reported to HSE's Railway Inspectorate have not been included.
3. Children are defined as individuals aged one year and up to and including 15 years of age. A search criterion of 0 years produces records where age is not known, as well as children under the age of 1. These data cannot be disaggregated.
4. These data include prosecution action taken between 1996–97 and 1999–2000 following fatalities and injuries occurring between 1996–97 and 1999–2000. All data relating to 1999–2000 are provisional.
5. Data from 1 April to 31 March.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning there were in each of the last 20 years. [137825]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* From the information readily available, the following are the numbers of fatalities from carbon monoxide poisoning from all fossil-fuelled appliances in the UK, from 1985–98:

Year	*Fatalities*
1985	46
1986	46
1987	52
1988	39
1989	42
1990	46
1991	51
1992	50
1993	57
1994	55
1995	51
1996	69
1997	42
1998	47

Source:
Department of Trade and Industry

Fatalities from carbon monoxide poisoning relating to the supply and use of flammable gas in GB are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1981–82	98
1982–83	42
1983–84	57
1984–85	60
1985–86	65
1986–87	35
1987–88	48
1988–89	41
1989–90	34
1990–91	30
1991–92	33
1992–93	41
1993–94	29
1994–95	30
1995–96	29
1996–97	31
1997–98	28
1998–99	37
1999–2000	26

[1] Provisional

Notes:
1. Mainly piped gas but also includes bottled LPG
2. Data for fatal injuries involving carbon monoxide under the Gas Act 1972 (for the years 1981/82–1985/86), the Reporting of Injuries and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 1985 (for the years 1986/87–1995/96). RIDDOR 1995 (for the years 1996/97–1990/2000). They do not include carbon monoxide fatalities from other sources.

Source:
Health and Safety Executive

Energy Efficiency

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made by Government Departments towards the target of improving energy efficiency by 20 per cent. in the nine years to 31 March. [138406]

Mr. Meacher: By 31 March 1999, energy efficiency in Government Departments had improved by just under 19 per cent. since 1990–91, as measured by the Total Cost Indicator.

Full details for each department are given in the tables. The tables give a summary. All tables include some revisions to figures for earlier years revealing slightly lower performance than previously reported. The last figure announced was 18.1 per cent. to March 1998, but clarification of a misunderstanding with the Navy and data revisions by some other departments have reduced that figure to 17.5 per cent. I expect the figures for 1999–2000, which should be available in the new year, to show that the 20 per cent. has been achieved.

Energy management in individual Departments is a matter for those departments and their Green Minister. However, the Government aim to be at the forefront of good practice to improve energy efficiency, and progress is reviewed regularly by Green Ministers under my chairmanship. We have developed new performance indicators which will, for the first time, enable comparisons with independent standards of good practice across the economy, and are now beginning to use these for the larger office buildings on the central Government estate. Once the first year's data have been collected and analysed, we will consider how best to use them in the new campaign which began in April this year.

Results for the former Department of the Environment and Department of Transport have been consolidated for earlier years to allow a continuous series for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. DETR's overall performance in 1998–99 has improved relative to the previous year, which was adversely affected by parallel operation of buildings during merger of the former departments.

Summary Table 1 Civil Departments:
Recent performance measured by a range of efficiency indicators (ie per m2); also by total CO_2[1,16]

Performance against energy and cost indicators, relative to 1990–91 (positive figures represent % progress)

	Adjusted for estate and weather changes										*Adjusted for weather changes only*	
	Fossil fuel		*Electricity*		*Total kWh*		*Total cost*		*CO_2*		*Total CO_2*	
Civil Departments, including Agencies	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
MAFF—Main Estate[4]	48	52	−11	−11	35	38	14	16	21	23	25	22
MAFF—Laboratories[4]	25	31	8	12	20	26	14	18	24	29	−36	−31
Cabinet Office	15	50	−31	−46	4	26	−13	−8	4	13	−63	−47
Culture, Media & Sport[10]	−33	−32	−11	3	−20	−12	−14	−1	−14	−2	−14	−2
Customs and Excise	32	28	−17	−15	14	12	−5	−3	0	2	21	23
Educ. and Employment	28	38	−22	−22	4	9	−13	−11	−9	−7	7	13
Employment Service	23	21	−16	−18	12	10	−2	−4	1	−2	−5	−9
Environment, Transport and Regions[5]	31	43	3	4	22	31	12	16	17	21	37	37
DETR—HSE[6]	39	45	11	13	29	34	19	22	25	27	29	31
DETR—QEII CC[7,8]	−7	−14	9	−17	3	−16	7	−17	7	−17	7	−17
FCO	−3	13	−17	−10	−8	4	−13	−4	−4	5	−34	−22
Health[9]	35	17	−83	−105	−10	−30	−53	−75	−39	−59	−21	−38
Home Office[11]	17	23	3	−4	13	15	7	5	11	10	9	5
Home Office—Prisons[2]	10	28	−19	−28	6	22	−2	6	9	20	−7	15
Inland Revenue	−7	17	19	17	3	17	13	17	14	19	31	19
Internat. Development[3]	54	56	36	35	48	48	41	40	42	41	71	71
Lord Chancellor's Department	28	30	1	0	20	21	10	10	13	14	−9	−9
National Savings	16	20	32	32	24	26	29	30	30	31	37	38
Northern Ireland	18	16	12	4	16	12	14	8	15	7	−2	−10
Scottish Office[4]	30	40	−26	−23	16	24	−5	1	7	13	24	29
Scottish Court Service[4]	35	44	30	23	34	38	32	31	34	33	−2	−6
Scottish Prison Service	15	16	−12	−18	12	12	5	3	9	9	−2	−5
Social Security[13]	17	25	0	−1	12	18	6	9	9	13	−12	2
Trade & Industry	74	74	40	39	62	62	49	49	52	53	69	70
Treasury	−19	−15	−8	−1	−16	−11	−11	−6	4	8	−9	−1
Welsh Office	48	38	−18	−17	19	13	−4	−6	1	−1	21	20
Total	18.0	28.8	1.6	−1.5	14.0	21.3	8.0	10.3	13.1	16.8	6.2	12.2

Summary Table 2 MOD[11,12] *and Total Government Estate*
Recent performance measured by a range of efficiency indicators; also by total CO_2[1,16]

Percentage reduction relative to 1990–91 (positive figures represent per cent. improvement)

	Adjusted for estate changes and weather correction										*Adjusted for weather change only*	
	Fossil fuel		*Electricity*		*Total kWh*		*Total costs*		*CO_2*		*Total CO_2*	
Ministry of Defence	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Common User Estate[15]	50	50	−2	−2	33	33	13	13	27	21	11	2
Navy	29	33	37	40	31	35	34	37	37	40	30	38
Army	17	24	26	23	19	24	22	24	24	26	20	21
RAF	26	28	14	11	23	24	19	18	20	20	30	29
Procurement Executive[14]	0	4	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	2
DERA	−27	−29	8	8	−11	−12	1	1	−4	0	−19	−20
MOD Total	21.3	25.7	22.3	21.0	21.6	24.6	21.9	23.0	24.1	24.3	23.3	23.2
Civil Departments Total	18.0	28.8	1.6	−1.5	14.0	21.3	8.0	10.3	13.1	16.8	6.2	12.2
Grand Total	20.3	26.6	15.5	13.6	19.2	23.6	17.5	18.9	20.6	21.9	17.8	19.7

[1] Progress is expressed as a percentage relative to the 1990–91 base year value of the performance indicator in question. Positive figures represent improvement. The standard indicator, against which the target to improve energy efficiency by 20 per cent. by 31 March 2000 is measured, is obtained by weather-correcting energy consumption and converting to costs using "standard prices" for fuel (6p/kWh for electricity and 1.25p/kWh for all fossil fuels) then dividing by floor area. Conversion to money both reflects the relative costs of electricity and fossil fuel and their environmental impact, and the use of fixed prices eliminates the effects of tariff changes which distort the comparison of fuel bills.

[2] Although figures have been prepared on a consistent basis, caution should be exercised in comparing the energy use of different departments and agencies because of differences in their estate and the nature of their work. For example, the operational needs of prisons and the QEII Conference Centre mean that they have a pattern of energy use which is different from that of a department which has predominantly office accommodation. Expenditure on energy and investment figures are included for information only. Investment figures relate to clearly identifiable energy efficiency measures undertaken by departments. Energy efficiency is an integral part of all major construction projects, including building refurbishment and plant replacement and the figure "0" for some departments does not necessarily mean there has been no investment, just that the investment was not clearly identifiable.

[3] The average performance figure for the civil estate cannot be derived by simply adding together the individual departmental progress and dividing by the number of departments because this does not allow for the large variations in consumption. The correct figure is obtained by calculating the value of the performance indicator for the year in question and the base year, for the civil estate as a whole, and calculating the reduction relative to the base year.

[4] The energy performance for MAFF's "Main estate" and its "Laboratories" continues to improve through on-going investment in energy schemes, monitoring of energy at local level and taking appropriate action as well as central initiatives including continued staff awareness programmes.

[5] The DETR's figures have been compiled from the former Environment and Transport Departments. The Department now has a greater proportion of air-conditioned buildings than in the base year, because of estate rationalisation, relocation to new HQ buildings and inclusion of some Government Offices for the Regions. Performance in 1997–98 was adversely affected by parallel operation of both old and new buildings while staff moved from one to the other.

[6] HSE was removed from the DfEE estate on the formation of that Department. QEII Conference Centre is reported separately because of its business-led demands. The initial sharp rise in consumption following the 1990–91 base year was directly attributable to increased revenue earning activity, which has continued throughout the reporting period, ["and the more recent decline in consumption reflects the effect of energy conservation measures undertaken at the site".]

[7] Rationalisation of the estate since the base year has led to staff moving from several naturally ventilated buildings to more densely occupied air-conditioned buildings, all equipped extensively with information technology equipment. Staff numbers have increased by over 25 per cent. since 1997–98 which has led to a commensurate increase in energy consumption.

[8] Base year is 1991–92.

[9] Base year in 1991–92. Data for Natural Resources Institute no longer included following its transfer to the University of Greenwich in 1996.

[10] Base year is 1994–95 by which time energy efficient lighting and other improvements already installed in buildings which are already fully air-conditioned with intensive IT usage.

[11] The Ministry of Defence (MOD) estate is different from the rest of the Government estate, and has been undergoing more radical changes. It is therefore treated in a slightly different way. In common with the civil estate, it has greatly increased its use of information technology.

[12] In civil departments, the effect of estate changes is allowed for by dividing consumption by floor area. In MOD, floor area is sometimes not meaningful (eg in relation to security or runway lighting) and also not often available. Estate changes are allowed for by being explicitly excluded from the calculations, ie the energy consumption of new facilities is removed, and for facilities no longer part of the estate, the consumption for the last full year of operation is added back. In most cases, such changes are small compared to the total and can often approximately cancel each other out.

[13] No 1998–99 data were available for the Common User Estate part of MOD. 1997–98 results are quoted.

[14] It is almost impossible to produce any meaningful results to date for MOD's Procurement Executive (PE) since it has suffered major estate gains and losses over the past 10 years and now consists largely of one recently built large office. The standard MOD methodology produces a meaningless "no change" result (since the present estate is almost entirely different from the original). Consequently, we have taken 1997–98 as the base year and applied the civil departments' methodology to this office.

[15] This shows the combined results for the whole of the Government estate based on the data in tables 1, 2 and 3. It is not a simple average of the data, but reflects the proportion of total consumption represented by each part of the estate (see also note 3). Some departments have a different base year, and the individually agreed base year has been used for the purposes of this table, where appropriate.

[16] In some instances the base year is not 1990–91, but for the purpose of this table the agreed base year has been used in the calculation.

Fuel Poverty (Pensioners)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the proportion of pensioners living in fuel poverty aged *(a)* 65 to 69, *(b)* 70 to 79 and *(c)* 80 years and above, broken down by (i) Government offices of the regions, (ii) groups of authorities with similar characteristics and (iii) area types based on the English House Conditions Survey Data for (A) 1991 and (B) 1996. [136221]

Mr. Meacher: There are two main definitions of a fuel poor household:

(a) If, in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime, it would be required to spend more than 10 per cent. of all income (including Housing Benefit and Income Support for Mortgage Interest) on all household fuel use.

(b) If, in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime, it would be required to spend more than 10 per cent. of its income (excluding Housing Benefit and Income Support for Mortgage Interest) on all household fuel use.

The 1991 English House Conditions Survey (EHCS) was based on a smaller sample of homes, and collected less information on each, compared to the 1996 survey. As a result it is not possible to provide the information requested without undue expenditure, and indeed if at all. The information that is available is shown in the table and is based on the definition at (b) above.

Number of fuel poor households[1] aged 60 years or more based on data from the 1991 English House Condition Survey

Household type	*Percentage of households in fuel poverty*	*Total number of households (thousands)*
Couple aged 60 or more	44	3,096
One person aged 60 or more	80	2,840

[1] Based on the definition at (b) above.

Using data from the 1996 EHCS, the tables set out the breakdown of older fuel poor households by Government office region and also by type of location. In order to be statistically valid, some of the categories requested have been grouped together. A breakdown is not available on the basis of groups of local authorities which have similar characteristics.

Number of fuel poor households aged 60 years in each Government office region based on data from the 1996 English House Condition Survey

Government office region	*Age category (years)*	*Percentage of fuel poor using definition (a)*	*Percentage of fuel poor using definition (b)*	*Total number of households (thousands)*
North East	60 to 74	46	51	245
	75 or above	47	54	108
Yorkshire and Humber	60 to 74	36	38	400
	75 or above	55	67	269
North West	60 to 74	38	43	613
	75 or above	38	49	332
East Midlands	60 to 74	32	36	381
	75 or above	45	51	189
West Midlands	60 to 74	36	40	497
	75 or above	54	61	222
South West	60 to 74	34	36	451
	75 or above	43	49	300
Eastern	60 to 74	26	30	555
	75 or above	43	50	246
South East	60 to 74	22	26	629
	75 or above	35	37	384
Greater London	60 to 74	24	30	508
	75 or above	41	49	234

Number of fuel poor households aged 60 years or more in urban/rural area based on data from the 1996 English House Condition Survey

Area type[1]	*Age category (years)*	*Percentage of fuel poor using definition (a)*	*Percentage of fuel poor using definition (b)*	*Total number of households (thousands)*
Urban	60 to 74	31	35	3,289
	75 to 84	38	45	1,422
	85 or above	46	57	338
Rural	60 to 74	33	36	990
	75 to 84	55	57	401
	85 or above	62	71	124

[1] Urban includes city centre and suburban residential homes. Rural includes rural residential and village centre homes.

Green Ministers

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Second Annual Green Ministers' report. [138407]

Mr. Meacher: I am delighted to announce that "Greening Government: the 2nd Annual Report of the Green Ministers Committee" will be published tomorrow. It provides a comprehensive account of the work of Green Ministers over the past year, and sets out our future work programme. The report reflects Green Ministers' increasing focus on integrating sustainable development into Government policies, as well as our continuing efforts to improve the environmental performance of Government operations. There is a considerable amount of information at Department level to enable the reader to understand the progress each Department has made in all areas of our work.

Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Cross-loaded Timber (HGVs)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will instruct the Road Transport Laboratory to undertake research into the safety of cross-loaded timber on commercial heavy goods vehicles; [136184]

(2) when he next expects to issue revised guidelines to road haulage contactors and their trade organisations about the safety requirements of cross-loaded timber on heavy goods vehicles; [136185]

(3) how many accidents have been reported in the last five years involving heavy goods vehicles carrying cross-loaded timber; [136186]

(4) what estimate he has made of the potential increase in the volume of timber to be transported from forests in the United Kingdom over the next five years; and how much of such timber he estimates will be carried on lorries using cross-loaded decks. [136187]

Mr. Hill: It is estimated that there will be a 13 per cent. increase in timber production over the next five years. It is not clear how much of that increase will be transported as cross-loaded timber.

There is no detailed statistical information available about accidents caused by insecure loading of cross-loaded timber.

My Department, in conjunction with those from the Health and Safety Executive, the Forestry Commission and the timber industry, are investigating whether it is safe to carry cross-loaded timber on goods vehicles. The findings of these investigations may result in specific research being commissioned.

The conclusions drawn from investigations and any resultant research will be added to the revision of my Department's Code of Practice on the Safety of Loads on Goods Vehicles. The industry has also agreed to amend its own code of practice in line with any conclusions. The review of my Department's code will be widely consulted on and, when complete, will be publicised within the haulage industry generally, including the trade organisations. The timescale will depend on what research, if any, is carried out and is unlikely to run beyond the end of 2001.

Town Improvement Schemes

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (1) pursuant to Cm 4917, if he will list the criteria for qualifying as a town improvement scheme; [138199]

(2) what businesses are to be included under his proposals for a supplementary business rate for funding town improvement schemes; and what the rates will be; [138198]

(3) pursuant to Cm 4917, if he will list the criteria for a local tax reinvestment programme; and how he will evaluate successful regeneration. [138200]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Details of our proposals for a supplementary business rate and for a local tax reinvestment programme are contained in the Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance" (19 September 2000). The consultation period ends on 8 December.

Under our proposals, the supplementary rate would be limited to a maximum of 1 per cent. of the national rate per year, up to a ceiling of 5 per cent. The supplement could be raised from all non-domestic ratepayers in a smaller area such as a town centre, subject to agreement by a majority of the ratepayers affected, for use in ways agreed between the ratepayers and the council. The Green Paper suggests that this could be one way of funding town improvement schemes. The only criterion would be that use of the supplementary rate in this way would need to be agreed between a local council and its ratepayers.

Possible criteria for establishing and evaluating a local tax re-investment programme (LTRP) are included for consultation in Appendix 2 to Annex F of the Green Paper. A copy of this Appendix will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

City Growth Strategies

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding is to be available to RDAs to develop city growth strategies; and what the scope of these strategies will be. [138244]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Funding has been made available as part of the 2000 Spending Review. Regional Development Agencies and the Small Business Service will have a key role to play in developing City Growth Strategies, as part of their shared purpose to promote enterprise in the regions and across society.

These strategies will map the economic asset base and develop detailed action plans for business growth in a number of key cities over three years.

Emergency Tug (Pentland Firth)

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from the Chairman of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency about the all year round siting of an emergency tug in the Pentland Firth; and if he will make a statement. [138019]

Mr. Hill: The Chairman of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency wrote to my noble Friend the Minister for Transport about emergency towing vessel provision in the Minches and Pentland Firth on 10 July 2000. I replied to him on 10 November 2000.

Wetlands

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish further guidance on the protection of sites listed as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. [138408]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are fully committed to meeting their obligations under the Ramsar Convention. We believe that wetland sites listed under the Convention should be accorded the highest level of protection available. The comprehensive policy statement I have published today on the protection and management of Ramsar sites in England places Ramsar sites on the same footing as sites designated as part of the European Union's Natura 2000 network and gives clear guidance to local planning authorities and other public bodies on how that protection should be delivered

Ramsar sites in England—A policy statement

Introduction

1. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (the 'Ramsar Convention'), signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources by national action and international co-operation as a contribution to achieving sustainable development throughout the world. In May 2000 there were 121 Contracting Parties to the Convention. The UK ratified the Convention in 1976. The UK Government is fully committed to effective implementation of the Convention.

2. One of the main means by which the Ramsar Convention seeks to conserve wetlands and wetland interests is through the listing of sites on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. In May 2000 there were 1,027 wetland sites covering over 78 million hectares on the Ramsar List. At that time the UK had listed 157 sites covering almost 738,000 hectares.

3. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Government's statutory adviser on international conservation matters, is currently carrying out a review of the UK Ramsar site list, taking account of the Convention's Resolution VII.11 (Strategic Framework and Guidelines for the Future Development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands). It is the Government's intention to publish a revised site list before the 8th Conference of Contracting Parties (COP) in 2002 and to designate any new sites which meet the selection criteria by COP9 in 2005. This will contribute towards the Ramsar Convention's own target of 2000 listed sites globally by 2005.

4. This statement sets out the Government's policies for the protection and management of Ramsar sites in England, of which there were 75 covering over 361,000 hectares at the end of May 2000. Matters relating to the management and protection of Ramsar sites in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fall to the devolved administrations of those countries.

Ramsar sites in England—the current position

5. All terrestrial areas included within listed Ramsar sites in England are currently Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and it is the Government's firm intention that this will continue to be the case. As such they are subject to the same arrangements as for other SSSIs notified by English Nature. The Countryside and Rights of Way Bill currently before Parliament will substantially enhance the protection available to SSSIs and to make it easier for English Nature to create the conditions for their conservation interests to be managed positively. As such the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill changes will make a very substantial contribution to meeting the Government's obligations under the Convention.

6. Paragraph C7 of the current Planning Policy Guidance on Nature Conservation (PPG9) published in 1994 extends the same protection at a policy level to listed Ramsar sites in respect of new development as that afforded to sites which have been designated under the Birds and Habitats Directives as part of the EU Natura 2000 network.

7. Article 6 of the Habitats Directive (as transposed into UK law through the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 as amended otherwise referred to as 'the Habitats Regulations') requires that any new development proposal likely to have a significant impact on a Natura 2000 site is assessed for its implications on that site in view of the site's conservation objectives. If that assessment concludes that the project would have an adverse effect on the integrity of the site it can only proceed, in the absence of alternatives, in the overriding public interest. In addition, compensatory measures must be taken to maintain the coherence of the Natura 2000 network. The Government's Outline Position Statement on the Birds and Habitats Directive published in May 1998 (otherwise referred to as the Government Statement) gave further guidance on the application of Article 6.

8. It is the Government's intention to bring forward revised Planning Policy Guidance on Nature Conservation once the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill has completed its passage through Parliament. It will continue to apply as a matter of policy substantially the same framework to listed Ramsar sites as to Natura 2000 sites. Paragraphs 15–27 of this policy statement draw attention to, and provide further guidance on, how that framework will be applied to Ramsar sites.

Relationship to Natura 2000

9. In May 2000 there were 79 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) classified under the Birds Directive and 148 candidate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the Habitats Directive covering almost 990,000 hectares in England. The Government has recently initiated consultation on substantial additions to its list of candidate SACs which will increase the proportion of SSSIs in the Natura 2000 network to around 75 per cent. by area.

10. Of the 75 English Ramsar sites at the end of May 2000, only 6 were completely outside the Natura 2000 network of sites. The remaining 69 were either coincident with or substantially overlapping SPAs or candidate SACs. The Government does not envisage that the proportion of Ramsar sites outside the Natura 2000 network is likely to change substantially in the light of planned revisions to both site networks.

Management issues

11. English Nature, the Government's statutory adviser on nature conservation matters in England, is charged with ensuring promotion of the conservation and wise use of all Ramsar sites through management and various other measures. In May 2000, 70 per cent. of Ramsar sites were in favourable or improving condition. English Nature's objective is to increase this to 75 per cent. by 2002, to 80 per cent. by 2004, and to exceed 95 per cent. by 2010.

12. Resolution V.7 adopted by the Ramsar Convention in 1993 requires that all Ramsar sites should have a management plan. All areas included within English Ramsar sites have some type of management plan incorporating conservation objectives for the Ramsar interests. Where the management plan for a site covers more than one designation, English Nature has been asked to ensure that plans adequately cover the Ramsar interests especially where these may be broader than Natura 2000 interests. They have also been asked to ensure that plans are consistent with the international best practice guidance contained in the Ramsar Toolkit (see paragraph 29).

13. All statutory bodies involved in funding conservation, both on designated sites and in the wider countryside, are encouraged to develop and use schemes to support the positive management of Ramsar sites and their interests.

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

14. The Bill places a new duty on the Secretary of State to notify the statutory nature conservation agencies of Ramsar designations in England and Wales and, in turn, on the agencies to inform owners and occupiers and other specified bodies. This duty will bring the notification procedures for Ramsar sites in line with those for sites designated as SSSI, SAC and SPA.

Planning policies

15. Most new development proposals likely to affect a Ramsar site will require an Environmental Impact Assessment under the Town and Country Planning (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1988 as amended. In applying the provisions of the Habitats Regulations to Ramsar sites, PPG9 requires that all development proposals likely to have a significant effect on such a site shall be subject to an 'appropriate assessment' of the implications for the site in view of that site's conservation objectives. This includes any proposal which a statutory body or 'competent authority' proposes to undertake itself. In carrying out an assessment the competent authority is required to consult English Nature and have regard to any representations made. In order fully to meet that policy obligation, the authority will need to ensure that its assessment takes into account the full range of Ramsar interests for which the site has been designated and their vulnerabilities to any effects of the proposed development.

16. Competent authorities are required by the Habitats Regulations to undertake an appropriate assessment of any plan or project likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site. Where Ramsar sites are coincident with or overlap Natura 2000 sites, authorities also need to ensure that their assessment takes fully into account the Ramsar interests on the site and any additional vulnerabilities that they may have to the effects of the proposal in order to fulfil their policy obligations under PPG9.

17. Wetland sites are some of the most fragile and vulnerable sites in the SSSI series, often subject to hydrological or other changes which occur both on and off site. Assessments need to take particular care to consider indirect effects as well as direct effects of proposals and the cumulative effects of piecemeal development.

Special considerations

18. The Government Statement of May 1998 on the Birds and Habitats Directives gave extensive guidance on the application of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and relevant factors to be weighed when making judgments about overriding public interest. In reaching decisions on Ramsar sites, it will be necessary to take into account the wording of Article 4 of the Ramsar Convention, which allows a Contracting Party to delete or restrict the boundaries of sites 'in its urgent national interest'.

19. The general principles expounded in paragraphs 8 to 11 of the Statement on the Birds and Habitats Directives should be followed when applying the provisions of PPG9 to listed Ramsar sites. The Government's view is that a development proposal does not necessarily have to be of national significance in its own right to meet the requirements set out in Article 4 of the Convention. Any benefits arising from

the proposal must, however, demonstrably outweigh the acknowledged international conservation value of the site. Projects of limited regional or local significance are thus unlikely to meet this test.

20. Article 4 of the Ramsar Convention requires Contracting Parties which delete sites or restrict site boundaries to provide compensatory measures for the loss of conservation interests. It is the Government's view that compensatory measures should provide, as a minimum, no net loss to the overall value of the national Ramsar site series either by way of quality or area. It is the Government's view that the principles expounded in paragraph 11 of the Government Statement on the Birds and Habitats Directives should also apply when it comes to compensatory measures for lost Ramsar interests, namely there must be a reasonable expectation that any such measures involving habitat recreation or restoration will be successful and that any such measures will be delivered within a timescale which secures the continuing nature conservation interests of any species present. The Government expects that a suitable package of compensatory measures will normally be a condition of any consent given and that wherever possible the developer will bear the cost of any such measures under the polluter pays principle.

Other development and consent regimes

21. Ramsar sites are potentially vulnerable to developments regulated by regimes other than the development control framework. For example, the Environment Agency regulates a wide range of waste management, discharge and water abstraction activities. Ministers expect that those, including the Government themselves, who have responsibility for such regimes should follow the policy approach advocated in PPG9 in respect of developments likely to have significant impacts on listed Ramsar sites.

Reviews of consents

22. Regulation 50 of the Habitats Regulations as amended requires the review of extant (i.e. unimplemented or partially implemented) consents on Natura 2000 sites. There are no such provisions for Ramsar sites and it has, to date, been the major difference between the two.

23. For the overwhelming majority of Ramsar sites, reviews of consents on Natura 2000 sites under the Regulation 50 provisions will normally be sufficient to ensure the Ramsar interests are adequately protected.

24. Local planning authorities are expected to extend the scope of their appropriate assessments when carrying out Regulation 50 reviews on Natura 2000 sites to consider the effects on coincident or overlapping Ramsar sites. Where the planning authority reaches the conclusion that there would be no adverse effect on the integrity of the Natura 2000 site from allowing the consent to proceed, but there would be an adverse effect on integrity on the Ramsar site, it should consider whether to issue a modification or revocation order using powers available under Section 97 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. In cases where the authority considers modification or revocation is warranted, the Government will consider reimbursing local authorities where the costs were high, where the action taken was no more than necessary to remove the risk to the site, and less costly alternatives have been fully explored.

25. Local planning authorities are expected to adopt a similar approach where listed Ramsar sites are not within the Natura 2000 network, by carrying out an appropriate assessment analogous to that required by Regulation 50 and by issuing modification or revocation orders under Section 97 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, at the earliest opportunity following the listing of a Ramsar site. Where the integrity of a Ramsar site would be adversely affected by the full implementation of an extant consent and modification or revocation of the consent is warranted, the Government will again consider reimbursing local authorities where the costs were high, where the action taken was no more than necessary to remove the risk to the site, and less costly alternatives have been fully explored.

26. The Government expect competent authorities, other than planning authorities, to use whatever review powers are available within the regimes they administer to address any potential adverse effects on the integrity of listed Ramsar sites from extant consents by adopting a general approach analogous to that advocated for planning authorities in paragraphs 24 & 25 above.

27. It is the Government's view that the additional call on public funds arising from the application of paragraphs 24 to 26 is not likely to be significant given the very high proportion of the Ramsar site series which is already covered by the Natura 2000 network and the review provisions of Regulation 50 of the Habitats Regulations. These existing measures are expected to protect the Ramsar interests in the vast majority of cases.

Wider issues

28. Designated sites are to a greater or lesser degree affected by activities which occur away from or adjacent to those sites, as well as those on site. Wetland sites are especially vulnerable to factors such as hydrological change within or adjacent to the site. The Countryside and Rights of Way Bill places a duty on public bodies to 'further the conservation and enhancement' of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The Government expect that public bodies, in meeting that new obligation, will pay particular attention to the needs of listed Ramsar sites. Where they have not done so already, public bodies will need to incorporate these considerations into their strategic thinking and planning mechanisms.

29. Article 3.1 of the Ramsar Convention requires Contracting Parties to 'formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List, and, as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory'. The Ramsar Convention has developed and adopted 'Guidelines for the Implementation of the Wise Use Concept'[1]. It has also recently published The Ramsar Handbooks on Wise Use[1], nine handbooks (referred to ask the "Ramsar Toolkit"), embodying the major 'best practice' guidelines developed and approved by the Conference of the Contracting Parties, complete with case studies, illustrations, and other helpful materials. The Government commend these documents to statutory bodies as valuable sources of further guidance and technical assistance on how issues of wise use should be addressed.

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[1]Copies of the Ramsar Convention's publications are available on the Convention's website at www.ramsar.org.

Further information on Natura 2000 is available on the European Commission's website at http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/natura.htm

The DETR's website can be found at http://www.detr.gov.uk.

Highway Maintenance

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he proposes to provide to allow local highway authorities to deal with the backlog in local highway maintenance; and if he will make a statement. [138259]

Mr. Hill: As set out in "Transport 2010: The 10 Year Plan" we are committed to providing sufficient funds to tackle the backlog of expenditure on carriageway, footway, bridge, and street lighting maintenance, estimated to be £7 billion in the next 10 years. In the forthcoming Local Transport Plan settlement we will provide £535 million to fund capital maintenance works on local highways in 2001–02 and £555 million in 2002–03. These are increases of 103 per cent. and 110 per cent. respectively compared with 2000–01. We have extended the settlement to cover non-principal roads as well as principal roads and bridges.

The allocations for local highway authorities in 2001–02 and 2002–03 are shown in the table, with the allocations for the current year for comparison. For the remaining three years of the five years of the Local Transport Plan settlement, authorities will receive at least 75 per cent. of their allocation for maintenance in 2002–03.

In addition, earmarked resources will be provided for new major maintenance schemes for the Central Motorway East in Newcastle and for the Silver Jubilee Bridge in Halton.

These capital resources provided through the Local Transport Plan settlement are in addition to the support for local highway maintenance provided through Revenue Support Grant.

The Local Transport Plan settlement does not cover London. Funding for local highway maintenance in London is a matter for the Mayor and Greater London Authority.

Local Transport Plan Settlement
Capital Allocations for Local Road Maintenance

£000

	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03
Darlington	933	1,329	1,398
Durham	5,240	8,555	9,103
Gateshead	1,533	1,533	1,533
Hartlepool	521	520	544
Middlesborough	492	877	734
Newcastle	3,657	3,657	3,657
North Tyneside	600	1,451	1,226
Northumberland	3,990	9,312	9,919
Redcar and Cleveland	660	1,568	1,621
South Tyneside	739	1,560	2,332
Stockton on Tees	566	1,194	1,283
Sunderland	2,117	2,638	2,770
Total for North East Region	21,048	34,194	36,120
Barnsley	2,453	2,670	2,829
Bradford	3,699	5,031	5,568
Calderdale	2,803	4,592	4,815
Doncaster	1,184	1,970	2,078
East Riding	2,254	5,898	4,861
Hull	1,461	1,501	1,461
Kirklees	4,870	6,163	6,405
Leeds	4,090	9,254	9,896
North East Lincolnshire	740	965	970
North Lincolnshire	1,556	2,468	2,598
North Yorkshire	5,740	13,449	14,361
Rotherham	1,809	3,124	3,297
Sheffield	3,518	3,518	3,582
Wakefield	2,772	3,568	3,762
York	712	1,095	1,155
Total for Yorkshire and Humberside Region	39,661	65,266	67,638
Birmingham	4,330	6,245	6,620
Coventry	1,173	1,232	1,317
Dudley	1,416	3,158	3,376
Herefordshire	2,372	4,348	4,539
Sandwell	2,453	3,558	2,453
Shropshire	3,885	7,982	8,548
Solihull	674	1,737	1,832
Staffordshire	4,554	8,675	9,315
Stoke on Trent	1,161	1,273	1,160
Telford/Wrekin	1,220	2,312	2,464
Walsall	2,242	2,964	3,072
Warwickshire	2,410	6,774	5,414
Wolverhampton	1,043	3,466	2,744
Worcestershire	3,161	7,184	7,366
Total for West Midlands Region	32,094	60,908	60,220

Local Transport Plan Settlement
Capital Allocations for Local Road Maintenance

£000

	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03
City of Derby	955	1,423	1,549
City of Leicester	1,948	2,764	4,316
Greater Nottingham	1,650	8,009	8,604
Derbyshire	2,880	11,034	11,711
Leicestershire	2,185	6,494	6,788
Lincolnshire	3,385	10,278	10,890
Northamptonshire	2,291	5,342	5,463
North Nottinghamshire	6,541	10,880	11,323
Rutland	407	751	783
Total for East Midlands Region	22,242	56,975	61,427
Bedfordshire	1,743	3,247	3,491
Cambridgeshire	2,817	6,967	7,437
Essex	5,170	13,925	15,001
Hertfordshire	4,467	10,083	10,586
Luton and Dunstable	461	819	862
Norfolk	5,203	19,247	18,973
Peterborough	1,082	1,765	1,843
Southend on Sea	696	1,608	1,742
Suffolk	4,472	13,467	11,808
Thurrock	597	1,146	1,201
Total for Eastern Region	26,708	72,274	72,944
Bath and North East Somerset	1,868	2,552	2,740
Bournemouth/Poole	841	1,662	1,744
Bristol	1,907	3,847	4,054
Cornwall	3,874	9,424	10,210
Devon	5,877	12,139	12,822
Dorset	1,645	5,807	6,218
Gloucestershire	4,551	10,076	10,812
North Somerset	895	3,173	2,437
Plymouth	1,815	2,324	2,481
Somerset	4,262	11,496	12,306
South Gloucestershire	1,276	3,343	3,505
Swindon	958	1,307	1,382
Torbay	379	1,161	1,208
Wiltshire	2,255	9,570	10,024
Total for South West Region	32,403	77,881	81,943
Bracknell	366	580	568
Brighton and Hove	1,113	1,126	1,199
Buckinghamshire	3,821	8,227	7,087
East Sussex	3,013	5,661	6,670
Hampshire	4,388	9,870	10,524
Isle of Wight	1,540	2,900	3,018
Kent	6,466	11,513	12,149
Medway Towns	757	934	990
Milton Keynes	1,279	2,069	2,194
Oxfordshire	5,793	8,045	8,013
Portsmouth	579	803	835
Reading	534	1,650	697
Slough	312	312	312
Southampton	581	1,085	1,152
Surrey	6,972	11,763	12,475
West Berkshire	900	1,285	1,379
West Sussex	2,320	6,389	6,813
Windsor	750	1,025	1,096
Wokingham	562	819	865
Total for South East Region	42,040	76,056	78,036
Blackburn	1,932	2,274	2,335
Blackpool	468	952	991
Bolton	2,089	5,102	5,236
Bury	1,245	1,929	2,002
Cheshire	8,956	11,535	12,204
Cumbria	5,544	9,173	9,884
Halton	2,893	2,893	2,893
Knowsley	710	1,038	1,090
Lancashire	6,096	16,630	17,782
Liverpool	2,152	4,184	3,991
Manchester	2,442	5,569	5,679
Oldham	1,448	1,784	1,887
Rochdale	1,496	2,677	1,751

Local Transport Plan Settlement
Capital Allocations for Local Road Maintenance

£000

	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03
Salford	1,008	1,871	1,746
Sefton	1,217	2,073	2,185
St. Helens	1,317	1,790	1,861
Stockport	1,108	1,815	1,905
Tameside	1,069	2,178	1,501
Trafford	884	1,127	1,213
Warrington	1,755	2,357	2,474
Wigan	1,394	3,420	3,559
Wirral	971	2,079	2,502
Total for North West Region	48,194	84,450	86,671
Total for England, excluding London	264,396	528,004	544,999

Notes:

1. The allocations for 2000–01 covered only principal roads and bridges. The allocations for 2001–02 and 2002–03 cover principal roads, non-principal roads, and bridges.
2. There is an element within the Standard Spending Assessment used to distribute Revenue Support Grant which covers revenue expenditure on local road maintenance, e.g. clearing snow, cleaning drains, grass cutting, etc.
3. These allocations are part of the overall Local Transport Plan settlement to be announced in December.
4. These figures do not include earmarked resources for ongoing major maintenance schemes in Bedfordshire, Devon, and Portsmouth or for new major maintenance schemes in Newcastle and Halton.

Funding for these schemes will amount to £7 million in 2001–02 and £10 million in 2002–03.

Global Warming

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the contribution of the aviation industry to global warming. [137748]

Mr. Mullin: We have not produced a UK assessment. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published their report, "Aviation and the Global Atmosphere", in December 1999. UK experts made significant contributions to the report on both science and technology. It considered all potential effects on the atmosphere and climate, up to 2050, from aviation emissions and identified the present and future impacts, on the basis of a range of scenarios, as well as remaining areas of uncertainty. The Government continue to support research to reduce these scientific uncertainties, and to improve technology.

Aircraft Detritus

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the CAA concerning frozen effluent falling from aeroplanes over residential areas. [137747]

Mr. Mullin: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of Thursday 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 171W.

The Secretary of State has not had any recent discussions with the CAA over such incidents. However the CAA is continuing to investigate icefall incidents whenever possible.

I understand the hon. Member met CAA staff on 18 May specifically to discuss icefalls, following which the CAA wrote to her on 26 May 2000 providing comprehensive details of icefall incidents. In the period 1 January 2000 to 1 November 2000, 36 incidents of icefall and 21 incidents of other falling objects were recorded. The average number of incidents recorded over the five-year period 1995–99 was 31.

The CAA places the primary emphasis on prevention, and both the Authority and airlines are putting a great deal of effort into eliminating icefalls by checking water systems for leaks. The CAA has also issued reminders to UK operators, by way of Airworthiness Directives, emphasising the importance of regular checks.

Trunk Roads

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the proposal of a link road between a new junction 18a on the M4 and the Avon Ring Road was *(a)* first included and *(b)* removed from the Government's trunk road programme. [138229]

Mr. Hill: The proposal for a new link road and a new junction on the M4 was first put forward by the former Avon County Council in 1985. This was accepted in principle by the then Department of Transport, but was never included in the Government's trunk road programme.

Responsibility for the scheme passed to South Gloucestershire Council, following local government reorganisation. The Council subsequently carried out a review of a number of major road schemes in their area in the context of current Government transport policy and emerging development plan policies. As a result, they decided in 1999 not to pursue this particular scheme.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Recreational Craft Engines

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the implications of EC Directive 94/25/EC on small businesses engaged in the modification, upgrading and conversion to LPG of recreational craft engines. [137294]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No specific assessment has been made at present. EC Directive 94/25/EC on recreational craft (RCD) is principally concerned with the design and construction (in terms of safety) of such craft, as well as certain specified components for incorporation into craft (including fuel tanks and fuel hoses), when they are placed on the market or put into service for the first time in the European Economic Area (EEA). The RCD became mandatory on 16 June 1998. The object of the RCD is to allow the free trade in recreational craft and the specified components, while maintaining a high level of product safety. Any person placing those products on the EEA market, or putting them into use, since that date is obliged to meet the essential safety requirements covering for example hull strength, stability and buoyancy, as well as safety requirements concerned with the installation of the engine, fuel systems and fuel tanks. Meeting the requirements of the RCD and properly applying the CE

marking confers the right to sell the craft anywhere in the EEA. Any subsequent modification, upgrading and conversion of a craft, concerned with the engine installation, is not currently within the scope of the RCD unless that modification, upgrading or conversion of the craft was so extensive that it amounted (in effect) to a "new" craft being produced for the purposes of the RCD. However it may be the case that, depending on where the craft is used, local "in use" safety regulations would need to be met as part of or following an engine modification.

The Commission has recently issued a proposal for the modification of the RCD which would (if adopted) include, in particular, requirements related to engine exhaust and noise emissions: the former would include propulsion engines subject to a "major engine modification" and the latter to recreational craft with engines that are subject to a "major craft conversion". Businesses are aware of this proposal but will be consulted as negotiations progress: A regulatory impact assessment is being commissioned. A public meeting has been arranged at the DTI on 15 January 2001, to which interested parties will be invited.

Mobile Telephones

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what independent research the Government have commissioned on the health aspects of using mobile telephones and the level of radiation from hands-free kits. [137773]

Ms Hewitt: The DTI commissioned independent tests, published in August, on the use of personal hands-free kits with mobile phones. The tests showed that use of hands-free kit reduced exposure when compared to normal use of the phone.

These tests were consistent with other tests that have been carried out internationally, but have been contradicted by studies commissioned by the Consumers' Association.

Both the Department and independent scientists have expressed reservations about the methodology employed in the Consumers' Association tests.

We are working with the Consumers' Association and urgently seeking to reconcile these conflicting test results.

Small Business Programme

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ensure that assets of the Learning and Business Link Company, Kent, including computers and servers, formerly the property of Business Link Kent and currently used by the chambers of commerce and enterprise, will be retained by the latter for use in the Small Business Programme. [137738]

Ms Hewitt: It is our objective that the transition from the existing BL network to the new SBS local network should be conducted in such a way as to ensure publicly funded assets continue to be used for the purposes for which they were intended. My officials are working with the organisations concerned in each area to ensure that this outcome is achieved to the greatest possible extent. I do not feel it would be appropriate to comment on the individual commercial negotiations concerned.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the waste incineration projects which have been approved under the terms of Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation, but which have yet to be built. [137394]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* A list of these projects is shown in the table.

Generator	*Site name/location*
NFFO-3	
Associated Energy Projects plc	Portsmouth Incinerator, Quartremaine Road, Portsmouth, Hampshire
European Development Corporation plc	Copyhold Works Incinerator, Nutfield Road, Redhill, Surrey
Enterprise Energy Ltd.	Brentwood Steel, Beacon Hill Industrial Estate, London Road, Purfleet, Essex
Pyrogen (Durham) Ltd.	Easington Colliery Incinerator, Easington, County Durham
Yorkshire Generation Company Ltd.	Hampole Quarry Incinerator, Wakefield Road, Hampole, Nr Doncaster, South Yorkshire
Energylinc Ltd.	Boston Waste to Energy Plant, Slippery Gowt Lane, Wyberton, Boston, Lincolnshire
Sheffield Heat and Power Ltd.	Bernard Road Incinerator, Bernard Road, Sheffield South Yorkshire
Pyrogen (Notts) Ltd.	Silverhill Colliery Incinerator, Silverhill Lane, Teversal, Ashfield, Nottinghamshire
Associated Energy Projects plc	Lamby Way Incinerator, Lamby Way, Cardiff, South Glamorgan
Pyrogen (Merthyr) Ltd.	Taff Merthyr Colliery Incinerator, Trelewis, Mid Glamorgan
Cleveland Waste Management Ltd.	Haverton Hill Incinerator, Site B, Process Plant Park, Billingham, Cleveland
Wolverhampton Waste Services Ltd.	Wolverhampton Waste Incinerator, Corporation Yard, Crown Street, Wolverhampton, West Midlands
Dudley Waste Services Ltd.	Dudley Incinerator, Lister Road, Dudley, West Midlands
Associated Energy Projects plc	Ardwick Railway Goods Yard Incinerator, Ardwick, Greater Manchester
Associated Energy Projects plc	Marchwood Incinerator, Bury Road, Marchwood, Hampshire
Pyrogen (Kent) Ltd.	Betteshanger Colliery, Northbourne, Betteshanger, Nr Deal, Kent
Tyseley Waste Disposal Ltd.	Tyseley Incinerator, Tyseley Waste Disposal Site, James Road, Tyseley, Birmingham, West Midlands
Associated Energy Projects plc	Marchwood Power Station, Normandy Way, Marchwood, Hampshire
Hanford Waste Services Ltd.	Stoke-on-Trent Incinerator, Stoke-on-Trent Waste Incinerator Plant, Campbell Road, Sideway, Stoke-on-Trent
Associated Energy Projects plc	Chineham Incinerator, Reading Road, Basingstoke, Hampshire
NFFO-4	
London Waste Ltd.	Edmonton B CHP Plant, Angel Road, London
City Energy Ltd.	City Energy Manchester CHP, Ardwick Goods Yard West, Manchester
City Energy Ltd.	City Energy Portsmouth CHP, Fratton Park Goods Yard, Portsmouth, Hampshire
Heron Trust Ltd.	Start Regen, Start, St. Erth, Hayle, Cornwall
City Energy Ltd.	City Energy Sheffield CHP, Warren Street, Sheffield, South Yorkshire

Generator	*Site name/location*
Greater Manchester Waste Ltd.	Stockport FBP, Bredbury Park Way, Stockport, Cheshire
Greater Manchester Waste Ltd.	North Manchester FBP, Reliance Street, Newton Heath, Greater Manchester
Greater Manchester Waste Ltd.	Salford FB Plant, Cobden Street, Salford, Greater Manchester
Kent Enviropower Ltd.	Halling Energy from Waste, Rugby Cement Works, Halling, Kent
Kent Energy Ltd.	Newhaven Energy from Waste Plant, North Quay Road, Newhaven, East Sussex
Kent Energy Ltd.	Matford Park Energy from Waste Plant, Bad Homburg Way, Exeter, Devon
NFFO-5	
Gent Fairhead Environmental Services Ltd.	Rivenhall Airfield, Woodhouse Farm, Near Braintree, Essex
Cleanaway Ltd.	Cleanaway Project 3, Pitsea Hall Lane, Pitsea, Basildon, Essex
Cleanaway Ltd.	Cleanaway Project 2, Rugby Cement, Hindmans Way, Dagenham, Essex
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Rainham, Ferry Lane, Rainham, Essex
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Pitsea, Pitsea Hall Lane, Basildon, Essex
Northumbrian Environmental Management Ltd.	Vange, High Road, Fobbing, Essex
Energy From Waste Kesteven Ltd.	Energy From Waste Kesteven Ltd., Honeypot Lane, Colsterworth, Grantham, Lincolnshire
British Sugar plc	Allscott Energy Recovery Centre, Allscott Sugar Factory, Telford, Shropshire
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Foxyards Waste to Energy Plant, Foxyards Site, Bean Road, Coseley, West Midlands
N.E.M. Ltd.	Sleekburn Energy From Waste Plant, East Sleekburn, Bedlington, Northumberland
N.E.M. Ltd.	Teesside 3 EFW Plant, Haverton Hill Road, Billingham, Teesside, Cleveland
N.E.M. Ltd.	Blyth EFW Plant, Cambois, Blyth, Northumberland
S.I.T.A. (GB) Ltd.	Ridham Dock, Iwade, Sittingbourne, Kent
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Shelford WTE Plant, Broad Oak Road, Canterbury, Kent
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Dimmer MRF & Electricity Generation, Castle Cary, Somerset
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Portfield MRF & Electricity Generation, A27, Chichester Bypass, Chichester, Sussex
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Silent Valley WTE, Waun Llwyd, Ebbw Vale, Gwent
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Withyhedge WTE, Bowling Farm, Rudbaxton, Haverfordwest, Pembroke, Dyfed
Energy Developments (UK) Ltd.	Poole MRF, Poole Landfill Site, Wellington, Somerset
N.E.M. Ltd.	Avonmouth EFW, Off King's Weston Lane, Avonmouth, Bristol
British Sugar plc	Brigg Energy Resource Centre, Scawby Brook, Brigg, South Humberside
N.E.M. Ltd.	Hessle EFW Plant, Tranby Lane, Hessle, Kingston Upon Hull, Humberside
Global Environmental Ltd.	Eastcroft Third Line CHP, Cattle Market Road, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
Gent Fairhead Environmental Services Ltd.	Nine Elms CHP, Stewart Lane Rail Depot, Nine Elms, Battersea, London
Acorn Energy Supplies Ltd.	Acorn Energy Supplies, Heighton Lane, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham
Compact Power Ltd.	Philadelphia Power Project, Philadelphia Complex, Houghton Le Spring, Tyne and Wear
Onyx Aurora Ltd.	Chapel Renewable Energy Centre, Endle Street, Southampton, Hampshire
Atlantic Energy Ltd.	Windwhistle Energy Project, Cooksland Road, Bodmin, Cornwall
Atlantic Energy Ltd.	Dolcoath Energy, South Crofy, Dudnance Lane, Pool, Redruth, Cornwall
Two further NFFO-4 projects are under construction:	
Slough Heat and Power Ltd.	Fibrepower (Slough) Greenock Road, Slough Trading Estate, Slough , Berkshire
United Waste Ltd.	Huddersfield Incinerator, Vine Street, Huddersfield West Yorkshire

Conoco Humber Refinery

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Conoco Global Development UK Ltd.'s proposal to build a combined heat and power station at the Conoco Humber Refinery at South Killingholme. [138420]

Mrs. Liddell: I have today granted consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to Conoco Global Power Developments UK Ltd. for the construction of a 475 megawatt gas-fired combined heat and power station at the Conoco Humber Refinery at South Killingholme in North Lincolnshire. The station has also today been given clearance as a gas-fired station under section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 and planning permission for the station has been deemed to be granted subject to 47 planning conditions agreed with the North Lincolnshire Borough Council.

The station will supply the energy requirements of the Conoco Humber Refinery and the Lindsay Oil Refinery and is the largest combined heat and power station given approval by the Government. This demonstrates our continued support to promote CHP stations, wherever practicable, and our commitment to reducing emissions of carbon to fulfil the promises we gave at Kyoto.

Copies of the Press Notice and decision letters are being placed in the Library of the House.

Green Technologies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress made by his Department's Joint Environmental Markets Unit in securing sales of British green technologies and services abroad. [137873]

Ms Hewitt: The Joint Environmental Market Unit's (JEMU's) role—working with others such as Trade Partners UK—is to promote the UK's environmental industry's capabilities and to help provide market access to relevant suppliers. JEMU has made good progress in implementing specific initiatives identified in its three year Business Plan, published in 1998. A key achievement has been the development of the first online database of UK environmental capabilities, providing a world wide shop window which enables companies to be contacted directly from one site. Representatives of the UK environmental industry have recently acknowledged JEMU's contribution to trade promotion as being relevant and effective.

MOX Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representation his Department received at the Plutonium 2000 Conference held in

Brussels in October; and what assessment he has made of the presentation made on the business viability of BNFL's plutonium MOX fuel plans. [137870]

Mrs. Liddell: Officials from my Department attended the Plutonium 2000 Conference but received no formal representations.

Presentations made at the Conference will be considered in the context of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' forthcoming consultation document on Radioactive Waste Management as appropriate.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much he has spent on the development of *(a)* on-shore wind generated power, *(b)* biomass energy, *(c)* wave generated power, *(d)* Solar energy and *(e)* off-shore wind power in each year since 1995. [137213]

Mrs. Liddell: The DTI's new and renewable energy programme supports research, development and demonstration, as well as technology transfer and export promotion activities. The breakdown of net expenditure on specific technologies is as shown.

£ million

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
(a) On-shore wind	3.4	2.5	1.2	1.0	0.9
(e) Off-shore wind[1]					
(b) Biomass energy	3.4	2.7	1.4	1.2	1.6
(c) Wave power	0.08	0.14	0.06	0.17	0.15
(d) Solar energy[2]	1.9	2.0	1.7	1.0	1.3

[1] Historically data are not broken down between on-shore and off-shore wind technologies.
[2] Up to 1998 the solar programme was focused on passive solar design of buildings. Since then work has primarily focused on photovoltaics.

Oil

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the environmental impact of using oil as an energy source. [137218]

Mrs. Liddell: A number of representations have been received, including from business organisations.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department *(a)* has taken and *(b)* intends to take to address the environmental impact of using oil as an energy source. [137219]

Mrs. Liddell: Environmental issues related to the extraction of oil are regulated in the main according to the Offshore Petroleum Production and Pipe-lines (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1999. Other environmental legislation such as the Prevention of Oil Pollution Act 1971 also applies. The environmental aspects of oil production are kept under review and it is planned to introduce further legislation to deal with specific aspects.

UK refineries have invested heavily in recent years to meet rising environmental standards, influenced—among other requirements—by the EU's Auto-Oil programme. They are regulated under the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control regime. All oil-fired Large Combustion Plant will be controlled through the revised EU Large Combustion Plant Directive. In addition, the UNECE Gothenburg Protocol and the proposed EU National Emissions Ceiling Directive will set annual emission ceilings for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds from 2010.

Emissions attached to the final use of oils in transport are the responsibility of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Much of the industrial use of oil will come under the requirements of the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control regime.

Compensation Claims

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to speed up the process of settling outstanding compensation claims. [136961]

Mrs. Liddell: In relation to claims for respiratory disease, progress has been too slow. However, in September I announced a twin track approach.

Firstly, we are making offers of increased amounts as expedited payments to thousands of miners and are extending expedited offers to some claimants not previously eligible, without them undergoing further tests. To date we have already made some 9,720 additional and new offers totalling £32.4 million. Altogether we hope to make over 19,000 offers totalling around £100 million before Christmas.

In addition, I announced an increase in the numbers of medical testing centres and record scanning teams. We are also seeking to streamline the Medical Assessment Process and records collection, and these proposals are being taken forward with the claimants' solicitors.

On Vibration White Finger, we aim to have carried out initial assessments on all the existing claimants by the end of next year. A further assessment may be required for those claimants seeking compensation for loss of services but this is still under consideration.

In total, this Government have now paid out some £250 million in respect of the liabilities we inherited from British Coal.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Physical Education

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average time is spent by each pupil per week on physical education in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools. [134709]

Jacqui Smith: The total number of hours spent on Physical Education is not available as the length of the school week varies from school to school. However, recent research by MORI confirms that the most popular out-of-school hours learning activity was participating in sport. It shows that the vast majority of schools have increased their extracurricular activities over the last two years. We have set an aspiration that all schools should provide two hours of curricular or extracurricular activities a week, and we are working to encourage schools and partners in the sports sector to deliver this through the Sports Strategy, an important part of which is promoting team games.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in developing Individual Learning Accounts. [137369]

Mr. Wicks: According to the latest figures, people in England had opened around 400,000 Individual Learning Accounts. This represents good progress towards meeting the UK target of 500,000 accounts opened by March 2001 and of one million accounts by April 2002.

Higher Education

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many higher education places were available in each of the past 20 years; and how many will be available in the next three years. [137829]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* Available data are provided in the table. The Department has funded additional planned higher education places: 36,000 in 1999–2000; 35,000 in 2000–01 and 45,000 in 2001–02. Of these additional places, 7 per cent. were for full-time undergraduates doing first degrees and the rest were for part-time students, post-graduates and students studying for courses below first degree level. Part-time undergraduates, who are mostly mature students, accounted for 57 per cent. of the additional places. Places beyond 2001–02 have not yet been decided. A complete time series is not available, but the table shows the recent trend and the projected impact of additional funded and non-funded places.

Home and EU domiciled higher education students in England

Thousand

Year	
1994–95[2]	1,342
1995–96[1]	1,409
1996–97[1]	1,449
1997–98[1]	1,487
1998–99[2]	1,514
1999–2000[3]	1,556
2000–01[4]	1,599
2001–02[4]	1,654

[1] Actual
[2] Estimated outturn
[3] Provisional
[4] Projected

School Standards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his assessment is of the recent research commissioned from the London School of Economics and Exeter University about the effect of *(a)* class sizes and *(b)* good teaching on school standards. [137913]

Ms Estelle Morris: The report commissioned from the London School of Economics and Exeter University into the relationship between resource allocation and educational attainment confirmed our view that a number of factors have an effect on pupil attainment. These include smaller infant classes and better quality teaching, both of which we were elected to deliver. The review also concluded that the quality of existing UK research is poor. This is why the Value for Money Unit is pursuing further research into the relationship between resource allocation and educational attainment.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Rolls-Royces

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 17 July, *Official Report*, column 23W, what criteria are used when deciding whether to acquire a Rolls-Royce for HM missions overseas. [134980]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* At present the FCO has purchased Rolls-Royces for official use by Heads of Mission at three of our key Posts, Washington, Tokyo and New Delhi. We also lease Rolls-Royces at eight other Posts where this provides value for money.

Employment Directive

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many letters he has received alleging that there was a threat to religious freedom posed by the EU directive on employment agreed between the Governments of the EU on 17 October. [135067]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities on 6 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 39W.

China

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if human rights concerns were raised during the recent United Kingdom/China Forum held in Beijing. [135770]

Mr. Battle: The UK/China Forum is a non-governmental group. It provides a framework for building a network of influential high-level personal contacts between Britain and China, and aims to develop initiatives to build stronger UK/China links in the specific areas covered by its seven sub-committees: Environment, Media, Culture, Education, Industry, Finance and Law.

The second meeting of the Forum took place in Beijing from 16–17 October. Human rights were not on the agenda for this meeting.

The meeting of the Forum coincided with the fifth round of the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue which was held in London from 16–18 October. HMG's concerns on China's human rights record were raised extensively during the Dialogue.

Departmental Policies

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency, of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136168]

Mr. Vaz: We hold no information of the kind sought by my right hon. Friend. The Mission of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is to promote the national interests of the United Kingdom and to contribute to a strong world community. For details of the Government's achievements in meeting its foreign policy targets, the following page of the FCO website may be helpful: http://www.fco.gov.uk/directory/dynpage.asp?Page=108

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy that the outer wall of sanctions against Yugoslavia should be lifted. [136969]

Mr. Vaz: No "outer wall" of sanctions is operated by the United Kingdom or by the European Union. In common with all countries, the FRY will need to show its commitment to the obligations which flow from the membership of international organisations, including major financial institutions, and to those organisations' values.

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent changes have been made to EU sanctions in relation to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [138419]

Mr. Vaz: Following the election of Vojislav Kostunica as President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), European Union Foreign Ministers agreed at the General Affairs Council on 9 October to revise EU sanctions against the FRY and to retain specific targeted measures.

The EU oil embargo and flight ban were lifted with effect from 9 October.

On 10 November the Council of the EU adopted a Common Position to restrict financial sanctions and the visa ban to Milosevic and persons associated with him.

The provisions on financial sanctions were implemented by an EC Regulation adopted on 10 November. This Regulation repeals EC Regulations 1294/99 and 607/2000 as well as Article 2 of EC Regulation 926/98. The Regulation will come into force this week with its publication of the *Official Journal of the European Communities*.

The new Regulation provides that all funds held in the EU belonging to individuals listed in the annex to the Regulation shall be frozen and that no funds shall be made available, directly or indirectly, to or for the benefit of any person listed in the annex.

Under the new Regulation all EU financial sanctions in relation to FRY companies will be lifted. All EU restrictions on the provision of export credit support finance and on investment in the FRY will also be lifted.

UK legislation providing penalties for breaches of the financial sanctions will be amended to take account of the new Regulation.

The individuals subject to financial sanctions are identical to those subject to the EU visa ban, which is the subject of a Council Decision of 10 November.

The EU arms embargo and embargo on the supply to the FRY of equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism are unaffected. The UN arms embargo against the FRY and prohibition on the arming and training for terrorist activities there remain in force.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance he is giving to Yugoslavia to help the refugee population in Serbia. [136970]

Mr. Foulkes: I have been asked to reply.

We are providing £10 million for Serbia in immediate bilateral assistance to including medicines, food and essential items for both the general and refugee populations. This includes £2 million for UNHCR to provide fuel, clothing, blankets and winterisation of collective accommodation housing 50,000 refugees.

Our main contribution to refugees in Serbia is through our share of European Community programmes. The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) programme in Serbia focuses on refugees and on the sick and elderly in the host population. ECHO provided 84 million euros in such assistance in 1999 of which we contributed £9.2 million. Its programme of 73 million euros in 2000 includes 18 million euros, of which we contribute £1.95 million, to assist with winterisation needs of refugees and vulnerable groups. This has been provided from the EC's special programme of 200 million euros immediate humanitarian assistance, which is providing food, medicines, energy and support to schools and municipalities. This aid will provide support to both the refugee and general populations.

Sudan

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will call for a formal investigation by the appropriate UN authorities into allegations of chemical weapons used by the Government of Sudan against civilians. [137106]

Mr. Hain: These allegations relate to alleged attacks in Southern Sudan in late July 1999 by the Government of Sudan against rebel forces during the civil conflict in progress at the time. Samples from the site of the alleged attacks have been analysed at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, Porton Down for the most likely CW agents. The tests found no evidence that these agents had been used. We duly informed the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) of our results as the OPCW is recognised by the UN as the competent body for handling CW issues.

Kadiatou Balde

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the British Embassy in Dakar has been informed of the decision of the Appeals Tribunal in the case of Kadiatou Balde from Guinea; and if she will be permitted to enter the UK. [137112]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* The British Embassy in Dakar has been informed of the decision. Kadiatou Balde will be able to obtain her visa from the Embassy today, provided that her circumstances have not changed.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if it is in the United Kingdom's national interest to relinquish the United Kingdom's veto on incentive measures in the cultural field at the forthcoming IGC; [137584]

(2) if it is in the national interest to relinquish the United Kingdom's veto on proposals relating to social security for migrant workers at the forthcoming IGC; [137586]

(3) if it is in the United Kingdom's national interest to relinquish the veto on the establishment of European Union agencies at the forthcoming IGC. [137589]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is in the United Kingdom's national interest to relinquish the veto on proposals relating to social security at the forthcoming IGC. [137585]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made it clear on numerous occasions that they will not relinquish the veto on social security.

Schools (Palestine)

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received about when the Palestinian Authority plans to reopen schools in the areas under its jurisdiction. [R] [137498]

Mr. Hain: The Palestinian Authority reopened the majority of its schools, colleges and universities on 7 October. They had been closed from 29 September until 7 October for security reasons. Some establishments have remained closed because of continuing operational difficulties.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Palestinian Authority regarding the reopening of schools. [R] [137499]

Mr. Hain: Most schools were reopened on 7 October.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received regarding the closure of Palestinian schools in recent weeks. [R] [137497]

Mr. Hain: The Palestinian Authority closed all its schools, colleges and universities from 29 September until 7 October, when the majority reopened. Schools operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) were closed for the same period. Some establishments remain closed because of the continuing operational difficulties.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list the issues that have been tabled by EU member states and the Commission for discussion at the IGC relating to qualified majority voting; [137897]

(2) if he will list those areas of extension of qualified majority voting that are proposed by *(a)* EU member states and *(b)* EU bodies; [137966]

(3) further to his reply of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 534–35W, on the Intergovernmental Conference, if he will list those minor issues not listed, but which are also on the agenda for the IGC. [137685]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the website www.europa.eu.int, where he will find the official documents relating to the Intergovernmental Conference.

Lomé Peace Accords

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 25 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 145–46W, on the Lomé Peace Accords, what the nature was of the close touch maintained. [137995]

Mr. Hain: Representatives of HMG were present throughout the Lomé Peace negotiations as observers. British observers, along with other international representatives facilitating the negotiations, helped to maintain contact and dialogue between the parties, and between the parties and the Togolese Chair.

European Federation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 557W, on European federation, which further powers *(a)* need to be transferred from the United Kingdom Parliament and *(b)* require QMV decision-making procedures to be applied, to fulfil his Department's policy objectives. [137684]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 557W, on European federation, if he will list those EU countries which share his policy objective. [137762]

Mr. Vaz: All EU Governments support a European Union which respects the national identities of its member states.

Iraq

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a

statement on the Government's policy on the UN arrangements to ensure that goods imported into Iraq under the oil-for-food scheme are for the agreed purposes. [137680]

Mr. Hain: The UK Government does all it can to ensure that goods imported into Iraq under UNSCR 986 are used for agreed purposes. Our experts scrutinise all contracts carefully to ensure that they fall within the terms of the relevant UN resolutions. We frequently discuss monitoring of oil-for-food goods in Iraq with the office of Iraq programme and, where goods are of concern, ask for specific in-country monitoring. Of particular concern are goods identified by UNMOVIC as of potential use in weapons of mass destruction programmes. We continually call for the Iraqi regime to allow UNMOVIC into Iraq to verify Iraq's compliance with its obligation to halt its weapons of mass destruction programme.

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of children in Iraq who are chronically malnourished and the proportion of the total number of children this represents. [137682]

Mr. Hain: There are no reliable figures on child malnutrition in the centre and south of Iraq. Despite UN efforts, the Iraqi regime has refused to cooperate with a group of independent experts appointed by the UN to prepare a comprehensive report and analysis of the humanitarian situation in Iraq. In the meantime the UK continues to advocate and support initiatives through the oil-for-food programme to better target the UN's humanitarian effort to help the most vulnerable in Iraq. This has already improved the situation on the ground. In northern Iraq, for example, where the UN rather than Iraqi authorities run the humanitarian programme, infant mortality is now lower than before sanctions were imposed.

Zanzibar

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the *(a)* first and *(b)* second elections in Zanzibar. [137940]

Mr. Hain: We have been following the situation in Zanzibar with concern. Commonwealth and other international observers were unanimous in their condemnation of the organisation of the elections on 29 October. We, with EU colleagues, criticised the decision to rerun the elections in only 16 constituencies and under the supervision of the current electoral commission in a statement issued on 3 November.

We will continue to press the Tanzanian authorities to find a solution to the political crisis that respects the democratic and human rights of all Zanzibaris.

Rogue States

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the potential threat to *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the NATO area from rogue states. [138009]

Mr. Vaz: The Government continually reviews, in close consultation with our Allies, potential threats to the United Kingdom and to our NATO Allies from all sources.

Single European Foreign Policy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 536W, on the single European Foreign Policy, if he will list the principal UK national foreign policy objectives which the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is a means of achieving. [137928]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's nine objectives are stated in the department's Public Service Agreement. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy has contributed most notably to objectives one and four. Objective one is "A secure United Kingdom within a more peaceful and stable world" and objective four is "A strong international community; leading to an improved quality of life worldwide".

International Criminal Court

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, for what reason the United Kingdom has not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. [137921]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 565W.

Chagos Islands and Diego Garcia

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the return of displaced islanders to Diego Garcia. [137915]

Mr. Battle: We have decided to accept the ruling of the Court. The Ilois are now able to return to the outer islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

Our first priority is to press ahead with the technical work we have in hand to assess the feasibility of settlement on those islands. In the meantime we will be open to discussion with the Ilois community about the practicalities of any return. We will also be consulting the Governments of the United States and Mauritius about the implications of the judgment.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his assessment is of the security implications of the return of displaced islanders to Diego Garcia. [137907]

Mr. Battle: The Ilois are now free to return to the outer islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory but access to Diego Garcia will continue to be controlled strictly and will be by permit only.

We will be discussing the security implications of the court case on the US Naval Support Facility on Diego Garcia with the US authorities.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the assistance his Department intends to give to the displaced peoples of the Chagos Islands in British Indian Ocean Territory to return home. [137874]

Mr. Battle: Our first priority is to continue the work we have begun to assess the physical, financial, social, environmental and economic feasibility of settlement on the outer islands of the territory. Once we have the results of this feasibility study, we will be in a position to consider what further assistance might be appropriate.

Single European Currency

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had since 29 September with the foreign ministers of *(a)* France, *(b)* Germany and *(c)* Denmark about the single European currency. [137918]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State meets other European Union foreign ministers on a regular basis and discusses a wide range of issues.

Middle East (Terrorist Threat)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment his Department has made of the terrorist threat to British visitors to Middle Eastern countries. [137916]

Mr. Hain: We have revised our travel advice notices to reflect the increased risk to British travellers to the Middle East as a result of heightened tensions in the region. Successive up-dates of travel advice for the countries affected have been available from the Travel Advice Unit and via the FCO website, www.fco.gov.uk.

International Relations

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with *(a)* Libya, *(b)* Iran, *(c)* Syria and *(d)* Yemen. [137917]

Mr. Hain: The United Kingdom enjoys full diplomatic relations with Libya, Iran, Syria and Yemen. We are constructively engaged with each country, and we continue to encourage them to play a positive role in the international community.

EU (Co-sovereignty)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, what representations he has made to Germany in respect of the German Foreign Minister's proposal for co-sovereignty between states within the EU. [137904]

Mr. Vaz: Ministers regularly discuss EU issues with all EU partners. The Prime Minister made clear our position in his speech in Warsaw on 6 October.

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contacts he has had with the Israeli Government and when, to ascertain that equipment and components licensed for export to the Israeli armed forces by Her Majesty's Government since 1990 have not been used *(a)* against civilians in the Occupied Territories and *(b)* in southern Lebanon. [138071]

Mr. Hain: We are, and have been, in regular direct contact with the Israeli Government, including at senior Israeli military official level, as part of our inquiries to confirm that equipment and components licensed for export from the UK have not been used against civilians in the Occupied Territories or southern Lebanon.

Kosovo

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many United Kingdom police officers are serving with the United Nations International Police Force in Kosovo; how many of these officers are undertaking *(a)* a six-month and *(b)* a 12-month tour of duty; and if he will make a statement. [137123]

Mr. Hain: There are currently 136 UK police officers serving with the United Nations International Police in Kosovo. Of these, 107 are undertaking a 12-month tour of duty. The remaining 29 have completed a 12-month tour of duty which has, at their request, been extended by a further six months. None of the officers currently deployed is serving a six-month tour of duty.

Institutional Reform (EU)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, 'Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform', relating to the extension of qualified majority voting to Article 191; [138020]

(2) what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, 'Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform', relating to procedures for making regulations governing political parties at European level, with particular reference to their funding. [137977]

Mr. Vaz: Political parties at European level were first recognised in the Maastricht Treaty. The proposal for a legal base to allow the establishment of a Statute to regulate these parties is intended to ensure the transparency of their funding. We strongly support this aim.

The details of such a legal base are still under discussion.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, 'Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform', relating to (1) enhanced co-operation measures; [137982]

(2) the new conditions for enhanced co-operation measures; [137981]

(3) the abolition of the national veto on enhanced co-operation measures; [137978]

(4) the application of enhanced co-operation procedure to Title V. [137983]

Mr. Vaz: The Prime Minister set out the Government's position on enhanced co-operation in his Warsaw speech on 6 October.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if it remains the Government's policy that immigration and asylum issues fall within the definition of border controls for the purpose of qualified majority voting; [137980]

(2) what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, "Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform", relating to the extension of qualified majority voting to aspects of asylum and immigration policy; [138021]

(3) what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, "Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform", relating to items for possible extensions of qualified majority voting. [137976]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made in the Council of Ministers on the proposals in the paper CONFER 4790/00, 'Progress report on the intergovernmental conference on Institutional Reform', relating to the draft amendments to Article 7. [137979]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made it clear that they are happy to discuss the proposal for a new early warning mechanism to be applied before any decision to take measures against a member state under Article 7 TEU. The details remain under negotiation.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made in the European Commission on the Commission's paper, 'On the Legal Nature of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union', with particular reference to the European Court of Justice's interpretation of the Charter. [137984]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 555–56W and today, *Official Report*, col. 452–53W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which rights contained in the draft EU Charter of Fundamental Rights are not identical to rights already incorporated in the European Convention on Human Rights. [137898]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him and the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 555W.

Child Soldiers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress towards the ratification of the Optional Protocol on child soldiers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [137745]

Mr. Hain: The Government are working toward ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Ministry of Defence is currently drawing up administrative guidelines for the armed forces to implement this protocol, once they are in place, we hope to ratify the protocol. An initial target of January 2001 has been set.

North American Free Trade Agreement

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the economic impact of NAFTA on the UK economy in the last five years. [136401]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Treasury has carried out no assessment of the economic impact of NAFTA on the UK economy over the last five years.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Burundi

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to provide support for the promotion of civil society in Burundi. [136457]

Clare Short: The first priority in Burundi is peace. We continue to provide financial assistance to the Arusha Peace Process and also humanitarian assistance through well established non-governmental organisations focusing on emergency healthcare and nutrition. As soon as peace is established we will consider providing further assistance for Burundi.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent reports she has received concerning the use of oil revenue from Sudanese oil fields for development projects. [135109]

Mr. Foulkes: We have seen some evidence that revenue is being directed to investment, especially roads and power generation. The Government of Sudan have also announced Sudanese Dinar 800m (US$ 3.118m) for development in the south through the Southern Sudan Co-ordinating Council. We are pressing for further clarification and will keep the situation under close review.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to review the provision of development aid to southern Sudan. [135108]

Mr. Foulkes: The first priority for the Sudan is a lasting political solution to the conflict. We believe development assistance will not be effective without peace. We need to strengthen the voices for peace among the ordinary Sudanese and are currently stepping up efforts to work more through church and other religious groups in the south and elsewhere. In the meantime, we will continue to give urgent humanitarian need top priority. We will also support and encourage good proposals from non-governmental organisations who can effectively reach the poorest groups in the country.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress in developing the new wharf at Jamestown, St. Helena. [138227]

Clare Short: A revised Wharf Improvement Project proposal was discussed with officials from my Department when they visited St Helena in July. The project is to be financed by the European Development Fund (EDF) but UK views will be taken into account when the project is considered by the EDF Committee. My officials were satisfied with the technical merits of the revised proposal. However, the St. Helena Government (SHG) have been asked to produce additional information on the health and safety benefits which underpin the economic case for this investment. This information has still to be provided. Subject to agreement on the economic case, we have advised SHG that we will support the project when it is submitted to the Committee for approval.

Health and Welfare Programmes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had in the last 12 months with leaders of Third World countries to develop health and welfare programmes. [137384]

Clare Short: Health issues have been included in most of my discussions during the past 12 months with leaders of poorer countries, with a focus on how we can assist them achieve the international development targets for health.

Kosovo

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department has spent to date on clearing unexploded cluster munitions in Kosovo. [137987]

Clare Short: We have funded five organisations to carry out emergency clearance of anti-personnel landmines and unexploded ordnance, including cluster bomb units. Two of these organisations have been exclusively tasked with cluster munition clearance, while the other three have undertaken this task as part of a broader programme of unexploded ordnance clearance. We provided over £6 million during the 1999–2000 financial year for the clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance in Kosovo. So far this year we have committed a further £6.6 million.

NDPBs (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to her which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137702]

Clare Short: There are no non-departmental bodies responsible to me that have duties relating to Scotland.

Malawi

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many staff her Department directly employs in Malawi. [136665]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department directly employs 34 members of staff in Malawi.

Mine Clearance (Africa)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department makes available to African countries which are not in conflict for mine clearance. [137944]

Clare Short: We continue to provide assistance for mine clearance to a number of African countries from our humanitarian mine action programme, which totalled some £15 million in 1999–2000. Currently, this includes Chad, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. This assistance is channelled through the UN (including the United Nations Mine Action Service, the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services) and other international organisations, national Mine Action Centres and NGOs, and includes strengthening indigenous capacity where possible. We also provide support to help countries ratify the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and their Destruction.

Vietnam

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department has provided for the floods in Vietnam; and what environmental management projects her Department supports in Vietnam. [135061]

Clare Short: We have provided a total of £1.15 million in response to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Crescent Societies (IFRC) Emergency Appeal to alleviate the suffering of flood victims in the Mekong watershed of Vietnam. This has contributed to meeting immediate needs (food, plastic sheeting and clothing) and to longer term livelihood support for families that will remain food insecure for some considerable time. Relief organisations placed a high priority on locally constructed boats to provide families with transport and the opportunity to catch and sell fish. This in turn assists families to buy rice and other staples and should reduce immediate dependence and bring medium-term benefits

by re-establishing sustainable livelihoods. We have contributed a further £80,000 as our share of the European Commission Humanitarian Assistance to flood relief.

We have mainstreamed support for the environment rather than supporting specific environmental projects in Vietnam. We recognise that most environmental trends are adverse and have significant detrimental impacts on the health and livelihoods of poor people. Our rural poverty reduction programmes in Vietnam incorporate environmental and sustainability considerations. The Ha Tinh Poverty Alleviation Programme supports the construction of sea dykes, mangrove replanting and integrated pest management (IPM) all of which reduce vulnerability and improve people's livelihoods. Broader rural poverty reduction programmes currently being designed will incorporate environmental and sustainability perspectives, ensuring that rural infrastructure is assessed for environmental impact and seeking better ways of using natural resources in supporting the livelihoods of poor people.

We are also considering ways of mainstreaming sustainability issues within broader national policy formulation, through, for example, the Poverty Reduction Strategy process.

SCOTLAND

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137436]

Dr. Reid: I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community.

WALES

Prison/Police Services

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will introduce legislation to devolve responsibility for the police service and for the prison service in Wales from the Home Office to the National Assembly for Wales. [138026]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No. The Government have no plans to transfer additional functions to the National Assembly.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137439]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community. I intend to spend some time volunteering during 2001.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Carers

13. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to help young carers. [136120]

Mr. Bayley: Social Security benefits are available for carers aged 16 and over. This means that measures recently announced, such as the increase in the Invalid Care Allowance earnings limit, the increase in carer premium and the extension of entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance for up to eight weeks after the disabled person dies, will help young carers, as well as others.

36. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further action he is taking to support carers. [136144]

Mr. Bayley: We recently announced steps to improve financial support for carers. We intend to:

Increase the carer premium in the Income Related benefits by £10 a week on top of next year's inflation uprating;

increase the earnings limit in Invalid Care Allowance from £50 a week to the National Insurance Lower Earnings Limit, currently £67 per week;

allow ICA to continue for up to eight weeks after the death of the person being cared for;

allow claims to ICA to be made from people aged 65 and over which will assist carers whose State pension is less than the rate of ICA and those who receive the Minimum Income Guarantee.

We will be seeking to introduce these changes as soon as the legislative timetable permits. The changes will help an estimated 300,000 carers at a cost of over £500 million over three years.

Tribunals

14. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he has taken to ensure that tribunals which lie within his Department's responsibility meet the requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998 for independence. [136121]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor appoints the panel members who sit on unified appeal tribunals within the Appeals Service. He introduced new administrative arrangements for judicial appointments, including part-time panel members, from 12 April 2000.

My right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor and my noble Friend the Lord Chief Justice consider that these arrangements put beyond reasonable doubt the safeguards guaranteeing the independence of judicial appointments.

Disability Benefits

17. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many persons have had their disability benefits cancelled over the most recent 12 month period for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [136124]

Mr. Bayley: About 170,000 awards of Disability Living Allowance and 285,000 awards of Attendance Allowance were terminated in the 12 months ending 30 September 2000. Awards are terminated in a range

of circumstances, including when people's condition improves, or they go to live abroad, die, or enter long-term residential care.

Minimum Income Guarantee

18. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have applied for the minimum income guarantee this year. [136125]

Mr. Darling: 220,000 pensioners have applied for the Minimum Income Guarantee between January and September this year.

21. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee who do not claim it. [136128]

Mr. Rooker: From statistical surveys based on a 1 per cent. sample it has been estimated that around 500,000 pensioners could be entitled to Minimum Income Guarantee but do not claim it. We shall have a better idea of a figure when the present take-up campaign is concluded, during which we are making direct contact with 2.3 million pensioners.

23. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many senior citizens are eligible for the minimum income guarantee. [136130]

Mr. Rooker: Some 2 million pensioners either as single people or couples receive the Minimum Income Guarantee. Figures for those who might be entitled but are not claiming were based on a 1 per cent. sample. We shall have a better idea when the present take-up campaign is concluded, during which we are making direct contact with 2.3 million pensioners.

24. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to help those pensioners whose small occupational pension schemes prevent them from receiving the minimum income guarantee. [136131]

Mr. Rooker: The new Pension Credit will help those on modest incomes with small occupational pensions firstly by introducing a new higher guaranteed income and secondly by rewarding savings income.

Social Fund

19. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the operation of the social fund's budgeting loan scheme. [136126]

Angela Eagle: The changes we made to simplify the social fund budgeting loan scheme in April 1999 are working well. In its first year the new scheme helped more people on the lowest incomes by way of interest-free loans than ever before.

Pensioner Tax Credit

20. **Mr. Lammy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received concerning the proposed pensioner tax credit. [136127]

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received regarding the proposals for a pensioner tax credit. [136123]

Mr. Rooker: A number of representations have been received on this matter. A consultation paper on our proposals for the Pension Credit was published on 9 November. A copy has been placed in the Library.

27. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the forthcoming Pensioner Tax Credit. [136134]

Mr. Rooker: We published our proposals for the Pension Credit last week. The plans are subject to public consultation.

Fraud

22. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the amount of benefit fraud detected since May 1997. [136129]

Mr. Rooker: The estimated loss due to fraud is £2 billion per year. We have now increased the targets for reducing the amount of fraud and error in the system. We are now aiming to reduce the losses from fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the two most vulnerable benefits, by 25 per cent. by March 2004, rising to 50 per cent. by March 2006.

30. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress of his initiatives to tackle Housing Benefit fraud. [136137]

Angela Eagle: We continue to give tackling Housing Benefit fraud a very high priority. One of our key objectives is to prevent fraud and error from entering the system. To this end, we are taking initiatives to ensure that information flows freely between local authorities and the Department:

We allocated £4 million funding to local authorities to install Remote Access Terminals (RATs), which give staff access to the Department's benefit systems. 404 local authorities have at least one RAT.

We have funded Electronic Transfer of Data (ETD). This means that many millions of paper forms, previously sent by the Benefits Agency to local authorities through the post, are now sent electronically.

Links between the Department's benefit systems and local authorities are complemented by other initiatives to prevent and detect fraud and error:

£100 million has been made available to local authorities to implement the Verification Framework by 2001. We have specified minimum standards for the verification of the identity of claimants, so preventing fraud from entering the system. To date, 253 local authorities have received set-up costs and 185 have been certified as compliant.

352 local authorities have signed up for the Royal Mail "Do not redirect" service funded by the Department. This prevents fraudsters having benefit mail redirected to a different address.

Reform of the anti-fraud financial incentive scheme is in progress, to ensure that local authorities can be rewarded for securing the end-to-end claims process.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 408W, on housing benefit fraud, if he will provide corresponding data for 1999–2000. [138048]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not yet available for 1999–2000.

Winter Fuel Allowance

25. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to ensure all pensioners receive their Winter Fuel Allowance before the end of this winter. [136132]

Angela Eagle: In order to make appropriate Winter Fuel Payments to those newly eligible as a result of the changes made to the scheme following the Taylor ruling, we asked that a claims process be developed as a matter of urgency. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced details of the claims process on 11 April. In parallel an information campaign—which includes national and regional press advertisements, a telephone helpline, leaflets, posters and the internet—aims to make existing and potential customers aware of the changes and what action, if any, is required.

In May this year we also wrote to around 1.2 million people, identified by the Department as being newly eligible for the payments, inviting them to claim.

The information campaign will continue to ensure that customers are kept fully informed.

On current plans, all payments should be made before the end of this winter—the end of March 2001. However, the timing of payments made to those who have to claim will depend upon when the claims are received.

For this winter—all automatic payments will be made before Christmas as will those in respect of claims that were returned before 22 September. Claims will still be processed if they are received after 22 September but payment before Christmas cannot be guaranteed. Claims for this winter's payments must be made—where necessary—before 31 March 2001.

For past winters, people must make a claim for each winter for which they think they may now be eligible. As at 6 November, over one million people had chosen to make a claim for payments in respect of previous winters and nearly one million payments have already been issued to people whose claim was successful. Because claims in respect of past winters are not subject to a time limit, and we continue to receive them daily, it is not possible to state categorically that all will be made by the end of March 2001. It all depends on when people choose to make their claim.

34. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of men aged over 60 years will receive their winter fuel payments by March 2001. [136142]

Angela Eagle: For this winter, all automatic payments will be made before Christmas, as will those in respect of claims returned before 22 September 2000. Claims will still be processed if they are received after this date but payment before Christmas cannot be guaranteed. Claims for this winter's payments should be made before 31 March 2001. Because people who need to claim their payment this winter can do so up to the end of March 2001, it is not possible to estimate the percentage as requested.

For past winters, people must claim Winter Fuel Payments for each winter for which they think they may now be eligible. As at 6 November, the number of newly eligible men who have chosen to make a claim stands at around 950,000 and around 930,000 payments have already been issued in respect of successful claims. Because claims for past winters are not subject to any time limit, and we continue to receive them daily, it is not possible to estimate the percentage as requested.

Pensioners

26. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to increase the income of pensioners who have modest second pensions. [136133]

Mr. Rooker: The Pension Credit will increase the incomes of those with modest second pensions, by ensuring that these savings are rewarded.

We published our proposals for the Pension Credit last week.

29. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on poverty among pensioners living in rural areas. [136136]

Mr. Rooker: We know that many pensioners, including those living in rural areas, experience poverty. That is why we have a broad strategy, which includes raising the minimum income guarantee to £92.15 from next April, and an above earnings increase in the basic State pension.

33. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of those of pensionable age receive no pension other than their State Retirement Pension. [136141]

Mr. Rooker: Just over 60 per cent. of pensioner families receive an occupational or other private pension on top of their State Pension. The remaining 40 per cent. do not, but many of them receive other income instead. in 1998–99, single pensioners in this group had an average net income of £117 a week although the basic State Pension was only £64.70; the figures for couples are £206 and £103.40 respectively. The State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) plays a role in increasing State Retirement Pension above the basic State Pension.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact on the standard of living of pensioners having awarded them an additional 75 pence per week. [136258]

Mr. Rooker: The increase in the basic State Retirement Pension in April 2000 was based on price inflation during the relevant period. The hon. Member will be aware that the living standard of the poorest pensioners was increased by raising the Minimum Income Guarantee by £3.45 for pensioners aged 60–75. However, pensioners will also receive a Winter Fuel Payment of £200 this year, which equates to just under £2 a week more than the previous year (when it was £100), and pensioners over age 75 will receive a free TV licence, which is worth a further £2 a week.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has just announced a further package of measures for pensioners which, when taken together with changes already in place, will mean that next year, pensioner households will, on average, be £11 a week better off compared with 1997, with the poorest being at least £15 better off in real terms.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of the amounts paid in benefits to pensioners are means tested. [136107]

Mr. Rooker: In 2000–01 an estimated 19 per cent. of benefits paid to pensioners were means tested. This compares with over 21 per cent. of benefits in 1996–97.

31. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on pensioners' reactions to the Government's 75p per week pension increase. [136138]

Mr. Rooker: We have received numerous representations regarding pensions since the uprating statement in November 1999. These have come from pensioners, pensioner organisations, voluntary organisations and right hon. and hon. Members.

The Government have listened to these representations.

Savings

28. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the extent to which the benefit system provides an incentive to those on low incomes to save. [136135]

Mr. Bayley: We have introduced a number of measures that demonstrate our commitment to rewarding those people who have worked hard and saved hard.

These include the new State Second Pension, and stakeholder pensions will give many more people the opportunity to build a good second pension; increases in the capital limits for the Minimum Income Guarantee from next April—benefiting half a million pensioners by £5 a week, on average; and our proposals for the new Pension Credit, from 2003, will specifically reward saving with a cash addition—benefiting 5½ million pensioners.

Benefits Administration

32. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he proposes to make to the administration method in housing and council tax benefit cases. [136139]

Angela Eagle: We have already introduced measures to bring about improvements in housing benefit administration. Since April, all local authorities have had to set challenging targets to secure year on year improvements in performance standards for housing benefit delivery. Our Housing Green Paper, published in April 2000, set out a range of further proposals for modernising the system. We are currently studying the responses and will announce our decisions shortly.

Pensions (Self-employed)

35. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to provide pension schemes for self-employed people. [136143]

Mr. Rooker: Self-employed people can currently contribute to a personal pension. From April 2001 they will be able to contribute to a stakeholder pension scheme, which will provide a flexible and low cost pension option for them.

Pensioners (Rotherham)

37. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Rotherham are eligible for *(a)* the winter fuel allowance, *(b)* a free television licence for over-75-year-olds and *(c)* the minimum income guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [136145]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Statistics on pensioners in Rotherham at May 2000

Thousand

	Number
Minimum Income Guarantee recipients[1]	2.8
Pensioners over 75[2]	5.2
Winter Fuel Payments recipients in winter 1999–2000[4]	13.4

[1] Source: Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000

[2] Source: Statistical samples held by ASD Information Centre—May 2000

[3] Number of pensioner households who will receive free TV licences is not directly known, but from the Statistical Samples it is possible to produce data on the number of pensioners receiving one or a combination of RP, IS, AA, DLA, IB or SDA by parliamentary constituency and are aged 75 or over.

[4] Source: Matching Intelligence Data Analysis Service Winter Fuels Payment 1999–2000 exercise.

Notes:

1. All except Winter Fuels Payment data are based on 5 per cent. samples, therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100.
3. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137437]

Mr. Darling: The Department supports the aims of the International Year of Volunteers and is currently working jointly with other Government Departments on ways in which employee volunteering can be implemented.

I can confirm that it is my intention to volunteer during 2001.

Pensions Expenditure

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the percentage of national income accounted for by expenditure on National Insurance retirement pensions in each year from 1996–97 to 2001–02, taking account of the measures contained in Cm 4917; and if he will provide those estimates to two decimal places. [138231]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table which, for completeness, also shows expenditure on other benefits paid to pensioners. All figures are rounded to two decimal places; for this reason they may not appear to sum to the total, which is also correct to two decimal places.

	Expenditure as a percentage of GDP[1]					
	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
(a) Retirement Pensions[2]	4.17	4.11	4.14	4.17	4.10	4.24
(b) Winter Fuel Payments	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.10	0.18	0.13
(c) Means-tested benefits for pensioners[3]	1.13	1.06	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.05
(d) Other benefits paid to pensioners[4]	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
(e) Concessionary TV Licences	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.04
Total	5.32	5.21	5.18	5.28	5.33	5.47

[1] The information is based on expenditure figures consistent with the Pre-Budget Report, and is compared with the latest GDP figures published by National Statistics on 27 September 2000
[2] Includes Retirement Pension basic and earnings-related components
[3] Includes Income Support/Minimum Income Guarantee, Social Fund payments, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit paid to people aged 60 and over
[4] Includes non-contributory Retirement Pension and Christmas Bonus (contributory and non-contributory)

Income-related Benefits

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish his Department's next estimate of the take-up of income-related benefits. [136549]

Mr. Bayley: The next annual statistics on the take-up of income related benefits will be published on 8 December 2000. These will cover the financial year 1998–99, the latest period for which data are available. They will therefore predate the introduction of the Minimum Income Guarantee and Working Families Tax Credit.

Benefit Payment Methods

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total savings from paying benefits and pensions directly into bank accounts instead of by cash payments at post offices. [136709]

Mr. Rooker: The move to automated credit transfer as the normal method of payment will provide a more modern, secure and efficient payment method and will bring significant savings anticipated to be in the region of £600 million per year. The move will begin in 2003, but full savings will not be realised until the system is phased in, when the transition from current paper-based methods of payment is complete.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many recipients there are of the *(a)* mobility component and *(b)* care component of Disability Living Allowance, broken down by levels of benefit, at the most recent date for which figures are available, and in each of the three preceding years. [138220]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is given in the table.

Recipients of Disability Living Allowance by component

Component	1997[1]	1998[1]	1999[1]	2000[1]
Care component				
Higher rate	359,400	381,900	391,900	414,500
Middle rate	530,100	564,500	590,200	621,600
Lower rate	390,600	439,500	477,200	506,600

Recipients of Disability Living Allowance by component

Component	1997[1]	1998[1]	1999[1]	2000[1]
Mobility component				
Higher rate	1,293,300	1,336,400	1,352,300	1,375,100
Lower rate	365,000	407,200	437,700	468,400

[1] Figures relate to the number of recipients at 31 May each year
Source:
DSS Information Centre: 5 per cent. data

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans his Department has to change the number of staff working at the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate. [135259]

Angela Eagle: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has streamlined corporate support activities in line with the Department's drive to centralise support functions and focus resources on achieving results. Following these changes, there will be 112 staff working at the BFI, who will complete the programme of inspection activity as planned.

Mileage Allowance (Medical Examinations)

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to complete the review of the decision to reduce the mileage allowance for attending medical examinations. [135939]

Mr. Bayley: The review of mileage allowances is not yet complete. Recommendations to Ministers on this subject will need to take account of the implications of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's announcement of the intention to create a new Working Age Agency, combining the Benefits Agency's responsibilities for working age people with the Employment Service.

National Insurance

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the impact on the level of the National Insurance Fund and on the rates of contributions in each year from 2001–02 to 2005–06 inclusive, of increasing the Basic Pension in each year by the percentage increase in the general level of earnings. [136051]

Mr. Rooker: This information is contained in the "Report by the Government Actuary on the Cost of Uprating the Basic Retirement Pension in line with the General Level of Earnings" Cm4920, which was laid

before Parliament on 9 November 2000. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and the Report is available on the Internet at WWW.gad.vov.uk/publication.html.

Respite Care (Allowances)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the basis for payment of allowances by his Department to a person receiving respite in *(a)* a private and *(b)* a local authority residential home. [136793]

Mr. Bayley: Entitlement to the income-related benefits for people in care homes depends on whether the person is admitted to a private or local authority home. The difference reflects the funding responsibilities between central and local government for the different types of home. Entitlement may also reflect any need for continuing payment of housing costs in respect of the person's own home during the period of respite care.

Where respite care is publicly funded, Attendance Allowance and the care component of Disability Living Allowance are not payable, to avoid duplication of provision, but no adjustment is generally made for the first 28 days. Where people pay for their own care these benefits are paid as normal.

Most other benefits are not affected by admission to care homes; though a person may have to pay the home for their respite care if privately arranged, or the local authority if that authority has arranged and funded the care.

Housing Benefit

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to equalise the arrangements for paying Housing Benefit to council tenants with those for other tenants. [136812]

Angela Eagle: Council tenants are paid by rent rebate. This means their Housing Benefit is credited against their rent account held by the council. Those in the private sector are paid by rent allowance. Payment is made by various means, either to the tenant or, in prescribed circumstances, direct to the landlord. The question of how Housing Benefit is paid was visited in the Housing Green Paper. We are currently studying the consultation responses carefully and will take decisions on how to proceed in the light of them. We expect to announce our decisions in due course.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people aged 25 years and over had been receiving the Jobseeker's Allowance for more than two years in September 1997; and how many people aged 25 years and over have been receiving the jobseeker's allowance for more than two years currently. [137092]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Jobseeker's allowance claimants aged 25 and over where claim is two years or more, August 1997 and May 2000

Year	*Number of claimants (thousand)*
August 1997	265.0
May 2000	145.7

Notes:
1. It is not possible to provide figures for September 1997, I have therefore provided for the nearest point in time which is August 1997.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
3. Figures based on claimants aged 25 years and over.
4. Figures based on duration of two years and over.
5. Based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error.
6. Figures include all JSA cases who receive contribution-based and income-based benefit.
7. Claimants signing for National Insurance credits only are not included.

Source:
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1997 and May 2000

Government Actuary Report

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 254W, when he asked the Government Actuary to undertake a report into the basic state pension and different methods of uprating. [137301]

Mr. Rooker: Section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 requires the Government Actuary, or the Deputy Government Actuary, to report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the cost of uprating the basic Retirement Pension in line with the general level of earnings. The Act received Royal Assent on 28 July 2000.

Anglo-Australian Social Security Agreement

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how the Government intends to respond to the termination of the Anglo-Australian Social Security Agreement; [137611]

(2) what estimate he has made of the effect on social security expenditure of the termination of the Anglo-Australian Social Security Agreement; [137612]

(3) how many people living in *(a)* Australia, *(b)* Britain and *(c)* elsewhere will be affected by the termination of the Anglo-Australian Social Security Agreement. [137614]

Mr. Rooker: People who are already receiving benefit with the help of the agreement when it terminates will not be affected. We are actively considering the full implications of Australia's decision and in particular what we can do to protect the position of those residing in the UK who have previously lived in Australia but not yet retired.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many people living in Australia are earning credits towards British contributory benefits; [137613]

(2) how many people retired in each of the past five years with part of their pension coming from credits earned while in Australia; and what was the average amount of pension earned by these credits. [137610]

Mr. Rooker: People cannot earn credits while they are resident in Australia. Under the terms of the Social Security Agreement with Australia, when someone who is permanently resident in the United Kingdom claims Retirement Pension, previous residence in Australia can be treated as periods during which Class 3 contributions have been paid.

We estimate that an average of about 1,000 pensioners have benefited from these provisions each year during the last five years. The estimated average basic pension enhancement under the Agreement was around £15 a week over this period.

Source:

Pensions Strategy Computer System

Earnings Link

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 575W, for how many years the National Insurance Fund will remain in surplus over and above the recommended surplus if the basic state pension was uprated in line with average earnings, contribution rates remained unchanged and contribution thresholds were uprated in line with the average earnings. [138046]

Mr. Rooker: The information is contained in Tables 4.2 and 5.2 of the "Report by the Government Actuary on the Cost of Uprating the Basic Retirement Pension in line with the General Level of Earnings" Cm 4920, which was laid before Parliament on 9 November 2000. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and the Report is available on the internet at www.gad.gov.uk/publication/publication.html.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hi-tech Crime

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the resources available to the police in England and Wales to tackle hi-tech crime. [138264]

Mr. Straw: The Government are committed to action against hi-tech crime in line with our twin objectives of making the United Kingdom the best and the safest place in the world to conduct and engage in e-commerce.

I am therefore making £25 million available to the police in England and Wales over the next three years to initiate the implementation of a National Hi-Tech Crime Strategy to enhance the capability of law enforcement more effectively to investigate crime where new technology is used.

The funding being made available will give impetus to the process of developing the skills within the police to undertake computer network investigations and forensic examination of computer systems. These are skills that are becoming necessary as criminals identify opportunities to use and misuse information and communications technology. It is important to ensure that the police have the proper skills and equipment to support them in this new activity.

With those skills the police will, at the local level, be able to deliver improved service to the public to investigate reports of computer-related crime and to recover and analyse computer based evidence. The crimes concerned cover a wide spectrum from hacking and financial fraud to obscenity and the unlawful activities of paedophiles. The work of local units will be complemented by a multi-agency National Hi-Tech Crime Unit that will begin operation in April 2001. The national unit will provide advice and support to local units, and to other law enforcement agencies across the United Kingdom, and deal with the most serious and organised hi-tech crime offences, including those which have a transnational impact.

The Government's commitment to support the development of the capability of law enforcement was made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, when he endorsed the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit report, "e-commerce@its.best.uk", last summer. That report recommended that the Government improve the technical capability of law enforcement to investigate internet crime and establish an Internet Crime Unit.

On 11 September the Prime Minister published the UKOnline Annual Report. The establishment of a National Hi-Tech Crime Unit was identified as a specific action, part of the Government's commitment to work with industry to ensure a safe and secure environment for e-commerce and to help people trust the internet.

I am pleased that with the support of the Association of Chief Police Officers, the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad, we are able to make progress towards ensuring that the police both locally and nationally are better trained and equipped to deal with hi-tech crime.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137430]

Mr. Straw: The Government fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. The Home Office is contributing £300,000 towards the costs of the International Year of Volunteers English Consortium to cover salaries and other core costs. We would also like to see all employers give their employees a day's paid time off to work in the community. The Home Office has a policy of allowing staff special leave each year to do voluntary work. I intend to spend a day volunteering during 2001.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the average cost is of issuing anti-social behaviour orders; [137599]

(2) how many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued since April 1999 in *(a)* England and Wales, *(b)* the Greater London area and *(c)* the Royal borough of Kingston. [137598]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Over 100 anti-social behaviour orders have been issued since the measure was implemented on 1 April 1999. At least 30 of these have been made in the Greater London area, but, as far as I am aware, none has been made in the Royal borough of Kingston.

I cannot yet say what the average cost of issuing an order is. We will be undertaking a review into the operation and effectiveness of anti-social behaviour orders in the New Year. Once the results of the review have been published, we should have a clearer picture of the cost of seeking an order.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons registered social landlords do not have the power to apply direct to the courts for anti-social behaviour orders; and if he will assess the benefits of giving such a power to those registered social landlords who have acquired the housing stock of a local authority. [137059]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 recognised the key responsibility of the police and the local authority for tackling problems of crime and disorder on a local basis. The Act created the anti-social behaviour order as a powerful community-based measure to assist the police and local authorities in carrying out that responsibility and gave them the power to apply for such orders. The guidance we issued in June emphasises that registered social landlords should play a full and active part in any anti-social behaviour order case involving their tenants.

We have given a commitment to review the operation of anti-social behaviour orders within two years of implementation. The review will start in the new year and its findings and recommendations will be published. The review will cover the current procedures and channels for making an application. The review will specifically consider giving registered social landlords the power to apply for anti-social behaviour orders.

Stasi Agents

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will provide an occupational breakdown of the British Stasi agents investigated since 1989; [137495]

(2) if the activities of the former Stasi spy controller in the United Kingdom, publicly identified in October, *(a)* have been, *(b)* are being or *(c)* will be investigated; [137494]

(3) if he will investigate the circumstances of the payment by the Stasi of sums to British Stasi agents between 1985 and 1989 in relation to discoveries made in October on which information has been supplied to him; and if those agents' identities have been discovered; [137493]

(4) what assessment he has made of the risks to the safety of defecting former FSB officers if they are returned to Russia. [137490]

Mr. Straw: I can add nothing to the reply that I gave the hon. Member about the East German Stasi on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 610W, and 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 398W.

Human Rights Act 1998

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998. [137620]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Human Rights Act 1998 received Royal Assent on 9 November 1998 and came into full effect on 2 October 2000. During that interval Whitehall Departments reviewed legislation, policy and procedures in the light of the Act's provisions and a range of training and awareness raising initiatives were undertaken for the judiciary and public authorities. The Human Rights Task Force played an important part in helping public authorities prepare for the Human Rights Act, issuing guidance and publicity materials and raising awareness of the Act among the general public. Financial provision has been made for dealing with challenges based on the Convention rights, especially in the initial period of operation.

Private Prisons

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many certified prison custody officers are employed in each private prison in England and Wales. [137846]

Mr. Boateng: The number of prisoner custody officers at each privately managed prison is:

Privately managed prison	*Number*
Wolds	139
Blakenhurst	231
Doncaster	249
Parc	256
Altcourse	292
Lowdham Grange	117
Ashfield	134
Forest Bank	215

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost was of the contracts and competitions group within the Prison Service in each of the last three years. [137845]

Mr. Boateng: The costs requested are:

Year	£
1997–98	939,134
1998–99	1,122,844
1999–2000	1,379,395

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the Wilson report on the comparative costs of state and private prisons; and if he will make a statement. [137848]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column 587W. The Wilson report is one of the two reviews referred to in that reply.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average cost is of a prison place in each contracted out prison. [137804]

Mr. Boateng: The cost of a prison place in each contracted out prison is:

Prison	£
Wolds	26,224
Blakenhurst	22,622
Doncaster	25,335
Parc	39,546
Altcourse	57,908
Lowdham Grange	30,160
Ashfield	39,120
Forest Bank	28,886

The figures represent costs at the end of September 2000 annualised over 2000–01. The average cost per place for the eight prisons is £33,725. The costs for Private Finance Initiative prisons include an element for the repayment of the capital financing charge.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what sum Premier Prison Services has repaid to the Prison Service as a result of the refinancing of PFI schemes for HM Prisons *(a)* Lowdham Grange, *(b)* Ashfield, *(c)* Dovegate and *(d)* Hassockfield Secure Training Centre. [137798]

Mr. Boateng: Premier Prison Services Ltd. (PPS) has not refinanced its Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. In late 1999 the holding companies of relevant PFI projects and their parent companies were restructured. This mechanical change did not alter the charges paid by the Prison Service or its lender liabilities in respect of Lowdham Grange, Ashfield or Dovegate prisons. The same applies to the Hassockfield Secure Training Centre which is a Home Office project.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much it has cost on average to build a prison place in each of the contracted out prisons. [137803]

Mr. Boateng: The capital cost for each Private Finance Initiative (PFI) prison place is:

	£
Parc	53,750
Altcourse	105,000
Lowdham Grange	56,000
Ashfield	75,000
Forest Bank	62,500
Rye Hill	66,667
Dovegate	86,250

The average capital cost per place for the seven PFI prisons is £72,167.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many accredited offender programmes are running in each private prison in England and Wales. [137847]

Mr. Boateng: Blakenhurst, Doncaster and Forest Bank prisons each run one accredited cognitive behavioural programme—the Enhanced Thinking Skills programme. Wolds prison runs two, accredited programmes: the CALM (Controlling Anger and Learning to Manage It) programme and the Reasoning and Rehabilitation programme. Parc prison is due to introduce Reasoning and Rehabilitation later this financial year.

Rye Hill prison is due to introduce Reasoning and Rehabilitation later this financial year, and the Sex Offender Treatment Programme within the next financial year. Dovegate prison is due to introduce the Sex Offender Treatment Programme within the next financial year. Altcourse and Ashfield prisons do not run any accredited programmes at present.

Reoffenders

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the reoffending rates are within two years of completion of *(a)* one year probation orders without any conditions, *(b)* one year probation orders with conditions and *(c)* the pathfinder initiatives. [137849]

Mr. Boateng: Information on reoffending rates is not available.

However, the percentage of offenders who were reconvicted within two years of completing a one year probation order with no additional requirements which was made during the first quarter of 1996 was 54 per cent. The analogous rate for those on a one year probation order with additional requirements was 58 per cent.

There are no reconviction or reoffending rates available for the pathfinder initiatives, since they have not been running long enough to provide the necessary data. Arrangements are in place for the evaluation of the programmes, which will include the production of reconviction rates.

Firearms

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offences involving firearms were recorded by *(a)* each police force in England and Wales and *(b)* in total in the year ending 31 March. [137739]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested data are not yet available.

The Verne Prison

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding his Department provides for the evaluation of the Kainos programme at Her Majesty's Prison The Verne. [137717]

Mr. Boateng: None. The independent evaluation of the work of the Kainos programme in prisons is funded by the Kainos Community, and is guided by a steering group which includes representation from the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate, the Prison Service and the Kainos Community.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for the period between the commencement of the Home Detention Curfew scheme on 28 January 1999 and 30 September 2000, inclusive, (a) the total number of prisoners released on the scheme, (b) the number of prisoners convicted of each specific offence who were released on the scheme, with as detailed a breakdown as possible of the offences committed, including the specific offences committed by prisoners normally classified under the categories (i) other homicide and attempted homicide, (ii) other violence against the person, (iii) drug offences, (iv) assaults, and (v) other offences, including a breakdown of the prisoners normally classified in the sub-category of other offences called other offences, (c) the average sentence (1) received and (2) served, and the average period spent on the scheme, in respect of each specific offence, (d) the number of prisoners released on the scheme, with as detailed a breakdown as possible of the offences committed, who (A) breached the conditions of the curfew, (B) disappeared and were recaptured, (C) disappeared and remain unlawfully at large, and (D) had their licences revoked, and for what reasons, (e) as detailed a breakdown as possible of the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme while on the scheme including all offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence and (f) as detailed a breakdown as possible of the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme who committed a further offence while on the scheme that was similar in character to that for which they were originally convicted, including all offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence; and if he will make a statement. [134862]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The information provided in my reply is for the period up to 30 September 2000. As of that date, a total of 26,609 prisoners had been placed on Home Detention Curfew since the scheme commenced on 28 January 1999.

The original offences committed by prisoners released under the scheme during the period, the number of prisoners convicted of each specific offence, the average sentence received and served for those offences, and the average period spent on the scheme in respect of prisoners convicted of each specific offence, are shown in Table 1. The data are taken from the Prison Service's inmate information system, based on the data recorded by each prison. The table provides as detailed a breakdown as is possible from central records.

As at 30 September, a total of 854 prisoners placed on the scheme had breached the conditions of their curfew. A breakdown of this number showing the original offences committed by those curfewees is shown in Table 2.

Information on curfewees whose licences are revoked and who disappear before being recaptured is not held centrally. However, information is held on the number of curfewees unlawfully at large at any one time. On 30 September there were 44 curfewees who remained unlawfully at large. This represents fewer than 4 per cent. of the total number of revocations.

Details of the offences committed by those 44 curfewees who remained unlawfully at large on 30 September 2000 can be found in Table 3.

As at 30 September 2000, 1,294 curfewees had their licences revoked, using the powers available to the Secretary of State under sections 38A(1) and 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. The reasons for revocation were as follows:

breach of the curfew (section 38A(1)(a) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991)

the curfewee's whereabouts could no longer be electronically monitored (section 38A(1)(b) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991)

it was necessary to protect the public from serious harm (section 38A(1)(c) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991)

the curfewee had committed an offence or breached any other requirement of probation supervision (section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991). Curfewees who are charged with a new offence may also be recalled on any of the preceding grounds depending upon the circumstances of the case.

Prisoners whose current sentence is in respect of an offence committed before 1 January 1999 are not liable to be recalled under section 39 of the Act. In such cases, where the curfewee has breached the requirements of probation supervision or where they have committed a further offence and it has not been possible to revoke their licence under section 38A of the Act, the breach may be referred to the courts under section 38(1) of the Act. The total number of such cases referred to the courts is not held centrally.

A breakdown of the original offences committed by the 1,294 recalled curfewees, together with a breakdown of the reasons for their recall, is at Table 4.

Table 5 gives a breakdown of the cases where a prisoner placed on Home Detention Curfew is known to have been convicted, cautioned in respect of an offence committed while on Home Detention Curfew, or where a prisoner is known to be pending prosecution for such an offence. Where a curfewee has been charged with more than one offence, these have been shown separately.

Table 6 gives a breakdown of cases involving prisoners placed on the scheme who are known to have been convicted, cautioned or have a prosecution pending in respect of an offence committed while on Home Detention Curfew which is similar in character to the index offence or offences for which they were originally convicted.

The scheme is designed to ensure a better transition for short term offenders between custody and the community. Prisoners are placed on Home Detention Curfew only after a careful risk assessment, and the safety of the public is paramount at all times.

Tables 1–6 have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many individuals convicted of offences of domestic violence have been released under the Home Detention Curfew Scheme. [137813]

Mr. Boateng: Domestic violence is not a separate category of index offence. It would not be possible to provide this number, except at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if individuals who have received custodial sentences for offences of domestic violence are eligible for release under the home detention curfew scheme. [137877]

Mr. Boateng: Domestic violence is not one of the statutory exclusions from eligibility from the Home Detention Curfew scheme. Providing a prisoner meets the general criteria for eligibility—that they have reached the age of 18 and are serving a sentence over three months but less than four years—they are eligible for consideration for the scheme.

All prisoners considered for the scheme are assessed specifically in relation to the potential risk, to the victim or to other members of the public, posed by their release. Prisoners who present a clear and immediate threat to either the victim or the public will not be released on the scheme.

Corporate Killing

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses to the consultation on involuntary manslaughter were received from *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* trade unions, *(c)* employers organisations and *(d)* members of the public; in each case, how many (i) broadly supported and (ii) broadly opposed the creation of a new offence of corporate killing; and if he will make a statement. [136937]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We received 166 responses to the consultation paper we published in May this year. Of these, 11 were from hon. Members, five from employers associations, three from trade unions and 27 from members of the public. The remainder were contributions from individual undertakings, pressure groups, other representative bodies, lawyers and other Government Departments.

Of these, five hon. Members broadly supported the creation of an offence of corporate killing. The other six confined their comments to the reform of the individual offence. Four of the employers associations indicated their broad support; one was opposed to the creation of a new offence. All trade unions that responded were in support of an offence of corporate killing. Of the members of the public who contributed to the consultation, all who commented on corporate killing were in broad support of the proposals.

We are now carefully considering all responses and will publish a digest of them in due course.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his most recent estimate is of the level of crime per 1,000 of population in *(a)* rural and *(b)* urban areas; and which category of crime is commonest in (i) rural and (ii) urban areas. [136832]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Estimates of the number of crimes per 1,000 population in rural and urban areas can be derived from the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS). The 2000 BCS interviewed a core random sample of 19,411 adults (those aged 16 and over) living in private households in England and Wales about their experience of crime during 1999.

There is no commonly agreed definition of rural areas. The definition of rural areas used in the BCS is based on those parts of England and Wales falling within A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN) categories 1 to 9, and 27. These categories were developed by CACI Ltd. and classify areas according to the demographic, employment and housing characteristics. They account for an estimated 24 per cent. of the adult population in 1999. Estimated crime rates per 1,000 population are given in table 1. BCS data have been used in this answer, rather than recorded crime data, owing to the better division of rural and urban areas in the BCS.

Table 1: Estimated number of crimes per 1,000 population[1] in England and Wales in 1999

	Number
Non-rural	390
Rural	235
All	350

[1] Based on results from the 2000 British Crime Survey. Estimates of adults per household, based on figures supplied by CACI Ltd., have been used in forming these estimates. In both urban and rural areas the estimated average number of adults per household is two in rural areas and 1.9 in non-rural areas.

Full details of the offences covered by the British Crime Survey are given in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/00, which has been deposited in the Library.

Vandalism and vehicle-related thefts are the most common types of offences against households in both rural and urban areas, according to the BCS. The most common type of crime against the person is common assault, again in both areas. These are assaults in which there is either no injury or at most minimal injury.

The incident rates for these crimes are shown in table 2. For household crimes, rates are quoted per 1,000 households.

Table 2: Incident rates for most common crimes per 1,000 population or households[1]

	Non-rural	*Rural*	*All*
Personal crimes			
Incident rates per 1,000 adults			
Common assault	58	35	53
Household crimes			
Incident rates per 1,000 households			
All motor vehicle-related thefts[2]	143	109	135
Vandalism[3]	145	84	130

[1] Based on results from the 2000 British Crime Survey.
[2] Include theft of or from motor vehicles, including attempts.
[3] Vandalism of motor vehicles is included within vandalism.

Huntingdon Life Sciences

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the licence of Huntingdon Life Sciences. [137071]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have no plans to do so.

Police Station Closures

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police stations have closed down in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales in each of the last 10 years in areas defined as rural and areas defined as urban. [136720]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Estimates by police forces of the number of police stations opened or closed in England and Wales between 31 March 1990 and 31 March 2000 are set out in the table. Overall, it is estimated that 309 new stations have been opened and 939 closed.

Year end	*Opened*	*Closed*	*Number change*	*Total stations open*
March				
1990	—	—	—	2,729
1991	35	−47	−12	2,717
1992	14	−49	−35	2,682
1993	29	−124	−95	2,587
1994	32	−145	−113	2,474
1995	30	−120	−90	2,384
1996	31	−68	−37	2,347
1997	42	−95	−53	2,294
1998	33	−96	−63	2,231
1999	44	−90	−46	2,185
2000	19	−105	−86	2,099
Total changes	309	−939	−630	—

A table of figures by force area has been placed in the Library. (There is no formal definition of "rural" or "urban" forces).

The force-by-force analysis suggests significant variations in force policy in relation to police stations. The figures reflect the changing pattern of policing as Chief Constables and Police Authorities have responded to changing patterns of demand for services and have sought improved efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.

Many police premises which have been closed or replaced will have deteriorated or have been inadequate for the demands of modern policing. Many will have become little used by the public. The Audit Commission report, "Action Stations—Improving the Management of the Police Estate" (1999) makes a strong case for further rationalisation of the police estate.

I do, however, understand the concern of those who live in areas which have lost a permanent policing presence. Accordingly, I am discussing, with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, how each police authority might better inform the public about the steps it is taking to maintain and improve police visibility and effectiveness in all parts of England and Wales.

CCTV

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research the Government have undertaken into the effect of CCTV in towns on crime levels in neighbouring rural areas. [136679]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Police operational experience and various research studies show that Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) has significant crime reduction and detection potential, particularly when used as part of a wider strategy. As with any crime reduction measure, there is a possibility of some displacement, but this is by no means inevitable. Schemes funded under the Crime Reduction Programme CCTV Initiative will be evaluated to build up the knowledge base of what works best in what context. The evaluations will address the issue of displacement.

The deadline for receipt of outline applications for funding under the second round of the £153 million CCTV Initiative has been brought forward to 22 December 2000. The application prospectus for the second round was issued in march 2000. It was amended from the first round to give increased emphasis to bids aimed at reducing crime and the fear of crime in rural areas and small community shopping centres where absolute crime levels may be lower, but fear of crime is having a significant adverse effect on local communities.

A copy of the application prospectus is available on our website: www.crimereduction.gov.uk.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what data he has collated for the Ealing division of the Metropolitan police of the number of ethnic minority officers and civilian staff in each of the past five years and the number of complaints and employment claims of unfair treatment made by ethnic minority staff. [137206]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested has been provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and is shown in the table:

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Police officers from ethnic minority groups	59	69	67	80	80
Civilian staff from ethnic minority groups	50	54	60	64	63
Grievances instigated by ethnic minority staff	0	[1] 1	0	0	2
Employment tribunals instigated by ethnic minority staff	0	0	1	0	3

[1] This grievance relates to a member of the civilian staff at Ealing who raised the issue of an incident that occurred in another division in the Metropolitan police

Mr. Nick Tucker

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the Criminal Cases Review Commission to report on the case of Mr. Nick Tucker. [137040]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that an application for review of Nicholas Tucker's case was submitted to the Criminal Cases Review Commission in January 1999. The

Commission has determined that the case will require an extensive review. Mr. Tucker's representatives have recently asked that his application should be given priority. The Commission will consider this request and let Mr. Tucker's representatives know the outcome. If the Commission found that there were no special factors that would justify giving it priority, Mr. Tucker's application would continue to await allocation to a caseworker, on the basis of date order of receipt, and the Commission would expect to begin the review by May 2001.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received regarding the case of Mr. Nick Tucker; and if he will make a statement. [137043]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have received various representations from Mr. Tucker's parents, from hon. Members, and from members of the public.

Entry Clearance

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many EU nationals were refused entry to the UK on grounds of *(a)* public policy, *(b)* public security and *(c)* public health during 1999. [137278]

Mrs. Roche: The available information relates to the total number of European Union nationals who were refused leave to enter in 1999. A total of 290 such persons were recorded in that year. There are no separate statistics for the individual categories requested.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many non-EEA family members who arrived in possession of entry clearance holding an EEA family permit were refused entry by the immigration officer at a British port of entry during 1999. [137277]

Mrs. Roche: I regret the information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Former FSB Officers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the requests for political asylum made by former FSB officers. [137489]

Mr. Straw: All asylum applications are fully and carefully considered on their individual merits, by specially trained officers in the Integrated Casework Directorate of the Home Office. Details of individual cases are not disclosed to third parties for reasons of confidentiality.

Lieutenant-Colonel Litvinenko

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if former Lieutenant-Colonel Litvinenko *(a)* has been, *(b)* is being or *(c)* will be debriefed on security issues; [137492]

(2) what guidance his Department has given to journalists in respect of the defection of former Lieutenant-Colonel Litvinenko. [137491]

Mr. Straw: It has been the long-standing policy of successive Governments not to comment on issues of national security. It is also an important principle that we do not ordinarily discuss an individual's immigration status. This has been explained to journalists by my Department's Press Office.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases are held in the Work in Progress Store of the Immigration and Nationality Department; and how many of these have been outstanding for *(a)* between six months and one year, *(b)* between one and two years and *(c)* more than two years. [136923]

Mrs. Roche: As at 3 November, there were 67,018 cases held in the Work in Progress Store. Of these, 6,022 have been outstanding for between six months and one year and 27,483 have been outstanding for between one and two years. The Work in Progress Store was set up at the end of 1998 and no cases have therefore been outstanding in the store for more than two years.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what proportion of asylum applicants since April have chosen to refuse the offer of accommodation in dispersal areas. [136791]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum cases have been dispersed under the terms of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and how many of these were *(a)* single adults and *(b)* couples without children. [136922]

Mrs. Roche: As at the end of October 2000, 5,600[1] asylum cases (not including dependants) were confirmed as having arrived in the accommodation allocated to them under the dispersal scheme. Of these, 4,600[1] were single adult asylum seekers, and 300[1] were adult asylum seekers with one dependant. Cases where there is only one dependant are not necessarily couples without children.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 100.

Private Psychiatric Hospitals (Prisoners)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convicted prisoners were transferred to private psychiatric hospitals in each of the last five years. [137289]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available information on the number of convicted prisoners transferred to private psychiatric hospitals under section 47 of the Mental Health Act 1983 between 1995 to 1999 is as follows:

Number of convicted prisoners transferred to the care of private psychiatric hospitals, 1995 to 1999

	Transfers[1] to private psychiatric hospitals	*Total number of transfers[1]*	*Proportion transferred to private psychiatric hospitals (%)*
1995	12	254	4.7
1996	23	268	8.6
1997	22	251	8.8
1998	15	258	5.8
1999	22	276	8.0

[1] Transfers from Prison Service Establishments under section 47 of the Mental Health Act 1983 including those subject to restrictions under section 49.

Residence Permits

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* passports and *(b)* identity documents purported to be issued by an EU member state presented by passengers on arrival in the UK were the subject of inquiries with the authorities of the member state to determine the document's genuineness, and whether issue to the holder was correct, during 1999. [137290]

Mrs. Roche: Statistics are not currently compiled for the number of inquiries made with other European Union/ European Economic Area (EU/EEA) member states regarding documents issued by them. The Immigration Service National Forgery Section is the nominated United Kingdom contact point for EU/EEA travel document inquiries. Other Immigration Service offices, however, also make certain unilateral inquiries directly with EU member states via established bilateral liaison contacts. Reference is normally made to these authorities only in a restricted number of cases; for instance, when it cannot be determined that the document is a forgery, or to clarify whether or not a document is a stolen blank whose details have not already been circulated via the nominated national contact point. A new system of recording details of the mutual exchange of such information is currently being put in place.

Comprehensive figures are, however, available for the number of cases of fraudulent passports and identity cards detected by the Immigration Service at United Kingdom ports of arrival during the course of 1999. There were 5,516 such detections, 3,018 of which were non-British EEA documents.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Council if she will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137435]

Mrs. Beckett: I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. I intend to take part in a voluntary activity during 2001.

The Privy Council Office fully supports the role that employers can play in the voluntary sector. A statement was made to all staff in June of this year confirming the Department's commitment to Volunteer Day and encouraging staff to become involved.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average period of time taken to settle claims dealt with by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority in each of the last three years. [135334]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

There are no meaningful average times applicable to claims for criminal injuries compensation. Applications range from the very straightforward ones in which a decision may be issued within a few weeks, through to exceptionally complicated cases in which it may take a number of years for the injury to be fully assessed.

The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority has, however, been able to provide some information about the percentage of cases settled within various time frames under both the current (tariff) scheme and the former (common law damages) scheme. This is summarised in the table.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme[1]

1996 (Tariff) Scheme time period	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Cumulative (Percentage)*
1997–98			
Up to 2 months	4,523	6	6
Over 2, under 4 months	9,933	14	21
Over 4, under 6 months	13,709	20	40
Over 6, under 8 months	15,844	23	63
Over 8, under 10 months	10,925	16	78
Over 10, under 12 months	7,021	10	88
Over 12 months	8,154	12	100
Total	70,109	100	
1998–99			
Up to 2 months	4,835	6	6
Over 2, under 4 months	11,983	15	21
Over 4, under 6 months	15,236	19	40
Over 6, under 8 months	16,013	20	60
Over 8, under 10 months	12,112	15	75
Over 10, under 12 months	7,157	9	84
Over 12 months	12,378	16	100
Total	79,714	100	
1999–2000			
Up to 2 months	6,812	9	9
Over 2, under 4 months	14,151	20	29
Over 4, under 6 months	16,040	22	52
Over 6, under 8 months	11,988	17	68
Over 8, under 10 months	7,416	10	79
Over 10, under 12 months	5,161	7	86
Over 12 months	10,171	14	100
Total	71,739	100	

[1] Time taken to process applications (from receipt to issue of decision)

1990 (Old) Scheme Time to resolve hearings (appeals)

Percentage

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Up to 12 months	21	6	4
Over 12 months	79	94	96

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) in each of the last 10 years, how many Queen's Counsel there were, broken down by *(a)* regional circuit and *(b)* field of practice; [137332]

(2) in each of the last 10 years, how many Queen's Counsel there were in England and Wales; and how many were appointed each year; [137333]

(3) in each of the last 10 years, how many Queen's Counsel were appointed by *(a)* regional circuit and *(b)* field of practice. [137334]

Mr. Lock: The information requested on the number of Queen's Counsel appointed is set out in the table:

Year	*Total in silk*	*Number appointed each year*
2000	1,072	78
1999	1,043	69
1998	1,006	60
1997	974	68
1996	925	66
1995	891	71
1994	845	77
1993	797	70
1992	760	69
1991	736	73

Information relating to the number of Queen's Counsel in practice was provided by the General Council of the Bar. They are unable to provide details regarding the Circuit or the field of practice of Queen's Counsel.

The information regarding Queen's Counsel appointed in the last five years by *a)* circuit and *b)* field of practice is listed below. Information before 1996 is not available.

Queen's Counsel appointed by circuit and field of practice

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Circuits					
Midland and Oxford	5	1	5	5	4
North Eastern	4	4	3	4	5
Northern	4	8	3	10	3
Wales and Chester	2	—	1	4	4
Western	3	1	—	4	4
Practice types					
Administrative and Public Law		—	3	2	6
Banking and Financial Services	1	1	—	2	1
Chancery	5	4	6	2	4
Commercial and Admiralty	6	10	6	6	5
Common Law	11	11	9	7	6
Criminal	10	8	15	12	14
Defamation	—	—	1	1	—
Employment and Industrial Relations	—	3	1	1	5
European and International Law	—	4	1	5	—
Family	4	2	1	1	3
Human Rights	—	—	—	—	1
Insolvency	—	—	—	1	2
Intellectual Property	3	3	3	—	1
Landlord and Tenant	—	2	—	—	2

Queen's Counsel appointed by circuit and field of practice

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Licensing	—	—	—	1	—
Parliament Planning and Local Government	2	1	—	1	4
Pensions	—	—	—	1	—
Revenue	3	1	1	—	2
Technology and Construction	2	4	1	2	3

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which specialist Bar *(a)* groups and *(b)* associations he consults over the appointment of Queen's Counsel. [137342]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor consults the following Bar and solicitors' associations during the consultation process for the appointment of Queen's Counsel:

Bar Associations

Administrative Law Bar Association
Chancery Bar Association
Commercial Bar Association
London Common Law and Commercial Bar Association
Criminal Bar Association
Employment Law Bar Association
Family Law Bar Association
Intellectual Property Bar Association
Local Government and Planning and Environmental Law Bar Association
Technology and Construction Bar Association
Parliamentary Bar Mess
Personal Injury Bar Association
Professional Negligence Bar Association
Revenue Bar Association
Bar Race Relations Committee
Bar Sex Discrimination Committee

Specialist Solicitors Associations

Law Society Equal Opportunities Committee
Admiralty Solicitors Group
Association of Personal Injury Lawyers
Association of Pension Lawyers
Commerce and Industry Group
Criminal Law Solicitors Association
Educational Law Association
Employment Lawyers Association
Housing Law Practitioners Association
Insolvency Lawyers Association
Intellectual Property Lawyers Association
Legal Aid Practitioners Group
London Maritime Arbitrators Association
Local Government Group
London Criminal Courts Solicitors Association
London Solicitors Litigation Association
Technology and Construction Solicitors Association
Solicitors Association of High Court Advocates
Solicitors European Group
Solicitors Family Law Association.

Barristers and Solicitors

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in each of the last 10 years, how many *(a)* barristers qualified to practise in court and *(b)* solicitors there were. [137341]

Mr. Lock: My Department does not record the information requested but has obtained it from the Bar Council and the Law Society. The number of *(a)* barristers, who may practise in all courts, and *(b)* solicitors, who may practise in the lower courts, and *(c)* the number of solicitors with rights of audience in the higher courts, in each of the last 10 years, is as follows:

	(a) *Barristers in independent practice*	*(b)* *Solicitors holding practising certificates*	*(c)* *Solicitors granted rights of audience in the higher courts each of the years specified*
1990	6,645	54,734	—
1991	6,901	57,167	—
1992	7,271	59,566	—
1993	7,735	61,239	—
1994	8,093	63,628	231
1995	8,498	66,123	119
1996	8,935	68,037	77
1997	9,369	71,637	101
1998	9,698	75,072	202
1999	9,932	79,503	200

Note:

The figures for solicitors with higher rights of audience (column *c*) relate to the number granted rights in each year. The figures are not cumulative as in the preceding columns.

Magistrates Courts Committees

Mr. Gill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what funding his Department provides for magistrates courts committees. [137571]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department provides separate grants for revenue and capital (buildings and IT) to local authorities for magistrates courts costs.

Revenue grant is paid at 80 per cent. of expenditure, with the remaining 20 per cent. met by local authorities. In 1999–2000 £329.2 million of grant was provided.

Capital grant is paid at 80 per cent. of the costs of the scheme or item, with the remainder met by local authorities. In 1999–2000, £26.4 million was paid (£16 million for buildings and £10.4 million for IT).

Court Houses (Human Rights Act)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what additional funding he proposes to make available to magistrates courts committees to enable them to make court houses compliant with the provision of the Human Rights Act 1998. [137570]

Jane Kennedy: The Department makes capital resources available for work on court houses and it is open to magistrates courts committees and their paying authorities to apply for such funding in order to make court houses compliant with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received from magistrates courts committees regarding the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 upon court houses. [137569]

Jane Kennedy: We have received representations from one magistrates courts committee on the impact of the Human Rights Act upon court houses. A further 13 letters have been received from hon. Members, local authorities and solicitors. The Department has also received a number of requests for funding assistance in 2001–02 to improve facilities in court houses.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the Lord Chancellor will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137432]

Mr. Lock: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer given to him today by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, *Official Report*, column 531W.

The Lord Chancellor fully supports the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community. From 1 August 2000 staff of the Lord Chancellor's Department and its executive agency, the Court Service, may take an additional day's paid leave for unspecified general voluntary work. The Lord Chancellor is himself considering possible voluntary activities during 2001.

Fine Revenues

Mr. Green: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much revenue was raised from fines following convictions for *(a)* littering and *(b)* abandoning a vehicle in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [137376]

Jane Kennedy: The collection of fines is the responsibility of the magistrates courts. Figures at this level of detail are not held centrally and could be obtained from individual courts only at disproportionate cost.

Mortgage Repossessions

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many mortgage repossessions there were in England and Wales in each of the past 15 years. [137729]

Jane Kennedy: Information on the number of mortgage possession actions entered and orders made in England and Wales in each of the past 10 years is available and is set out in the table. Information on numbers before 1990 is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Year	Number of actions issued	Number of orders made
1990	145,350	54,718
1991	186,649	73,859
1992	142,162	58,654
1993	116,181	43,017
1994	87,958	32,137
1995	84,170	30,535
1996	79,791	27,777
1997	67,073	22,524
1998	79,637	23,002
1999	82,623	23,590

Note:
Not all orders made result in repossession. Parties are still at liberty to negotiate a settlement.

Judicial Trustees

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many trusts are administered by judicial trustees under the Judicial Trustees Act 1896. [137843]

Jane Kennedy: The Official Solicitor is currently administering 81 cases and the Public Trustee is currently administering three cases under the Judicial Trustees Act 1896 (the Act). Solicitors, accountants, or any other competent person can be appointed as Trustee by the Chancery Division of the High Court and that office has record of an additional current 25 cases. This produces a total of 109 cases currently being administered under the Act.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137197]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department does not hold contracts with any companies for the relocation of civil servants, and has not done so in the past.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff her Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137958]

Mr. Stringer: As at 1 October 2000, the information on all Civil Service departments (including their agencies) participating as employers in the New Deal is as follows:

New Deal starts as at 1 October 2000

Main department (including agencies)	*Number*
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	58
Intervention Board	3
Cabinet Office	13
Privy Council Office	1
Charity Commission	25
Culture, Media and Sport	6
Ministry of Defence	118
Education and Employment	2,182
Office for Standards in Education	1
Environment, Transport and the Regions	63
Export Credits Guarantee Department	4
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	8
Government Communications Headquarters	1
Government Offices for the Regions	8
Health	39
Home Office	89
International Development	7
Law Officers' Departments	15
Lord Chancellor's Department	38
National Assembly for Wales	36
Northern Ireland Office	11
Scottish Executive	54

New Deal starts as at 1 October 2000

Main department (including agencies)	*Number*
Registers of Scotland	1
Social Security	603
Trade and Industry	51
HM Treasury	3
Office of Government Commerce	1
HM Customs and Excise	73
Inland Revenue	317
Office for National Statistics	10
Royal Mint	3
Total	3,842

Ministerial Fleet (Petrol Costs)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what was the cost for each of the past three years of petrol for the Downing street fleet of cars; and how many vehicles are in that fleet. [135008]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Dr. Julian Lewis, dated 13 October 2000:

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office, has asked me in my capacity as the Chief Executive responsible for the Government Car and Despatch Agency to reply to your Parliamentary Questions about the number of ministerial vehicles provided to various government departments and the associated petrol costs.

The figures are as follows:

Department	*Number of ministerial cars*	*Petrol costs (excluding VAT) from 1 April to 30 September 2000 (£)*
Cabinet Office, including No. 10 Downing street	[1]7	6,231
Department of Culture Media and Sport	4	4,027
Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions	8	5,551
Department for Education and Employment	8	7,812
Department for Trade and Industry	5	3,158
Department of Health	6	5,904
HM Treasury	5	5,441
Home Office	4	4,520

[1] Including reserve cars for Prime Minister

Figures for earlier years are not readily available and are in archived format. These can only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137422]

Marjorie Mowlam: I would refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Office, *Official Report*, column 531W.

Cabinet Office rules allow paid time off to undertake activities in all areas of volunteer work, for example as a magistrate or school governor, helping out at a local old people's home or assisting with an adult literacy scheme.

I attach a great deal of importance to the benefits which voluntary work brings to both the individual and the organisation. Along with a number of staff in my Department, I will be undertaking a day of voluntary activity next year to mark the International Year of Volunteers. I intend to do so by spending the day with disabled people.

TREASURY

English Parishes

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of English parishes do not contain settlements of 2,000 or more. [136497]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tim Yeo, dated 13 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on percentages of English parishes which do not contain settlements of 2,000 or more. (136497)

There is no information on the populations of settlements within Civil Parishes in England. However, from the 1991 Census, some 8,378 parishes (82 per cent. of all parishes (10,269) in England) had total populations of under 2,000 residents.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the annual cost of the climate change levy to the clothing and textile industry. [135564]

Mr. Timms: The impact of the levy will depend on a number of factors, including: the future energy consumption by firms; the level of employment in those firms; the number of firms that are eligible to receive a discount on the main rates of the levy by signing up to an energy efficiency agreement; what use they make of electricity generated from "new" renewable sources of energy and in "good quality" combined heat and power plants; and the extent to which they take advantage of the proposed introduction of a system of enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments.

Petrol

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which differential tax rates account for the different cost to the motorist of unleaded petrol and lead replacement petrol. [134965]

Mr. Timms: The current difference in the tax rates for unleaded and lead replacement petrol accounts for 2.43 pence per litre (excise duty plus associated VAT). However, as announced in the PBR, subject to consultation on the environmental implications, the duty premium will be removed in Budget 2000.

Retail price of fuel reflects the influence of a number of variable commercial and economic factors apart from duty.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the contribution made to GDP by voluntary workers in the last financial year for which figures are available. [136068]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 13 November 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the contribution made to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by voluntary workers. (136068)

The contribution of voluntary workers to GDP is included in the National Accounts where the output of the organisations they work for is estimated as part of market activity. For example, the output of a charity shop, which may be staffed by unpaid volunteers, will be included in the output of retailers, and any profit the shop generates will appear in the income estimate of GDP. However, it is not possible to identify separately where this output that contributes to GDP has been produced by voluntary workers.

The System of National Accounts (SNA) makes provision for information on unpaid work to be compiled in a satellite account. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is currently developing a Household Satellite Account, which will include, amongst other things, an estimate of the volume and value of voluntary work. It is expected that this will be published at the end of 2001.

Bank Lending

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Cm 4917, what powers he has to compel banks to disclose their individual lending activities to businesses in under-invested areas. [138243]

Miss Melanie Johnson: None.

ISAs

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many investors have opened ISA accounts who did not previously hold a PEP or TESSA; [138245]

(2) how much money has been invested in ISA accounts by investors who previously did not hold a PEP or TESSA. [138258]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I regret that information based on analysis of administrative data held by the Inland Revenue is not yet available.

Euratom Safeguards Agency

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was *(a)* the total annual budget and *(b)* Her Majesty's Government's annual contribution to the Euratom Safeguards Agency in each of the last five years; and what are the estimated figures for each of the next five years. [137693]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information is contained in the Adopted EC budget for 2000, copies of which have been deposited in the House of Commons Library.

The UK makes its contributions to the EC Budget as a whole and not to specific sections.

Single Currency

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W, what constitutional factors were considered in relation to possible British membership of the single European currency, prior to the 27 October 1997 statement concerning British membership of EMU. [138008]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As the October 1997 statement stated, if the economic benefits are clear and unambiguous, there is no constitutional bar to British membership of EMU.

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which responsibilities for assessing if membership of the single European currency would be in Britain's economic interest lie with *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Bank of England. [135859]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Internet (Price Transparency)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what studies his Department has undertaken on the competition effects of increased price transparency due to use of the internet; and if he will make a statement. [137330]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government believe that the internet and e-commerce are generally beneficial to competition. They increase the range of suppliers for many products and services. Price transparency is just one aspect. HM Treasury has not conducted studies on the competition effects of increased price transparency.

Petrol Costs (Ministerial Cars)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost was in each of the past three years for petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [134966]

Miss Melanie Johnson: All Treasury ministerial cars are provided under a lease contract with the Government Car and Despatch Agency.

HEALTH

Cancer Services

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review on *(a)* cancer research, *(b)* cancer screening and *(c)* palliative care of cancer patients. [133844]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service Plan announced that a substantial increase in funding has been secured for the NHS. As a result cancer services will receive an additional £280 million in 2001–02, £407 million in 2002–03 and £570 million by 2003–04. This will be used to support the implementation of the NHS Cancer Plan, published on 27 September 2000. The plan sets out action to improve the speed, quality and equity of cancer services, and builds on the far-reaching changes for health services set out in the NHS Plan. Specifically resources have been identified for:

Cancer research—by 2003 we will be investing an additional £20 million each year in the infrastructure for cancer research and an extra £4 million on prostate cancer research. Basic and medical research, including cancer, will also benefit with £250 million being made available to the research councils for new research activity, particularly in genomics, e-science and basic technology.

Cancer screening—by 2004 routine invitations for breast screening will be extended to women aged 65 to 70, and the current service will be upgraded by offering two-view mammography at all screening rounds.

Palliative care of cancer patients—by 2004 the NHS will invest an extra £50 million to end inequalities in access to specialist palliative care and enable the NHS to make a realistic contribution to the cost hospices incur in providing agreed levels of service.

Further details are available in the NHS Cancer Plan, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Breastfeeding

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage breastfeeding of babies. [134563]

Yvette Cooper: We are fully committed to the promotion of breastfeeding, which is uniformly accepted as the best form of nutrition for infants. We also firmly believe that it is important that women and their partners are able to make a fully informed choice on how to feed their babies based on accurate and consistent information. This means that women should have access to information about all infant feeding practices through the relevant health care professional to be confident about the choices they make.

The Infant Feeding Initiative was launched in May 1999 as part of our commitment to improve health inequalities. We have appointed two part-time National Infant Feeding Advisers to act as a focus for developing and implementing strategies for promoting breastfeeding. In particular, their expertise is being utilised to increase the incidence of breastfeeding among groups where breastfeeding rates are lowest, for example, those on low income, and to ensure that all mothers have the information and support they need to make informed infant feeding choices.

We have established the National Network of Breastfeeding Co-ordinators to promote breastfeeding at a local level and to share ideas nationally with a view to increasing both the number of mothers breastfeeding and the length of time they continue to breastfeed. Each year the four United Kingdom Health Departments support National Breastfeeding Awareness Week to increase public awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding, which took place this year from 14–20 May.

We also provide financial support to the four main voluntary organisations in this area, the National Childbirth Trust, La Leche League, Breastfeeding Network and the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers. Close links are also kept with UNICEF's Baby Friendly Initiative (UKBFI) which includes a departmental observer sitting on the Steering Committee of the UKBFI. We offer support for research into breastfeeding through the Quinquennial Surveys of Infant Feeding Practice; a new survey will be undertaken this year. Also, as part of the Department's research initiative on health inequalities, we are supporting a study aimed at identifying the barriers to breastfeeding in low income groups. The Department also receives and publishes expert advice on breastfeeding through its advisory committees.

Air Pollution

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the health costs of air pollution indicating the health problems of principal concern and the main source of the pollutants. [135392]

Yvette Cooper: The Department's Committee on the Medical Effect of Air Pollutants (COMEAP) published a report in 1998 on 'Quantification of the Health Effects of Air Pollution on Health in the United Kingdom'. The report was based on levels of pollutants in 1995. It estimated that the deaths of between 12,000 and 24,000 vulnerable people (mainly those with heart or lung disease) may be brought forward and between 14,000 and 24,000 respiratory hospital admissions and readmissions may be associated with short term exposure to air pollution each year. There was insufficient information to allow quantification of other health effects of air pollution.

The main pollutants of concern were particles and ozone. Particle levels have decreased since 1995 but there is no clear downward trend for ozone. The main sources of particles are primary particles from combustion sources (mainly road traffic), secondary particles, mainly sulphate and nitrate formed by chemical reactions in the atmosphere and coarse particles such as dust and biological particles. Ozone arises from chemical reactions of pollutants in the atmosphere in the presence of sunlight. The precursor pollutants include nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds form traffic and industry.

The Department's Ad-Hoc Group on the Economic Appraisal of the Health Effects of Air Pollution estimated that the average cost to the NHS of a respiratory hospital admission was about £1,390[1].

[1] For 1994–95 at 1996–97 prices.

Hepatitis C

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if needle exchange facilities for injecting drug users are monitored with a view to prevention of hepatitis C infection. [135519]

Yvette Cooper: By discouraging sharing of syringes and promoting safer injecting practice, needle exchanges contribute to minimising the spread of blood-borne diseases including hepatitis C.

Needle exchange facilities are generally provided directly through the National Health Service or through voluntary sector agencies under agreement with health authorities, or through community pharmacies. They are subject to the normal monitoring arrangements exercised by health authorities.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken to prevent hepatitis C infection in injecting drug users. [135520]

Yvette Cooper: We recognise the prevalence of hepatitis C among injecting drug misusers is high, and, in the industrialised world, most transmission of hepatitis C now occurs via injecting drug use.

Measures to prevent the spread of hepatitis C among drug users include needle exchange facilities, the prescription of oral substitute medication, and health promotion literature.

The Department published revised "Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management" last April and sent these to all doctors. The guidelines include advice on blood-borne diseases and on injecting drug use.

During 2000–01 it is planned that guidance for professionals will be published, expanding on the information in the Department's clinical guidelines. Regional seminars are to be held for professionals to raise awareness of the guidance, and increase skills in delivering prevention messages.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action is being taken to combat hepatitis C within the prison population. [135884]

Yvette Cooper: The Prison Service has a strategy for preventing the spread of hepatitis C, and other communicable diseases, in prisons. This includes training for staff, education and information for prisoners and measures to reduce the risk of transmission. Where clinically indicated, a prisoner who has tested positive for hepatitis C would be referred to a National Health Service specialist for expert advice on the clinical management of the case.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to combat the spread of hepatitis C; and if he will make a statement. [135517]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is continuing to raise awareness of hepatitis C by working with the voluntary sector and others to provide information and advice for the general public and for those groups most at risk, specifically injecting drug users.

Hepatitis C is spread primarily by contact with the blood of an infected person, and injecting drug users are at increased risk of infection. In this country, there is a robust approach to harm minimisation that includes widespread needle exchange schemes and substitute prescribing, both of which encourage people not to inject and not to share injecting drug equipment. We are currently improving the effectiveness and efficiency of these programmes through shared care schemes. Guidance on hepatitis C and strategies to minimise transmission is being developed and will be backed up by regionally based workshops and seminars.

The risk of transmission of hepatitis C via blood donations has been virtually eliminated by the screening of blood donors for antibodies to hepatitis C virus and the treatment of blood products. Organs and tissues for donation are also screened for hepatitis C. The risk of hepatitis C transmission in the clinical setting is minimised by adhering to universal infection control procedures. To emphasise this, guidance has been issued to the National Health Service on minimising the risk of occupationally acquired hepatitis C for health care workers. Guidance on the prevention and control of blood-borne virus infection in renal dialysis units, which includes advice on hepatitis C, is currently being finalised. The Advisory Group on Hepatitis C is currently reviewing its advice on hepatitis C infected health care workers.

The Department is currently considering how to strengthen and develop prevention and surveillance.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the occurrence of hepatitis C in the UK population over the period 1995 to 2000. [135886]

Yvette Cooper: Current information suggests that the prevalence (current level) of chronic carriage of hepatitis C may be around 0.5 per cent. of the general population. The incidence (new infection) of hepatitis C is not known as the virus is usually acquired without symptoms. Data from surveillance of antibody positive hepatitis C laboratory reports in the United Kingdom during the period 1995–99 are set out in the table. These laboratory reports do not distinguish between new and chronic infections, and reflect current laboratory testing patterns. They do not take into account under-reporting and under-ascertainment of cases.

Number of laboratory reports of hepatitis C infection

Year	England and Wales[1]	Scotland[2]	Northern Ireland[3]
1995	1,667	1,125	58
1996	2,544	1,236	29
1997	3,058	1,494	26
1998	4,488	2,052	38
1999	5,561	2,009	23
2000	3,224[4]	Not available	37[5]

[1] *Source:* Public Health Laboratory Service
[2] *Source:* Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health
[3] *Source:* Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland.
[4] Provisional figures to week 36
[5] To date

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability of harm reduction facilities, with special reference to needle exchange, in the last five years; and what assessment he has made of the effects of needle exchange facilities on the prevalence of hepatitis C among injecting drug users. [135518]

Yvette Cooper: Our anti-drugs strategy is clear about the benefits of a policy that discourages drug use but also recognises that some people may still use illegal drugs. It is important to minimise the health risks and harm for those who do so.

Data from the drug action team template returns for 1999–2000 show a combined total of 322 statutory and voluntary sector providers of needle exchange services. The directory "Drug Problems: where to get help", published by the voluntary sector organisation Drugscope, lists 124 voluntary and statutory agencies which provide needle exchange facilities for injecting drug misusers. These data are not comparable due to their different methods of collection.

Other measures to minimise the spread of hepatitis C among drug misusers include the prescription of oral substitute medication, and health promotion literature. Guidance on harm reduction for injecting drug misusers, and current carriers of hepatitis C, are included in the Department's clinical guidelines "Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management", which were published last year and sent to all doctors.

We recognise the very important role played by needle exchange facilities in helping to prevent the spread of blood-borne diseases, particularly among people who might not otherwise engage with services. It is generally acknowledged that the introduction of needle exchanges have been instrumental in averting an HIV epidemic among drug misusers. The latest report by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction shows that the United Kingdom has the lowest rate of hepatitis C prevalence in the European Union.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to attempt to identify the hepatitis C population in the United Kingdom. [135888]

Yvette Cooper: The Department will continue to raise awareness of hepatitis C by working with the voluntary sector and others to provide information and advice for the general public and for those groups most at risk, specifically injecting drug users.

Those who have been at risk of exposure to hepatitis C and who seek testing in the National Health Service should be offered well-informed advice and made aware of the implications of a positive test. Those who test positive will be referred to a specialist for confirmatory testing, further assessment and treatment, if appropriate.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will implement a plan for London similar to that established by the Greater Glasgow Health Board to combat hepatitis C infection. [135889]

Yvette Cooper: Our approach to hepatitis C is to develop a strategic national programme which involves co-ordination in areas such as public health work on prevention and surveillance; tackling drug misuse; prison healthcare; research; commissioning healthcare services and implementing the recommendations of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence.

Health authorities in London are best placed to judge the need for specific action to prevent and control hepatitis C infection according to their local situation.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for a national strategy on combating hepatitis C infection. [135521]

Yvette Cooper: Our approach to hepatitis C is to develop a strategic programme which involves co-ordination in areas such as public health work on prevention and surveillance; tackling drug misuse; prison healthcare; research; commissioning healthcare services and implementing the recommendations of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will report on the treatment of HIV and hepatitis C infections. [136163]

Yvette Cooper: There are no plans at present for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to produce guidance on drugs for the treatment of HIV. NICE completed appraisals of ribavirin and alfa interferon for hepatitis C on 31 October 2000. This guidance and further information on the NICE work programme can be found on NICE's website at www.nice.org.uk.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the National Director of Cancer Care's brief to reduce mortality from cancer includes liver cell cancer secondary to hepatitis C. [136160]

Yvette Cooper: Yes. We recently published the NHS Cancer Plan setting out a comprehensive strategy to tackle cancer and through a major programme of action linking prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care and research. The Plan pledges to cut the death rate from all cancers by one fifth by 2010, this includes the death rate from liver cell cancer secondary to hepatitis C.

AIDS

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money the Government spent on AIDS research in the financial year 1999–2000; how many new AIDS cases became diagnosed in that year; and how many deaths arising from contraction of AIDS occurred in that year. [135516]

Yvette Cooper: In the financial year 1999–2000, we spent £20.2 million on HIV/AIDS research[1]. During the same period, 3,714 new HIV/AIDS cases were diagnosed in the UK and 418 deaths due to HIV/AIDS were reported to have occurred.

[1] Actual spend by the Department of Health, Scottish Office, Welsh Office, Medical Research Council and other research councils.

Overhead Powerlines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received concerning overhead powerlines; and what recent research his Department has undertaken on this subject. [135794]

Yvette Cooper: A number of letters have been received from Members of Parliament, research organisations, pressure groups and individual members of the public, concerning the possibility of health effects associated with proximity to power lines.

The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) provides advice to us on these matters. In 1992, and again in 1994, the NRPB's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation examined the evidence for an association between the incidence of cancer and exposure to electromagnetic fields and concluded that there was no clear evidence of an adverse health effect at the levels of electromagnetic field to which the public is normally exposed. There have been continuing concerns about this issue and the Advisory Group keeps the relevant research under review. The Group will be publishing a comprehensive review of the more recent studies in the next few months.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has recently commissioned on the possibility of a connection between overhead powerlines and cancer. [136429]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is currently funding both epidemiological and laboratory studies on powerlines and cancer. The Department also contributes to the World Health Organization International Electromagnetic Fields Project and has supported the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study.

In 1992, and again in 1994, the National Radiological Protection Board's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation examined the evidence for an association between the incidence of cancer and exposure to electromagnetic fields and concluded that there was no clear evidence of an adverse health effect at the levels to which the public is normally exposed. The Advisory Group continues to monitor the issue and will be publishing a comprehensive review of recent research in the next few months.

Tobacco Additives

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish information about tobacco additives by brand in a format readily accessible and available to consumers. [135579]

Yvette Cooper: The information on additives by brand supplied by major United Kingdom tobacco companies is published in the Health Select Committee's recent report, "The tobacco industry and the health risks of smoking", Minutes of Evidence and Appendices (Appendix 32 to 36). The Report and evidence of the Committee are published by the Stationery Office of the House and can be accessed by internet at www.parliament.uk/commons/hsecom/htm

Influenza Vaccine

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he has taken to ensure sufficient influenza vaccine is available this winter; and if he will make a statement. [136154]

Yvette Cooper: This year, we have extended the recommended groups for influenza immunisation to include everyone aged 65 and over, irrespective of their underlying health, as well as younger people in established high risk groups. This increase has led to record numbers of vaccine being made available, nearly 11 million this year compared to 7.8 million last year, an increase of 40 per cent.

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) wrote to all general practitioners in May informing them of the change in policy and asked them as a matter of urgency to review their list of people eligible to receive the flu vaccine, and, order additional vaccine if required. A further letter was issued from the CMO on 1 August to all GP's reminding them to order extra vaccine if they had not already done so.

Latest figures as at 31 October, show that 9.5 million doses of vaccine have already been distributed. This, along with the amount of vaccine still to be delivered, is a sufficient amount to exceed our immunisation target of 60 per cent. for this year.

GPs order their supply of flu vaccine direct from manufacturers. This year there are five suppliers of flu vaccine. Unfortunately one of the manufacturers, Solvay, has encountered problems in growing a strain of the vaccine which has led to delays in some deliveries. Solvay have been in touch with the affected GPs to tell them details of any delays, but have confirmed that all ordered vaccine will be delivered by the end of November, in time to protect people this winter.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consideration the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has given to the social costs of the refusal to supply beta interferon to multiple sclerosis sufferers. [136400]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) carries out appraisals in accordance with its framework document. This document states that

"its task is to assess the evidence of all the clinical and other health-related benefits of an intervention—taking this in a wide sense, to include impact on quality of life, relief of pain or disability etc as well as any impact on likely length of life—to estimate the associated costs, and to reach a judgment on whether on balance this intervention can be recommended as a cost-effective use of NHS and PSS resources".

Copies of NICE's Framework document are available in the Library.

nvCJD

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proportion of the new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease care package will be earmarked for assisting in the early identification of the symptoms of the disease; [136278]

(2) what support he intends to give as part of the NVCJD care package to the families of victims who have been misdiagnosed. [136279]

Yvette Cooper: Patients will have access to the full range of services provided by the National Health Service and Social Services departments. The Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) Care Package Fund is intended to ensure that people diagnosed as having CJD have rapid access to comprehensive, appropriate packages of care. The speed of diagnosis in cases of CJD is improving all the time and the CJD Surveillance Unit continues to work towards further improvement.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the incidence of misdiagnosis of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. [136277]

Yvette Cooper: No patient diagnosed as "definite" or "probable" vCJD by the National CJD Surveillance Unit has ever been found to have been suffering from another disease. Since March 1996 the Unit has had a significant number of suspected cases referred to them that, on further investigation, have turned out not to be vCJD cases.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to raise the awareness of health practitioners of the early symptoms of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease; [136282]

(2) what recent research he has commissioned into methods of early identification of the symptoms of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. [136281]

Yvette Cooper: The National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit (CJDSU) continues to investigate all cases referred to it as possible variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) and keeps diagnostic criteria under constant review. Expanded criteria which allowed "probable vCJD" to be diagnosed for the first time in patients who are still alive were published in March 2000 in a Department of Health press release (2000/0153). All general practitioners were informed about these criteria in August 2000, through the Chief Medical Officer's Update. In addition, the CJDSU regularly sends reminders and updates on vCJD to neurologists throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what further research into the incubation period of CJD will be undertaken, and by whom, following the contraction of the disease by a 74-year-old. [136654]

Yvette Cooper: The Government-funded National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit (CJDSU) continues to investigate all cases of variant CJD (vCJD) referred to it and analyses data collected to try and identify any common factors which might shed light on the route of exposure and the possible incubation period.

The Department has commissioned research to look for vCJD in the elderly population to see if cases may have been missed in this age group.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* groups and *(b)* individuals who are involved in research into nvCJD. [136619]

Yvette Cooper: Details of Government funded research projects on Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs) including variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) are available on the Medical Research Council's website (http://www.mrc.ac.uk/tse_2c.htm).

Huntingdon's Disease

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason Huntingdon's disease was selected as a condition which could be the subject of inquiry by insurance companies in deciding whether or not to offer insurance cover; and if he will make a statement. [136553]

Yvette Cooper: The Genetics and Insurance committee was established in 1999 by the United Kingdom Government to develop a procedure for assessing the scientific and actuarial relevance of genetic tests currently being used in insurance risk assessment and to evaluate each test against the criteria agreed. The application from the Association of British Insurers for consideration of two genetic tests for Huntingdon's Disease in life insurance was the first application to be received by the Genetics and Insurance Committee. The Genetics and Insurance Committee concluded that the scientific and actuarial evidence was sufficient for the results of these two tests to continue to be taken into account in setting insurance premiums.

The Human Genetics Commission has been asked to look at the wider social and ethical issues involved in the use of genetic data in insurance. The GAIC decision does not pre-empt that wider consideration.

NHS Direct

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if individuals will be able to obtain information on *(a)* abortion, *(b)* family planning services and *(c)* access to local NHS services through NHS Direct and the new NHS walk-in centres; and if he will make a statement. [136948]

Yvette Cooper: NHS Direct aims to provide information, advice and referrals to appropriate services for most conditions, including abortion and family planning.

NHS Direct and the walk-in centres play a central role in providing information and signposting people to appropriate services. They also have a valuable role to play in improving access to local sexual health services.

The information needs of the population is one of the issues that is being addressed in the sexual health and HIV/AIDS strategy due for launch in the spring.

Heart Disease

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the implementation of the National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the West Midlands. [136579]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The National Service Framework (NSF) for coronary heart disease sets 12 national standards for improved prevention, diagnosis and treatment and goals to secure fair access to high quality services over the 10 year period. This will include building capacity, increasing specialised workforce, improved prevention and faster access to services.

The National Health Service Plan of 27 July is providing significant new money for CHD services:

> investment in heart disease services will be increased by an extra £230 million a year by 2003–04. In addition, there will be an extra £120 million of capital funding from the Treasury Capital Modernisation Fund over the next two years to March 2002, to expand capacity and modernise services. Furthermore, an extra £10 million has been announced to increase cardiac operations by a further 3,000 by 2003, in addition to the £50 million announced in October 1999 for an extra 3,000 operations by April 2002.
>
> Emergency care for heart attack patients is being reformed in a three year programme to train and equip ambulance paramedics to provide thrombolysis safely for appropriate patients. On average, patients will get thrombolysis one hour sooner than if they were taken to hospital first, saving up to 3,000 lives a year once fully implemented.

Additional investment announced this year includes £49 million new money for early CHD wins, £21 million to speed up ambulance response times, £15 million to support new rapid access chest pain clinics, £10 million for equipment to diagnose and treat CHD, and £3 million for the CHD Partnership programme.

Actions are under way to implement the NSF in the West Midlands in line with the milestones set nationally. Local delivery plans for implementation of the NSF have been received from the thirteen West Midlands health authorities.

Particular local initiatives include: 11 rapid access chest pain clinics across the region in the first roll out, including one at the Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry; New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton, will be developed as the fourth cardiac surgical centre in the region; the Black Country CHD Collaborative are developing a network of cardiac care; Action Heart at Dudley and Shropshire health authority's Help to Quit are excellent initiatives in cardiac rehabilitation and smoking cessation respectively.

Rochdale NHS Trust

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to broaden the shortlist of candidates for the position of Chairman of Rochdale NHS Trust, beyond the proposal of the Regional NHS Executive Chair in July. [137004]

Mr. Denham: The regional chair considered the names of a number of candidates on the regional register as well as those of serving non-executives from the Rochdale area who were seen to have the necessary qualities for a chair appointment. The candidates subsequently invited for interview included the current chair, Mr. Hermann Jungmayr, but he declined to be interviewed. Two candidates were eventually interviewed, and both their names were recently recommended to Ministers for possible appointment to the post. A decision on the appointment is likely to be made shortly.

Treatment Withdrawal

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received and from whom concerning the legality of the British Medical Association's guidelines for the withholding and withdrawal of treatment. [137041]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has received approximately 200 representations concerning the British Medical Association guidelines on Withholding and Withdrawing Life-prolonging Treatment. These include representations from a number of professional, lay and religious organisations, Members of Parliament, individuals and a petition to the Prime Minister from the organisation "Against Legalised Euthanasia—Research and Teaching". Of these representations approximately 25 per cent. raised the issue concerning the legality of the guidelines.

Screening (Pregnant Women)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authorities that currently offer pregnant women screening for *(a)* Down's syndrome and *(b)* cystic fibrosis; and if he will make a statement. [137375]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not collected centrally. A Lancet paper surveying the provision and method of antenatal Down's syndrome screening (page 1264, Vol. 154, 9 October, 1999) is available in the Library.

The United Kingdom National Screening Committee will build on this work to inform its implementation plans for a universal antenatal Down's syndrome screening programme. At present the Committee does not recommend universal antenatal screening for cystic fibrosis.

NHS Vacancies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for doctors at NHS hospitals in the Greater London area. [137385]

Mr. Denham: The available information is given in the table. Results from the Department of Health vacancies survey March 2000 were published in September 2000.

Department of Health vacancies survey, March 2000. Vacancies in NHS trusts in London region; medical and dental consultants as at 31 March 2000

	London region
3 month vacancies (whole time equivalents)	120
3 month vacancy rate	3.0 per cent.

Notes:
1. Three month vacancies are those posts that had been vacant for three months or more at the date of the survey.
2. The three month vacancy rate is calculated as three month vacancies (3 month vacancies + staff in post at 30 September 1999).
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

Sources:
Department of Health vacancies survey March 2000
Department of Health annual non-medical workforce census

Human Genetics

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Employment, (Ref. 2000/0064758 PODB) when he expects to receive from the Human Genetics Commission their wider study on the uses of genetic information. [137327]

Yvette Cooper: The Human Genetics Commission is currently considering the storage, protection and use of genetic information in various contexts and what may need to be done to ensure that concerns over the potential abuse of such information are addressed.

The Commission aims to submit a report and recommendations to Ministers by late 2001. This will take account of the results of a period of extensive consultation which begins on 27 November 2000.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137429]

Ms Stuart: We fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community. This Department reacted positively to the challenge to support staff in undertaking voluntary activities. Department of Health staff are allowed a minimum of one day's paid leave per year to undertake voluntary activity. Furthermore, definitions of voluntary activity have been broadened, and managers are encouraged to exercise discretion and be flexible when considering requests for leave from work. We intend to undertake voluntary activity for a day during 2001.

Winter Pressures

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department has taken to ensure closer working practices to help reduce effects of winter pressures between social services and acute NHS hospitals; and if he will make a statement. [137124]

Ms Stuart: In May 2000, the Department issued guidance to all National Health Service organisations and Social Services Departments setting out whole system arrangements to ensure that they, together, respond well to seasonal pressures, and provide high-quality services for local people throughout the year. In 2000–01, the Government have already invested an additional £63 million in intermediate care beds and staff to prevent avoidable hospital admissions, to facilitate prompt discharges from hospital, and to support independence and independent living, particularly for the elderly.

Local Winter Planning Groups (LWPGs) are in place across England to ensure that effective service and contingency planning is in place for winter 2000–01. The Department has assessed all LWPG winter plans and has put in place monitoring arrangements to ensure seasonal pressures are identified and addressed immediately. Expert teams of health and social care professionals are also visiting health and social care communities across England to provide support and advice, and to promote and share good practice.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department has taken to disseminate best practice in dealing with winter pressures at *(a)* regional level, *(b)* health authority level, *(c)* trust level and *(d)* primary care group/trust level; and if he will make a statement. [137125]

Ms Stuart: Local Winter Planning Groups (LWPGs) have been established across England to ensure effective service and contingency planning for winter 2000–01. LWPGs include representatives of all National Health Service organisations, local councils with social services responsibilities and other local partners including the voluntary and independent sectors.

Best practice is disseminated through comprehensive guidance, national conferences, and visits by expert teams of health and social care professionals.

Nurses and Midwives

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered (i) nurses and (ii) midwives are aged *(a)* below 30, *(b)* 30 to 39, *(c)* 40 to 49, *(d)* 50 to 54, *(e)* 55 to 59 and *(f)* 60 years and over. [138247]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

NHS hospital and community health services qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff by age bands in England as at 30 September 1999

	Whole-time equivalents	Headcount
Under 30	42,990	45,440
30 to 39	85,840	104,050
40 to 49	69,310	82,160
50 to 54	26,380	30,560
55 to 59	12,810	15,310
60 +	3,490	4,570
Unknown	9,830	28,040
Total	250,650	310,140

Notes:
1. Figures exclude learners and agency staff.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
3. Totals may not equal the sum of component parts due to rounding.

Source:
Department of Health 1999 non-medical workforce census

Spinal Surgery

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultant neurosurgeons who specialise in spinal surgery there are in England. [138044]

Mr. Denham: From the Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census on 30 September 1999, there were around 140 Consultants in Neurosurgery in the National Health Service. Information about numbers of consultants specialising in spinal surgery is not collected centrally.

Hospital Drug Dispensing

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the impact on the primary care costs were hospital pharmacies permitted to dispense 28 day supplies of drugs to patients; [137752]

(2) if he will require hospitals to dispense drugs to in-patients from patient bed-side boxes; [137754]

(3) what plans he has to introduce 28 day original pack dispensing from hospital pharmacies; [137753]

(4) what plans he has to encourage patients to take with them all medicines they are taking when admitted to hospital. [137856]

Ms Stuart: "Pharmacy in the Future—Implementing the NHS Plan" (a copy of which is in the Library) makes clear that we expect National Health Service hospitals in England to review their pharmacy systems to make them efficient, timely and safe, and more patient focused.

To see that changes are made, NHS Executive regional offices will be rolling out a medicines management performance management framework specifically for hospitals later this year and the Department will be establishing a collaborative programme in order to spread and share best practice. This is likely to include, in appropriate cases, the use of medicines which patients bring into hospital on admission and self-administration schemes on wards (including the use of patient bed-side boxes). Hospitals are also likely to dispense medicines on discharge and to out-patients more frequently in complete original packs. Many such packs are designed by their manufacturers to provide a course of treatment lasting 28 days, although this varies from product to product, and the quantity to be prescribed for any given patient must, of course, reflect their clinical needs.

Re-engineering systems in this way will reduce waste and improve the cost effectiveness of the NHS's spending on medicines generally. It may well involve spending being incurred within hospitals which was previously incurred within primary care. The size of any such shift will vary from place to place depending on current practice and on the nature of new arrangements agreed locally. Work is under way, co-ordinated by NHS Executive regional offices, to ensure that local health commissioners and hospitals work together to ensure suitable funding arrangements are in place.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that hospital pharmacies conform with EU Directive 92/27/EEC on patient information; and what the estimated costs of such compliance are. [137751]

Ms Stuart: The Directive was incorporated into United Kingdom law by The Medicines (Marketing Authorisations etc.) Regulations 1994. These regulations apply to all people involved in the supply of medicines, including hospital pharmacies. It is the responsibility of the Medicines Control Agency to investigate suspected breaches of those regulations. We hold no information nationally on the cost to hospitals of meeting their obligations under these regulations.

Hospital Hygiene

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Government's initiative to improve hospital cleanliness following the distribution of funds directly to hospital trusts for this purpose. [137740]

Mr. Denham: Over £30 million was allocated directly to National Health Service trusts at the end of July to start an immediate national clean-up campaign.

Rapid assessments of all acute hospitals were carried out following initial visits in July. More detailed assessments have been made following further visits to the 400 hospitals by the patient environment action teams (PEAT). Some 300 experienced managers and professionals, drawn from the NHS, private sector and supported by patient organisations were involved in these visits.

Every trust has prepared an action plan, which has been agreed by the Department. NHS Estates will validate and support the action plans. Each trust has a board member who will take personal responsibility for hospital cleanliness.

There will be five clean hospital summits in November for senior trust managers to share experiences and good practice.

Unannounced visits to hospitals will also be made in January, by the PEAT teams, to check that standards of cleanliness in our hospitals have improved, and that procedures are in place to ensure that these improved standards will be maintained. Once these visits have been completed we will be in a position to better assess how effective the initial stage of the programme has been.

To ensure that cleanliness in hospitals is maintained in the future we are drawing up a standard for cleanliness for all hospitals; these will be incorporated into the National Performance Assessment Framework and will be introduced next year.

Anticoagulant Clinics

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to set up anticoagulant clinics in community pharmacies. [137855]

Ms Stuart: In the "Pharmacy in the Future—Implementing the NHS Plan" (a copy of which is in the Library) we said that by 2004 all primary care groups and primary care trusts will have schemes in place so that people get more help from pharmacists in using their medicines. Monitoring patients' anticoagulant therapy, whether in community pharmacies or elsewhere, is one of many ways in which pharmacists may potentially help people get the most out of their medicines.

Pharmacists

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to address the pay differentials between community pharmacists and hospital pharmacists. [137741]

Mr. Denham: For 1999–2000 lower graded hospital pharmacists were targeted for an enhanced pay award of up to 12 per cent. to help address recruitment and retention problems. Hospital pharmacists in common with other groups of non pay review body staff have been offered a pay increase of 3.25 per cent. for 2000–01, and for 2001–02 a minimum increase of RPIX at December 2000 plus 0.5 per cent. subject to progress on negotiations with the trade unions on proposals for modernising the National Health Service pay system.

The NHS does not directly employ or determine the pay of pharmacists working in community pharmacies.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce postgraduate structured training and experience programmes for pharmacists *(a)* for newly qualified graduates and *(b)* for existing community and hospital pharmacists. [137854]

Mr. Denham: A range of postgraduate training opportunities is available to both community and hospital pharmacists.

Hospital-acquired Infection

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress in combating hospital-acquired MRSA infections. [137985]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 10 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 431W.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 November 2000

DEFENCE

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135452]

Dr. Moonie: A copy of the Civil Service Code was issued to every MOD civil servant in May 1999. The Department's procedures require staff to report any matters of concern within the scope of the Code to their third line manager in the first instance. If the matter cannot be resolved at this level staff have a right of appeal to their Top Level Budget Holder and, ultimately, to the Permanent Under Secretary of State. The procedures also make provision for staff to be able to discuss concerns in confidence with a senior officer outside of their management area if they wish. If, having raised a matter of concern to them within the Department, a member of staff considers that he or she has not received a reasonable response there is a right of appeal to the Civil Service Commissioners.

These procedures are set out in the Department's Personnel Manual and reiterated in departmental instructions regularly circulated to all staff.

Departmental Policies

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136172]

Dr. Moonie: There have been no significant effects on the Gorton constituency or the surrounding area. Gorton's Territorial Army centres were retained as a result of the 1998 restructuring review.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff his Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137952]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

Porton Down

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent measures he has introduced to improve the reliability and security of postal services to and from Porton Down. [137685]

Dr. Moonie: None, as the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) site at Porton Down has not experienced any problems with the reliability and security of postal services.

Women (Combat Roles)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent studies his Department has undertaken of the experience of other countries' armed forces in respect of women in combat roles. [137908]

Mr. Hoon: We are currently engaged in a study, announced in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, to evaluate the impact on combat effectiveness since opening 70 per cent. of posts in the Army to women and of allowing them to serve in specialist billets "attached" to the Royal Marines. The study, which is due to report to Ministers in 2001, will also make an assessment on the armed forces' combat effectiveness of removing the present exclusion of women from the Royal Marines General Service, Royal Armoured Corps (including the Household Cavalry), Infantry and RAF Regiment. As part of this study we have drawn upon other countries' experiences in respect of women in combat roles.

RAF Dishforth

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what representations he has received on redeployment from Dishforth Airfield to Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton, and for disposal or re-use of Dishforth Airfield; [137703]

(2) if he will make a statement on the long-term future for RAF Dishforth. [137705]

Mr. Spellar: The primary occupier of the former RAF Dishforth (now Dishforth Airfield) is 9 Regiment Army Corps (9 Reg AAC), a Joint Helicopter Command (JHC) unit. The JHC is currently engaged in carrying out an estates rationalisation study and one of the options is to re-deploy all helicopters and manpower from Dishforth Airfield to Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton. The study is due to report in autumn 2001 and no decisions on the redeployment of manpower currently based at Dishforth or the disposal or re-use of Dishforth Airfield will be made until then. In the meantime, no representations have been received on the future of Dishforth, except for the hon. Member's own letter to me of 6 November.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military and civilian posts there are at Dishforth Airfield. [137704]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently 383 military posts and 39 civilian posts at Dishforth Airfield. By April 2001 these numbers will rise to 538 military posts and 43 civilian posts. There are a further 58 civilian staff currently employed by Sodexho, the site contractor. Military personnel are also deployed from time to time from RAF Linton-on-Ouse, as requested.

Ships (Asbestos)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the removal of asbestos from his Department's ships. [137692]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer my hon. Friend, the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), the then Under-Secretary of State for Defence, gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) on 12 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 166W.

Good progress is being made on our ongoing 10 years programme to identify safe non-asbestos alternatives and introduce them into service at every opportunity including planned maintenance and refit periods. For example, we are currently trialling replacements in two particularly challenging areas: the ship propeller shaft brakes and high pressure steam system joints. If the trials are successful we shall fit replacements in a much earlier timescale than originally expected.

Progress on Ministry of Defence asbestos elimination measures, including those for Royal Navy ships, was presented to the Health and Safety Commission in May this year who fully endorsed the approach being taken.

Berths

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the number and locations of *(a)* X berths and *(b)* Z berths available to his Department. [137691]

Mr. Spellar: Including all berths and docks, the total number of X and Z berths available is, respectively, 40 and 26. These are principally located in the Naval Bases of Devonport and Clyde, and the privatised facilities at Barrow in Furness, Rosyth and Devonport. The precise locations and numbers are as follows:

List of the locations of X berths

	Number
Faslane	8
Devonport and Plymouth Sound	16
Rosyth	11

List of the locations of Z berths

	Number
Falkland Islands	1
Loch Goil	1
Rothesay	1
Liverpool	[1]2
Isle of Skye	1
Loch Ewe	2
Bermuda	3
Devonport and Plymouth Sound	2
Diego Garcia	2
Portsmouth	1
Spithead	4
Southampton	1
Gibraltar	2
Coulport	1

[1] The use of the berths in Liverpool is currently in abeyance awaiting final resolution of the mechanism for the implementation of the potassium iodate tablets countermeasure distribution plan.

Barrow in Furness owned by BAE Systems Marine Ltd.[1]

	Berths
Barrow in Furness Devonshire Dock	4 × X
Barrow in Furness Buccleuch Dock	1 × X
Barrow in Furness	2 × Z

[1] The berths listed against Barrow in Furness are owned by BAE Systems Marine Ltd. and have "lapsed". The necessary procedures to revalidate the berths will be instigated 12 months prior to reactor core installation for the Astute Class submarines currently on contract.

Royal Air Force

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will ensure that overspending on defence procurement projects does not affect RAF frontline strength. [138159]

Dr. Moonie: There are no current plans to depart from the conclusions reached in the Strategic Defence Review about the frontline strength of the RAF, although these plans are regularly reviewed.

Training (Foreign Troops)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the *(a)* gross and *(b)* net income derived from the training of personnel from foreign armed forces in the last year for which figures are available. [138315]

Mr. Spellar: The information is not held in the format requested. The funds expended training solely foreign personnel cannot be separated from the overall cost of the activity. Furthermore, the amount of receipts generated solely from training foreign personnel is not recorded separately. As a result I can provide only the amount of receipts recovered for the provision of education and training in general. In 1990–2000, this sum was just over £58 million.

Controlled Substances

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of *(a)* the Army, *(b)* the Navy and *(c)* the RAF tested positive for the use of controlled substances in the most recent testing programme, stating in each instance what percentage of trained strength tested positive for *(a)* cannabis, *(b)* cocaine, *(c)* heroin and *(d)* other controlled substances; and if he will make a statement. [137861]

Mr. Spellar: From 1 January to mid-October 2000, 580 Army personnel tested positive. Of the trained strength, 0.26 per cent. tested positive for cannabis, 0.04 per cent. for cocaine and 0.10 per cent. for other controlled substances as previously described. No one on the trained strength tested positive for heroin.

During the same period, 41 Naval Service personnel (including Royal Marines) tested positive. Of the trained strength, 0.04 per cent. tested positive for cannabis, 0.01 per cent. for cocaine and 0.03 per cent. for other controlled substances (Ecstasy, LSD, Amphetamines, Benzodiazepines and Performance Enhancing Drugs). No one on the trained strength tested positive for heroin.

The corresponding figures for the RAF record that 14 personnel tested positive. Of the trained strength, 0.08 per cent. tested positive for cannabis, 0.03 per cent. for cocaine and 0.03 per cent. for other controlled substances as previously described. No one on the trained strength tested positive for heroin.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the controlled substances that members of the armed forces were routinely tested for in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* 2000; what plans he has to adjust the testing programme with regard to (i) the number of substances tested for, (ii) the interval between testing and (iii) the penalties for service personnel testing positive; and if he will make a statement. [137863]

Mr. Spellar: When first introduced by the Army in 1995, the Compulsory Drug Testing (CDT) programme routinely tested for: Cannabis, Cocaine, Amphetamines (including Ecstasy) and one of Opiates, Benzodiazepines or LSD. Since 15 October 1999, the tri-Service programme has tested routinely for: Cannabis, Cocaine, Amphetamines (including Ecstasy), Benzodiazepines and one of other Opiates or LSD.

If prevailing drug trends change, or a particular risk exists that is not covered by the routine testing programme and where appropriate analytical technology is available, other drugs of misuse can be added, exceptionally, to the testing programmes, e.g. performance enhancing drugs.

Increasing the frequency of CDT enhances deterrence but a balance must be established between deterrence and minimising disruption to the services operational and training commitments. A recent amendment to the random rolling drug testing strategy has increased the probability of higher risk groups being tested on a more frequent basis, without having a significant impact on the services' ability to meet their operational liability.

It continues to be service policy that, save in exceptional cases, a positive random test result, or the refusal to provide a specimen, will lead to Army and RAF officers being required to resign and to administrative discharge in the case of an RN officer. Soldiers, ratings and airmen will normally be administratively discharged. Personnel of the rank of lance corporal (and equivalent in the other services) and below may be retained in exceptional circumstances at the discretion of their Commanding Officer.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how often are members of *(a)* the Army, *(b)* the Navy and *(c)* the RAF tested for the use of controlled substances; which controlled substances are tested for; which testing kits are used; and if he will make a statement. [137862]

Mr. Spellar: The Army aims to test all personnel annually for drugs. Units that are deemed to be at higher risk by nature of their location or their previous Compulsory Drug Testing (CDT) record may be subject to more frequent testing. The Naval Service aims to conduct random testing in every ship and establishment at least annually, with some establishments subject to more regular testing, and this year plans to test approximately 30 per cent. of its personnel. The RAF aims to test 25 per cent. of its personnel annually. The services conduct their random CDT agenda as part of a rolling programme.

Currently, the tri-service programme tests routinely for: Cannabis, Cocaine, Amphetamines (including Ecstasy), Benzodiazepines and one of either Opiates or LSD.

The drug testing process utilises Microgenics Clonable Enzyme Doner Immune-Assay (CEDIA) technology. Previous immuno-assay technologies utilised were Syva's EMTII and Roche's ONLINE. Samples that screen positive are then confirmed by Gas Chromatography/ Mass Spectrometry (GC/MS). A sample will be reported positive only after the presence of drugs has been verified by the confirmatory GC/MS process.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Drug Trafficking

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General on how many occasions since 21 August he has referred to the Court of Appeal sentences imposed for drug trafficking. [137885]

The Solicitor-General: With effect from 21 August 2000 the Attorney-General was given the power to refer sentences passed in the Crown court for drugs trafficking offences. These include offences of production or supply of controlled drugs contrary to ss.4(2) and (3) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, cultivation of cannabis contrary to s.6(2) of the Misuse of Drugs Act and offences contrary to the Customs and Management Act 1979 in connection with a prohibition or restriction on importation or exportation of a controlled drug within s.2 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The Attorney-General has just referred the first case under these provisions to the Court of Appeal.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General how many people his Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137949]

The Solicitor-General: I refer to the answer given by the Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Nitrous Oxides

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the number of deaths caused by emissions of nitrous oxides in each of the past three years; [136098]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effects on human health of nitrous oxides emissions from waste incinerators; and if he will make a statement; [136100]

(3) what estimate he has made of the amount of nitrous oxides that will be emitted by waste incinerators in each of the next three years. [136099]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* I assume the hon. Member means "nitrogen oxides", often referred to as "nox" (NO_x), of which nitrogen dioxide forms a large proportion and which is regarded as the main pollutant of health concern within NO_x.

At relatively high concentrations, nitrogen dioxide causes inflammation of the airways. There is evidence to show that long-term exposure to nitrogen dioxide may affect lung function and that nitrogen dioxide may enhance the response of sensitised individuals to allergens. Studies have reported associations between respiratory hospital admissions and nitrogen dioxide levels but it is unclear whether this effect is due to nitrogen dioxide itself or to particles which often increase at the same time as nitrogen dioxide. The source of the nitrogen dioxide is not relevant.

The Government have not estimated deaths caused by NO_x emissions. The 1998 report of the Department of Health's Committee on Medical Effects of Air Pollutants "Quantification of the Effects of Air Pollution on Health in the United Kingdom" (copies of which are in the House Libraries) considered that, although there was some evidence of an effect of nitrogen dioxide on mortality, this was too uncertain to use to quantify numbers of deaths. However, nitrogen oxides contribute to the formation of secondary particles (nitrates) and ozone. Deaths brought forward by ozone and particles were quantified by COMEAP. COMEAP did not ascribe proportions of these deaths to particular ozone precursors such as nitrogen oxides or to particular types of particles such as nitrates.

The assessment of the costs and benefits of the proposed waste incineration directive commissioned by the Department from Entec UK Ltd. (copies of which are in the House Libraries) on the basis of COMEAP data used an assumption about the proportion of ozone attributable to NO_x to calculate the marginal health benefits of the NO_x limits in the proposal. It concluded that the proposed NO_x limit would prevent 46 deaths being brought forward and prevent or delay 91 respiratory hospital admissions as a result of the formation of ozone. Entec UK have very recently recognised a mathematical error in the original calculation, such that the figures given for the marginal health benefits of the proposed NO_x limits were overstated. The correct figures for health effects of NO_x are in fact significantly lower—0.7 deaths not brought forward and 0.9 respiratory hospital admissions not brought forward as a result of the formation of ozone.

The National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory holds data for estimated total UK NO_x emissions from three incineration sectors—sewage sludge incineration, poultry litter incineration and municipal waste incineration. This data have been extrapolated to give projected NO_x emissions for 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020, using assumptions about changes in capacity, but without taking into account the NO_x limits in the proposed waste incineration directive. The figures are set out in the table. On the basis of the projected 2000 total NO_x figure from all three sectors, the incineration sectors covered contribute only 0.3 per cent. of the UK total NO_x emissions.

NAEI NO_x emissions estimates

Kilotonnes

Incineration sector	*1998*	*2001*	*2005*[1]	*2010*[1]	*2015*[1]	*2020*[1]
Sewage sludge	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4
Poultry litter	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2
Municipal waste	5.2	4.0	12.0	21.0	21.0	21.0
Total incineration	5.8	4.6	12.6	21.6	21.6	21.6
All sources	1,753	1,559	1,354	1,167	1,068	1,076
Percentage from incineration	0.3	0.3	0.9	1.9	2.0	2.0

[1] Projections based on various assumptions derived from 'Energy Projections for the UK (Working Paper)', March 2000, EPTAC Directorate DTI

Source:

UK Emissions of Air Pollutants 1970–98, J. W. L. Goodwin, A. G. Salway, T. P. Murrells, C. J. Dore and H. S. Eggleston October 2000 (www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual/)

Industrial Accidents (Humberside)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* fatal industrial accidents and *(b)* industrial accidents involving a stay in hospital of over 24 hours have occurred in the Humberside Region since 1 January 1999. [134239]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* *(a)* Fatal Accident. The number of fatal accidents which occurred in Humberside from 1 January 1999 to 16 October 2000 and which have been reported to HSE as required by the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 is 16.

(b) Injuries involving a hospital stay. HSE only records details of major injuries as defined in RIDDOR (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regs 1995). This includes requiring admission to hospital for more than 24 hours along with serious injuries such as a fracture, amputation, loss of sight etc.

There were 1,217 major injuries logged which came into this category.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* injuries involving a stay in hospital occurred in premises on Humberside which were under a prohibition notice in the last five years. [134240]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* There were three deaths which have occurred in premises on or after the date a Prohibition Notice was served.

HSE only records details of major injuries as defined in RIDDOR (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regs 1995). This includes requiring

admission to hospital for more than 24 hours along with serious injuries such as a fracture, amputation, loss of sight etc. There were 78 major injuries logged which came into this category.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many Band 2 and Band 3 HSE inspectors there are in the Hull office. [134241]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* There are currently two Band 2 and three Band 3 HSE inspectors based in the Hull office. In addition a specialist Band 3 trainee is currently based in Hull for a six month period. The B2 inspectors manage teams of inspectors in the Leeds and Sheffield offices respectively. Currently two of the B3 inspectors are engaged on operational duties working for managers located in the Leeds and Sheffield offices.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many requests for HSE inspectors to make educational and promotional visits to the Humber Region in the past two years were made to the Leeds and Sheffield offices of the HSE; and how many such requests were successful. [134244]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* Records are not kept of request for educational and promotional visits. Our records show that in the last two years inspectors made a total of 115 educational contacts in Humberside.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 502W, on the Health and Safety Executive, what meetings were held with *(a)* local employers, *(b)* local trade unions and *(c)* local authorities before the meeting with the Chairman of the HSC and the Regional Director of the HSE. [134245]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 November 2000]:* The Chair of HSC and the Regional Director of HSE's Yorkshire and North East Region met with Hull trade unionists on 15 May this year. Prior to this, no meetings had been held with local employers, local trade unions and local authorities.

A419/A417 (Nettleton Bottom)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 387W, on the A419/A417 at Nettleton Bottom, *(a)* how many (i) fatalities and (ii) serious accidents there were in the last three years on the road and *(b)* what is the estimated cost of the Highway Agency's safety improvement scheme for the road. [137209]

Mr. Hill: There have been one fatal and two serious accidents on the A417 at Nettleton Bottom in the last three years.

The estimated cost of the Nettleton Bottom Improvement (Phase II) Safety Scheme is £214,180.

NHS Trusts and Social Landlord Partnerships

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the performance of NHS trusts and resigistered social landlords partnerships; if he will list the locations where such partnership schemes have been initiated; and what plans he has to further extend the partnership scheme. [137230]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* We are keen to encourage partnerships between NHS trusts and registered social landlords for the development of affordable accommodation for health service employees. I understand that the Department of Health is currently collecting information of the partnerships which have been formed but I am unable to list their locations at this stage. It will not be possible to carry out any assessments of their performance until information on the partnerships has been collected.

I expect partnerships to be encouraged further through the Starter Home Initiative the details of which will be announced in the new Session of Parliament. This initiative will provide assistance to key workers in high cost areas to purchase their own home. I expect employees of NHS trusts to be among those who will benefit from this scheme.

Resettlement Costs (Flooding)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the benefits of introducing a scheme to provide financial assistance to enable householders to resettle should it prove economically unviable to provide long-term defences against flooding. [137509]

Mr. Mullin: The Government's first priority is to see what improvements can be made to flood defences, so that resettlement can be avoided. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has recently announced that existing funding for flood defence work will be increased by a total of £51 million over this and the next three years. This additional funding will allow more river-based defence schemes to be progressed.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff are employed by his Department under the New Deal for Young People. [137960]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The number of New Deal staff employed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and its Agencies is 51. Of these 14 are in the category of young people (18 to 24 year olds).

Registered Social Landlords

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to gather information centrally on the previous employers of the most senior staff of registered social landlords that have taken over former local authority housing stock and the names and relevant financial interests of the chairs of the boards of these organisations. [137707]

Mr. Mullin: Registered Social Landlords are not-for-profit companies independent of the public sector. Therefore I do not believe it would be appropriate for the Department to gather and hold centrally the information suggested by my hon. Friend.

Affordable Homes

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to ensure that homes for which planning permission is given on the basis of affordability remain affordable on re-sale or reallocation. [137708]

Mr. Mullin: We already provide guidance to local planning authorities on this issue. Planning obligations and conditions may be used to ensure that affordable housing provided through planning policy is secured, either initially or in perpetuity, for occupation by people in need of such housing. Detailed guidance is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 3: "Housing" and Circular 6/98, "Planning and Affordable Housing". All affordable housing provided by Registered Social Landlords using Social Housing Grant must continue to be let at affordable rents as a condition of receiving the grant.

Directly Elected Mayor

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase turnouts in local referenda on directly elected mayors; and what plans he has to provide public funds for this purpose. [138007]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Chapter 13 of the guidance on new council constitutions, placed in the Library of the House on the 26 October 2000, indicates measures for local authorities to maximise turnout at local referendums and states that we are considering the introduction of certain innovations in electoral practice in the proposed regulations on referendums. As stated in the Local Government Bill explanatory notes, published on 26 November 1999, savings arising are expected to offset, or more than offset, any additional costs that may fall to local authorities as a result of adopting new decision-making arrangements including the costs associated with the holding of referendums.

Executive/Scrutiny Arrangements

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those small district councils which will be exempted from the regime of an executive/scrutiny split under the Local Government Act 2000. [138004]

Ms Beverley Hughes: All councils are required by the Local Government Act 2000 to have separate scrutiny arrangements in their new constitutions. Under the Act these new constitutions for district councils in two tier areas with a population below 85,000 (as estimated by the Registrar General on 30 June 1999) may involve either executive or alternative arrangements. I have placed a list of those councils in the Library of the House.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many properties in the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency have benefited from improvements funded through the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme in each of the last 10 years. [138073]

Mr. Meacher: The table identifies the number of properties receiving insulation measures and value of grant for each of the last 10 financial years.

Financial year	*Number of grants*	*Value of grants (£000)*
1991–92	761	91.5
1992–93	629	87.8
1993–94	1,309	190.7
1994–95	1,298	206.4
1995–96	1,843	259.2
1996–97	1,457	203.4
1997–98	1,377	191.1
1998–99	952	137.2
1999–2000	1,163	153.3
2000–2001	[1]85	75.8

[1] A further 503 households are awaiting permission from the social or private landlords for work to be carried out

The new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) for England was launched on 1 June 2000. It replaced the more basic scheme that operated since 1991. HEES provides packages of insulation and heating measures, linked to the condition of the property and the type of householder. The grant maximum increased from £315 up to £2,000. As a consequence, the average value of work per household has substantially increased.

Waste

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce legislation to prevent the importing of waste into the United Kingdom for disposal. [138186]

Mr. Meacher: The UK already prohibits most imports of waste for final disposal. Under the legally binding United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste, which came into effect in June 1996, the UK accepts wastes only from those countries which cannot reasonably be expected to deal with specific wastes in an environmentally sound manner. This is because we have the necessary treatment facilities which meet tough environmental standards. This policy is designed to encourage countries to become as self-sufficient as possible in waste disposal.

Consistent with European law, however, the UK cannot prohibit imports of wastes for recovery, which could include shipments of municipal wastes for incineration with energy recovery. However, shipments of municipal waste still require the prior consent of the UK enforcement authorities and would have to meet specific criteria set out in the UK Plan. There may be grounds for objecting to individual shipments if the primary purpose of the importing facility is to treat local wastes and those wastes will be displaced by the proposed imports. Available data show that no imports of municipal waste have taken place since the existing UK Plan came into effect in 1996.

UK policies and procedures on the acceptance of waste imports are being considered as part of the current review of the UK Plan.

Loop Railway Lines (Hatfield)

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received about movement in the loop railway lines around Hatfield since 17 October. [137822]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* After the accident at Hatfield on 17 October, services were diverted on to the line via Hertford. The Hatfield line has now re-opened, with the first passenger service on Friday 10 November.

Freight Vehicles and Buses

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* freight vehicles and *(b)* buses have converted to (i) LPG and (ii) CNG since May 1997. [138237]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* DVLA statistics show that from the end of June 1997 to the end of June 2000, the number of goods vehicles (over 3.5 tonnes gross vehicle weight) running on gas increased by 126 to a total of 175. Over the same period, the number of buses running on gas increased by 62 to a total of 103. DVLA's figures do not distinguish between the road fuel gases liquid petroleum gas and compressed natural gas.

Incineration

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure relevant information in respect of incineration is drawn to the attention of Ministers in his Department. [137539]

Mr. Mullin: None, as Ministers are as a matter of course kept fully in touch with waste management policy issues through the Department.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the information made available to Ministers in the last six months relating to anticipated deaths and pollution-related illnesses associated with proposed incinerators. [137540]

Mr. Mullin: Ministers have been kept fully in touch with work on the health effects of incinerators. Most recently, information provided to Ministers has included the correction by the consultants Entec UK Ltd. to their estimate of benefits of the proposed waste incineration directive[1], showing that some of the figures for health effects currently in circulation are very significant over estimates. (The error is explained in EM 10417/00 on the proposed waste incineration directive).

[1] Regulatory and Environmental Impact Assessment of the Proposed Waste Incineration Directive Final Report February 1999 (in the House Library).

Frogs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 12 October CM/23437/00, what information as to the basis of his policy he has received from English Nature and their contacts with those in other countries, undertaking research into frog disease and mortality; and if he will make a statement. [136223]

Mr. Mullin: English Nature, our statutory advisers, regularly review the work undertaken within the international scientific arena on issues that may affect native species, including amphibians, and will shortly be meeting with the Declining Amphibian Populations Task Force (a specialist group that co-ordinates and funds work on amphibian diseases) to discuss a contingency plan should significant pathogens be detected in British frog populations.

Retrospective Planning Applications

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to strengthen the powers of local authorities to require retrospective planning applications. [136450]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None. Local planning authorities can already invite a retrospective planning application in respect of unauthorised development where they judge that there are no planning objections to it. Otherwise, authorities already have wide ranging enforcement powers to control development undertaken without planning permission. We have no current plans to strengthen these powers further.

Housing Density

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was housing density, as measured by homes per hectare, in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* from January. [138416]

Ms Beverley Hughes: New dwellings in England were built at an average density of 25 per hectare between 1994 and 1998. Figures for individual years have not yet been published. My Department is conducting research looking at this and other aspects of the publication of these statistics. This research should be completed next year.

Liverpool Street-Norwich Line

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations regarding delays to trains on the Liverpool Street, London to Norwich line, since 17 October have been *(a)* received by his Department and *(b)* made by his Department to Railtrack plc. [138415]

Mr. Hill: We have received one representation from a member of public about delays on the London Liverpool Street to Norwich line. We have made no representations to Railtrack specifically on delays to trains on this line but we are meeting regularly with Railtrack and the Association of Train Operating Companies to discuss progress with the national track recovery plan.

Capping Powers

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to use the reserve capping powers for 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [138469]

Ms Armstrong: It is the Government's policy that local authorities should accept greater responsibility for setting their own budget and council tax increases. That is why we abolished crude and universal capping. However, we retain reserve powers to protect council tax payers from excessive increases. We identified three authorities whose council tax and budget increases in 1999–2000 and 2000–01 were at the top end of the range of increases for all authorities in England. I met those authorities in July. I have considered carefully the points they put to me. I have also taken account of the fact that the average council tax increases in England fell in 2000 for the second year running. On balance, I have decided not to use the new reserve powers this year. Against a background in which the Government have announced a significant increase in funding for local authorities for the next three years, all local authorities should budget responsibly.

Climate Change

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his objectives for the forthcoming climate change negotiations in The Hague. [138611]

Mr. Prescott: The Sixth Conference of the Parties (COP 6) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will aim to agree a detailed framework for the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol.

The Government want to negotiate an agreement which can be endorsed by all countries; pave the way to ratification by sufficient numbers of countries for the Protocol to enter into force by 2002; and will lead to action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by developed countries which are currently responsible for 60 per cent. of the world's emissions. We will work for an agreement that safeguards the environmental integrity of the Protocol, taking into accounts its economic impacts and providing certainty for business.

Health and Safety Laboratory

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Health and Safety Laboratory will publish its annual report and accounts for 1999–2000. [138695]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Laboratory has today published the 1999–2000 Annual Report and Accounts, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Business-Government Links

53. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the President of the Council what progress has been made in improving the Government's links with the business community through the business communications unit. [136378]

Mrs. Beckett: The Business Coordination Unit in my Department is making a significant contribution to improving Government contact with all sectors of business across the UK. Business representatives have warmly welcomed the work of the Unit and I look forward to further progress.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Oral Questions

49. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the President of the Council if she will bring proposals to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to allow for greater topicality in oral questions to Ministers. [136374]

Mr. Tipping: There is a matter which has concerned Committees of this House over several decades. The Modernisation Committee are currently reviewing their work programme—I will ensure that this issue is raised as a potential area for consideration.

House of Commons (Maintenance)

51. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee what has been the total sum spent on repairing, improving and maintaining the House of Commons buildings over the past 12 months. [136376]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The House of Commons spent some £25 million on repairing, improving and maintaining the House of Commons buildings in the last full financial year.

Commission Minutes

52. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee to ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will undertake to publish notes of minutes of the meetings of the House of Commons Commission within two weeks of each meeting. [136377]

Mr. Kirkwood: The Commission's meetings are deliberative. The Commission does publish considerable details about the House's management and services for Members in its annual report, the last of which was published on 19 July 2000 (HC 808).

I can tell the hon. Member that we are considering ways of providing hon. Members with information on a more regular basis, including information on the parliamentary intranet, in line with recommendations of the Braithwaite review of management and services. As soon as decisions about this are made, I will ensure that the House is informed.

Regional Standing Committee

54. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the President of the Council what progress has been made in setting up the regional Standing Committee. [136379]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark) on 14 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 799.

Portcullis House

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee if he will make a statement on progress of the commissioning of Portcullis House. [136367]

Sir Sydney Chapman: The first hon. Member moved into the building on 11 September and of the 210 Members' offices over 180 have now been occupied. It is expected that all moves will be completed this month.

As I indicated in the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 352W, the overwhelming response from hon. Members and their staff has been very positive, welcoming the ambience and good working facilities provided in the building.

The Vote Office, Post Office and Serjeant at Arms Service desk opened in time for the return of the House after the summer adjournment. The meeting and conference rooms were also available, and the Select Committee rooms are now operational.

The e-Library has been handed over to that Department and should be operational by the State Opening.

The Refreshment Department's accommodation was handed over on 6 November. I understand that after a period to move in their stock and equipment and conduct staff training, the Department hopes to open "the adjournment" brasserie and "the debate" self service restaurant in time for the State Opening. The refreshment service to the first floor meeting rooms will start operating on a trial basis this week with a view to starting a full operation by 4 December.

Public Tours (Summer Adjournment)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what assessment she has made of the operation of arrangements for public tours during the summer adjournment. [136365]

Mrs. Roe: A report by the Visitor Manager on the results of the trial opening to visitors from 7 August to 16 September was considered by my Committee at its meeting on 7 November, together with the results of a visitor satisfaction survey conducted by the University of Greenwich Business School. The Committee was pleased, and encouraged, to note that visitor satisfaction level with both the guided tour itself and the performance of the tour guides was exceptionally high. Visitors felt very strongly, and were very positive, about the importance of continuing to offer public tours during the summer recess. My Committee will be considering our draft Report, which, when agreed, will be put before the House for its consideration shortly. I understand a similar assessment of the trial opening is being carried out by the relevant Committee of the House of Lords.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Malawi

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the Government Departments she is funding in Malawi and the amount funded in each case. [136643]

Clare Short: We do not fund individual Departments directly. We support a number of sectoral programmes, each of which may be sponsored by one or more Departments. Our approach to this, in common with other donors, is set out in the Departmental Report 2000 (CM4610, e.g. page 14, page 93), a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Education Programmes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to encourage Third World countries which benefit from debt relief to use such benefits to develop education programmes for young people. [137383]

Clare Short: The reason for debt relief is to assist on poverty reduction. The country-led approach to development embodied in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes (PRSP) process provides a framework for allocating all Government resources, including savings from debt relief and development assistance, so that they make maximum impact on poverty. Investing in education is vitally important for development and poverty reduction. Achieving universal primary education by 2015 is one of the International Development Targets. We and others have repeatedly made it clear that real progress will only be achieved and sustained if education, and basic education in particular, is given the priority it deserves within PRSPs. Since May 1997 we have committed over £400 million to helping Governments in developing countries to put in place sustainable education systems able to provide high-quality primary education to all their children. We will do more.

Palestinian Schools

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the Palestinian Authority's decision to close the schools under their control. [137502]

Clare Short: We understand that the Palestinian Authority closed its schools for security reasons but that most of them have now re-opened. This is entirely a matter for the Palestinian authorities.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid Her Majesty's Government have spent on Palestinian education and schools in each of the last six years. [137500]

Clare Short: UK development assistance for Palestinian education since 1995–96 has totalled £3,371,925. This

includes support to the Palestinian Authority and NGOs. Available information on annual expenditure is as follows:

Year	£
1995–96	328,943
1996–87	561,560
1997–98	1,176,306
1998–99	757,679
1999–2000	547,437

In addition the UK has provided a total of £47,278,000 to the United Nations Works and Relief Agency, mainly as contributions to the Agency's core budget. This is used to provide education, health and welfare services to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza and neighbouring countries. Our annual expenditure has been:

Year	£ million
1994–95	6.0
1995–96	6.666
1996–97	8.14
1997–98	10.067
1998–99	3.371
1999–2000	13.034

Uganda

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department makes available to Uganda to prevent mother to baby transmission of HIV. [137942]

Clare Short: We do not currently provide direct funding for the specific prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (MTCT) in Uganda. Steps are being taken to establish a programme for dealing with MTCT, led by UNICEF, working closely with the Ministry of Health, the Uganda AIDS Commission and the UNAIDS theme group, of which the Department for International Development is an active member. We are also providing over £2 million in support this financial year to a variety of AIDS related projects and programmes throughout Uganda.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department spent in development and aid in Sierra Leone in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* so far this year; and what the financial support spent on war. [138018]

Clare Short: Development expenditure by the Department for International Development in Sierra Leone in 1999–2000 amounted to £29,914,000. Development expenditure for Sierra Leone so far this year totals £13,645,000. Final expenditure figures will not be available until next summer. Development funds have not been used to support the war against the Sierra Leone rebel factions.

HIV/AIDS (Caribbean)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean and the support the UK is providing to local health organisations there. [137737]

Clare Short: Recent reports indicate that HIV prevalence in the Caribbean is now second only to sub-Saharan Africa. The Caribbean also has the highest AIDS incidence rate in the Americas. HIV/AIDS is already the leading cause of death in the 15–44 age group within the region.

We are supporting the work of the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC) in its response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We are funding the second phase (£713,564) of a project aimed at the Prevention and Control of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases. This focuses on strengthening the management of public health information strategies for HIV/AIDS, cost-effective STD/HIV/AIDS case management, and improved surveillance systems for STDs and HIV/AIDS within Caribbean countries.

We are currently examining what further support should be provided to a CARICOM-sponsored regional plan of action for tackling HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean, as presented at a regional conference held in Barbados in September.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Human Rights Commission

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what attempts are made by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to identify or assess the perceived *(a)* political and *(b)* religious affiliation of persons seeking assistance from the Commission; [136520]

(2) if he will list the occasions on which the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has initiated proceedings, the nature of each such case and the reference number and names of the persons concerned; [136523]

(3) what efforts are made by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to encourage applications for assistance in bringing a case from sections of the community which are presently under-represented in the number of applications for assistance; [136521]

(4) if he will list the applications made to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for assistance to bring a case, the cost of such assistance in each case in which assistance was given, and also show the cases in which requests for assistance were refused and the reasons for refusal in each case; [136519]

(5) if he will publish the criteria used by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for giving assistance to an individual to bring a case; [136518]

(6) on how many occasions the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has assisted individuals in bringing cases; what is the reference number of the cases and the names of the individuals concerned; and by what means the outcome of the cases was brought to the attention of the general public; [136517]

(7) if he will list the occasions on which the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has intervened in existing proceedings, indicating the nature of the cases, the names of those involved and the reference number. [136522]

Mr. George Howarth: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission which is an independent body. I have therefore asked the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to write to the hon. Member. A copy of his letter will be placed in the Library.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 73–76W, on ministerial directions, if he will place in the Library the text and supporting documentation of the directions made by Ministers in his Department in 1998 and 2000; and if he will make a statement. [137299]

Mr. Caborn: I have considered this request under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and concluded that providing this information would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion within government. The request therefore falls within the term of exemption 2 of the Code of Practice.

Oil and Gas Directorate

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to *(a)* relocate his Department's oil and gas directorate employment to Aberdeen and *(b)* create additional oil and gas jobs, indicating where the jobs will be located. [137336]

Mrs. Liddell: My Oil and Gas Directorate maintains offices in both Aberdeen and London, reflecting operational needs. There are no plans to change this.

In the last three years the number of posts located in Aberdeen has risen from 56.3 to 72.3; a further 14 posts have been transferred from my Department to the Inland Revenue's Aberdeen office. This reflects our policy of maintaining a substantial operational presence in Aberdeen. The future staffing of Oil and Gas Directorate is currently under review.

SMEs (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many small and medium enterprises failed by constituency in Wales and England in the last 12 months. [137716]

Ms Hewitt: There are no official statistics on the number of small and medium enterprise failures by constituency.

When a County court hears an insolvency petition they allocate the case to the nearest Official Receiver's office. It is the location of the Official Receiver's office that is recorded, not the location of the business.

There were 5,037 insolvencies in England and Wales from 1 October 1999 to 30 September 2000, the latest 12 months available.

ADSL Services

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will require suppliers of ADSL services to specify to consumers a maximum and minimum expected contention ratio; and if he will make a statement. [138328]

Ms Hewitt: Contention ratio is one of a number of fundamental quality of service parameters used to specify ADSL service products, as are other parameters such as data rates and throughput. It is generally accepted that service quality and cost are related and this is certainly true for ADSL services.

It is likely that contention ratio information will be provided by ADSL service suppliers as part of their service contract with the customers and indeed customers may well request this information if it is not readily available. It is also expected that ADSL service suppliers will offer customers a choice of throughput offerings so that customers will be able to choose which quality performance offering best meets their needs.

It is therefore for market forces to determine which services consumers are likely to demand and what price consumers are willing to pay for such services based on the overall service quality package.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137438]

Mr. Byers: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 531W.

I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community.

My Department fully intends to take up the Prime Minister's challenge. An article to be published in the staff newspaper early in the new year will announce that all staff have the right to take one day's paid special leave per year to take part in voluntary activities in their community. This is in addition to the provisions that already exist to allow staff paid time off for voluntary activities.

I personally intend to spend a day, working as a volunteer in my own constituency, during 2001.

Deregulation

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 228W, on deregulation, what progress his Department has made in identifying the statement referred to and the evidence on which it is based. [138409]

Ms Hewitt: The statement to which I now understand this and the previous question refers is that "Government continues to reduce the burdens caused by too much regulation." It appears in two publications published by the Small Business Service—"Setting up in Business: A Guide to Regulatory Requirements" and "Employing Staff: A Guide to Regulatory Requirements." It also appears on the Small Business Service website.

There is considerable evidence for the statement. For example, the Government have increased the threshold below which small companies may opt to dispense with having their annual accounts audited from a turnover of £350,000 to a turnover of £1,000,000. This measure alone will produce annual savings of around £90 million for about 75,000 companies. In addition, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his pre-budget statement has proposed a major overhaul of the VAT system to reduce the administrative burden on small firms. The Federation of Small Businesses said it was

> ... delighted with the proposals outlined by the Chancellor on VAT, saying reforms would provide greater simplicity and ease cash flow problems for small firms.

A number of other measures to reduce burdens are in the pipeline, including reform of the liquor licensing and gambling laws. Further evidence for the statement is the report by the OECD last year that the UK had the lowest level of product market regulation while the CBI has reported that the UK has more flexible labour market regulation than other European countries.

Sugar Regime

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is *(a)* the current and *(b)* the forecast level of restitution payments in each of the EU countries in respect of sugar export. [137549]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The following table provides details of export refunds on sugar in each member state for 1998–99. The Commission's latest estimate for the EU's 2000–01 budget is 1,210 million euros for the EU as a whole. No forecast figures per member state are available, as the breakdown of expenditure depends on the port of export.

Member state	*Expenditure on export refunds 1998–99 (million euro)*	*Percentage by member state*
Austria	14	1
Belgium	299	19
Denmark	96	6
Finland	7	0
France	488	31
Germany	235	15
Greece	4	0
Ireland	5	0
Italy	153	10
Luxembourg	0	0
Netherlands	34	2
Portugal	31	2
Spain	49	3
Sweden	22	1
UK	154	10
Total	1,591	100

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from the British sugar industry regarding the proposed new sugar regime; and if he will make a statement. [137590]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

As at 10 November written responses to the Ministry's consultation letter of 6 October have been received from British Sugar plc and the Tenant Farmers Association. In addition, a wide range of interests participated in a consultation meeting on 23 October. Copies of the written comments will in due course be made available in the Ministry's library at Whitehall Place.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of the total UK consumption of sugar is satisfied by *(a)* home production, *(b)* imports from former colonies and *(c)* other sources. [137606]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The following table indicates the proportion of the total UK consumption of sugar satisfied by each source for the July 1999 to June 2000 marketing year. Home sugar beet production refers to sugar produced within quota only, and does not include over-quota sugar.

Percentage

Source	*Proportion of UK consumption*
a) Home sugar beet production	53
b) African, Caribbean, Pacific States and India	40
c) Other sources	7

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Access to Work

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to inform small and medium sized enterprises about the Access to Work scheme. [135841]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mark Neale to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 14 November 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning the steps being taken to inform small and medium sized enterprises of the Access to Work scheme. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on his behalf.

In answer to your specific question, it is encouraging to know that half of the employees who apply for support from the Access to Work scheme work for organisations which employ fewer than 500 people. The Employment Service already invests around £300,000 per year in marketing and publicising its disability services and programmes, through a variety of media including external advertising, exhibitions and marketing events, video and information leaflets, which are available through all Jobcentres. This includes leaflets specifically aimed at employers. Our own promotion is reinforced by a wide range of other organisations, particularly in the

voluntary sector, who represent disabled people. We collaborate with them to help publicise Access to Work and our other support for disabled people and employers seeking to employ people with disabilities.

I am also pleased to be able to tell you that the Employment Service is relaunching its website this autumn. This relaunch will include fuller information about disability services, including much more information about Access to Work for employers and individuals.

Our promotion of the Access to Work scheme is reflected in growing demand for it. In round figures, 13,000 disabled people were supported in 97–98, 16,000 in 98–99, and 21,000 in 99–2000.

I hope this is helpful.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135468]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* In 1999, the overall sickness absence rate in the Department for Education and Employment (including the Employment Service) was 10.6 days per staff year. We have agreed targets with the Cabinet Office to reduce this to 9.6 days by 2001, and 8.3 days by 2003. The Department is making significant efforts to meet these challenging targets.

Asset Management Data

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by *(a)* authority and *(b)* as a total, the results of the asset management plan condition data surveys, breaking the data down according to each of the four levels of priority, as required by the Department. [136751]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We are collecting and validating the data and will publish them next year.

New Deal (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many clients of the New Deal in Hendon in each New Deal category have *(a)* found a job, *(b)* found a subsidised job, *(c)* found training and *(d)* found work on an environmental task force. [136951]

Ms Jowell: The following table shows latest figures (to the end of August 2000) for the number of young people gaining jobs from the New Deal for Young People in Hendon parliamentary constituency.

In answer to *(a)-(d)*, figures on starts to each New Deal option are shown. All options include an element of training

Type of option	*Number*
Employment option	19
Full time education/training	148
Voluntary sector	31
Environment task force	8
Total into options	206
Number into jobs	347

Special Educational Needs

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance has been issued to adjudicators and school organisation committees on the policy of inclusion for children statemented with special educational needs. [137229]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* In March 2000 the Department issued guidance on statutory proposals for changes in schools. This included guidance for adjudicators and school organisation committees on the factors to be considered when determining proposals for the reorganisation of special schools and special educational needs provision in mainstream schools.

The following extract highlights factors to be considered in relation to standards of provision:

whether the proposals will enable pupils' special educational needs to be met

whether the proposals will improve educational standards in the area

how the proposals will support increased inclusion

whether the proposals will improve standards of accommodation

whether the proposals will ensure the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum including all the elements of a basic curriculum

how the proposals will address any specific health, safety and welfare requirements

how the proposal will contribute to the efficient use of resources

the impact of the proposal on other special educational needs provision within the area.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research his Department has undertaken into the loss of SEN teachers due to increased delegation of spending by LEAs. [138029]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has not commissioned research specifically into the effect of increased delegation of funding to schools on teachers employed in LEA central services. We have, however, jointly funded with NASEN research to look at the ways in which SEN Support Services are developing. The early findings from this work suggests that posts are increasing or remaining stable in the vast majority of LEAs. A final report on this research will be published early in 2001.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the questions of whether statements of special needs should in future *(a)* specify or *(b)* otherwise set out assistance from a local authority in the proposed code and regulations on special needs. [138323]

Jacqui Smith: We have received representations from a range of individuals, parents' groups, voluntary organisations, and some hon. Members.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what measures his Department is taking to publicise the Holocaust Memorial Day Education Pack; and if he will make a statement; [137631]

(2) what measures his Department has taken to distribute copies of the Holocaust Memorial Day Education Pack to schools and colleges; and if he will make a statement; [137632]

(3) what guidance his Department has issued to schools and colleges on how to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day; and if he will make a statement. [137633]

Jacqui Smith: The Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) Education Pack was launched on 9 November as part of the build up to the Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January. The Pack has been publicised through the Department's Spectrum publication which goes to all schools, and through the HMD website run by the Home Office.

The Pack has been produced by a working group of experts from non-government organisations who have a vast range of experience and knowledge in the area of holocaust education, including the Holocaust Education Trust who, on behalf of the working group, are making the Pack available to all schools. I am very grateful to all those organisations who have been involved in its production. Members of the national and community press, a number of survivors and representatives from those organisations involved in the Pack were present at the launch.

The Pack is a valuable cross-curricular resource and includes a number of suggestions for activities and assemblies to support the commemoration of the Memorial Day.

Carlisle Jobcentre

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in the relocation of the jobcentre in Carlisle; and if he will make a statement. [137709]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Eric Martlew, dated 13 November 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning the progress of plans to relocate Carlisle Jobcentre. This is something which falls within responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

We have been asked to vacate the premises we now occupy in Lowther House. Our estates team are involved in commercial negotiations to lease alternative premises which will meet the needs of all our customers. We are exploring a number of options in the city centre.

I will provide you with details of premises once negotiations have been concluded.

I hope this is helpful.

Teachers' PRP

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to open up teachers' performance-related pay threshold training and external assessment procedures to special service establishments which wish to mirror the threshold system in payments to their staff. [137851]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* We are currently considering what support we might give to educational establishments who are interested in mirroring the threshold assessment procedures for their teaching staff. We are consulting on a new provision for the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document to allow such assessments, if carried out in accordance with the system explained in the document, to count in maintained schools.

Value for Money Unit

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the work of the Value for Money Unit in his Department. [137912]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Value for Money Unit was set up last year to give advice on various aspects of value for money in schools. The Unit works on enabling schools to benchmark their expenditure against similar schools; conducts and sponsors research on the effect of resources on educational outcomes; provides good practice guidance for schools; and advises schools and LEAs about best value in education.

Out-of-hours School Activities

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support his Department is offering for out-of-hours school activities. [138063]

Jacqui Smith: Out of school hours learning activities are high on this Government's education agenda. We believe that all young people can benefit from these additional opportunities to learn and succeed. In addition to the £205 million of lottery money available through the New Opportunities Fund for these activities, my Department has made available, through the Standards Fund, £20 million this financial year and £60 million for 2001–02.

My Department is also running a two-year, £2.5 million programme of partnership projects between schools and a wide range of partner organisations, such as businesses and youth, community and voluntary organisations. The 138 projects in the programme will focus on engendering partnership and on evaluating the benefits for both schools and partners.

In addition, the Department has published a wide range of practical guidance and good practice example for providers of out of school hours learning activities; most recently the "Study Support Toolkit", a suite of good practice and training materials, and "Safe Keeping", a good practice guide for health and safety in out of school hours learning activities.

European Institutions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the *(a)* purpose and *(b)* running cost of (i) the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, (ii) the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and (iii) the European Training Foundation. [138079]

Mr. Wicks: The three organisations referred to are agencies of the European Union.

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

The purpose of the Centre is to provide information on member states' vocational education and training systems. It promotes and supports research on specific education and training themes, produces descriptive reports and identifies developmental trends of interest to member states and the European Commission.

In 2000 the running costs of the organisation are 12.9 million Euros.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

The Foundation was established to provide policy makers with research-based information on the improvement of living and working conditions. This includes comparative cross-European research on employment and unemployment, equal opportunities, social inclusion, health in the workplace and employee relations. As well as commissioning research through open tender the Foundation is active in disseminating research-based information through publications, conferences and seminars throughout the member states.

In 2000 the running costs of the Foundation are 15 million Euros.

European Training Foundation.

The purpose of the Foundation is to act as a centre of expertise in human resource development to assist the countries of central and eastern Europe, the new independent states and non EU Mediterranean countries. It provides analysis and advice to these countries on vocational education and training, disseminates information on EU best practice, assists in the design and development of vocational education and training projects and in monitoring and evaluation of initiatives in these countries. The Foundation is playing a particularly active role in assisting those countries seeking accession to the European Union to develop their vocational education and training expertise.

In 2000 the running costs of the Foundation are 16.2 million Euros.

Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Technology College

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when officials from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will meet the headteacher of the Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Technology College to discuss the proposed development of an ICT training course. [138169]

Mr. Wills: Officials of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) would be pleased to meet with the headteacher of Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Technology College. Officials of the Department for Education and Employment, with colleagues at QCA, will arrange a meeting.

EU Council of Ministers

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Education/Youth Council held in Luxembourg on 9 November; and if he will make a statement. [138396]

Mr. Wills: Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and I represented the UK at the Council of EC Education/Youth Ministers in Brussels on 9 November. Education Ministers gave political approval to a common position on a recommendation on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers and instructors. Political approval was also given to a Mixed Resolution containing a Mobility Action Plan. The Plan sets out a number of measures, which member states can select from according to national circumstances, to promote the mobility of teachers, academics, students and volunteers across Europe.

Ministers discussed a preliminary draft report on the future objectives of education systems. Council agreed that the report, which is to be presented by the Education Ministers to the Stockholm European Council in spring 2001, should aim to identify objectives and priorities common to education systems within member states and facilitate the sharing of information and exchange of good and best practice at a national level.

The Council adopted two opinions for the Employment and Social Policy Council on the Social Policy Agenda and draft employment guidelines.

Ministers received reports from the Commission and Presidency on: the conclusions of the Leiden seminar, organised by the Netherlands and French Presidency, on open methods of co-ordination and benchmarking of European education systems; follow up to the meeting of the EU and Latin American Ministers for Higher Education in Paris on 3 November; a memorandum on life-long learning; progress reached in the implementation of the European Year of Languages 2001; the renewal of the United States—Canada—EU co-operation agreements in the field of education and training and; the outcome of the Blois seminar entitled "Learn the history of Europe".

Youth Ministers held an open debate on the follow-up measures which should be taken following earlier consultations with young people in Europe. Council agreed the importance of involving young people at European level and the need to create regular opportunities for consulting with young people—including those not affiliated to recognised youth networks—at both national and European level. The debate was part of the Commission's consultation process linked to developing a White Paper on the future of youth policy.

Ministers received information from the Commission on the implementation of the Youth Programme and adopted a resolution on the social inclusion of young people.

The Presidency and the Commission raised the issue of the potential dangers facing young sportsmen and women through over-training, drug abuse and commercial exploitation. The Commission urged the Council to consider taking action to tackle this.

The Council heard a report from the German delegation on the need to tackle the problem of racism and xenophobia among young people.

A copy of the Council Minutes will be placed in the Library in due course.

HEALTH

Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent representations he has received about Ehlers-Danlos syndrome; and what provision exists in the NHS for specialist clinical and research facilities for this condition; [135880]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with the Minister of Health in the Welsh Assembly about provision for Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. [136384]

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the NHS's treatment of sufferers of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. [136998]

Mr. Denham: The Department has received recent correspondence about the Connective Tissue Genetics Group (CTGG), which is based at the Institute of Medical Genetics in Cardiff.

The provision of treatment for Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome patients is part of the responsibility of health authorities who must make arrangements for the health of their population as they are closest to the people they serve and so best placed to respond sensitively to their needs.

There have been no recent discussions with the Minister of Health in the Welsh Assembly about EDS services. The National Specialist Commissioning Advisory Group (NSCAG) advises health ministers in England on the identification and funding of services where central intervention into local commissioning of patient services is necessary. NSCAG is working closely with the Specialised Health Services Commission (SHSC) for Wales to consider a national clinical EDS service that includes services of all current providers.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) has been providing research funding to the CTGG as a five year programme grant that is due to be completed in November 2000. The MRC would consider any new application for further research funding from CTGG. The MRC always welcomes high quality applications for support and these are judged in open competition with other demands on funding. Awards are made according to their scientific quality and importance to human health.

Chief Dental Officer

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what grounds the former Chief Dental Officer took early retirement. [137574]

Mr. Hutton: Personnel records relating to public employment remain confidential under the terms of Part 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Fungal Infection Treatment

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of research into treatment with synthetic human antibodies in order to counter deadly fungal infections; and if he will make a statement. [137412]

Mr. Denham: The Medicines Control Agency has recently assessed an application to conduct a clinical trial designed to evaluate the use of a synthetic human antibody in the treatment of disseminated fungal infection.

Secure Units (Suicides)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children and young people committed suicide in local authority secure units in each of the last 10 years. [137811]

Mr. Hutton: One child committed suicide in 1998. There have been no other suicides in local authority secure accommodation in the last 10 years.

Acute Hospital Beds

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many acute hospital beds there are in the Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority area. [137795]

Mr. Denham: During 1999–2000 Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority had on average 1,418 beds available. Since last December, the local health community has opened an additional 89 beds for this winter.

Agency Nurses

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many agency nurses were employed in the NHS, and at what total cost, in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [137120]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is given in the table.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Agency nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in England as at 30 September in each year

	Whole time equivalents
1979	4,020
1980	4,220
1981	3,760
1982	3,040
1983	2,440
1984	3,750
1985	4,120
1986	5,450
1987	6,130
1988	6,240
1989	7,230
1990	[1]—
1991	3,930
1992	3,230
1993	4,780
1994	4,440
1995	[1]—
1996	[1]—
1997	[1]—
1998	[1]—
1999	[1]—

[1] Not available—agency staff not collected in these years

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Waiting Times (North Cumbria)

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on out-patient waiting times in the North Cumbria Health Authority. [137710]

Mr. Denham: The latest information for North Cumbria Health Authority for the quarter ending 30 June 2000 demonstrates that 82 per cent. of North Cumbria residents with a written referral from a general practitioner were seen within 13 weeks and that 98 per cent. were seen within 26 weeks.

Child Migrants

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department has taken in respect of the welfare of former British child migrants since the publication of his Department's response to the Third report of the Health Committee, Session 1997–98, HC 755; and what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of such measures. [138171]

Mr. Hutton: In the Government's response to the Health Select Committee's Report on the Welfare of Former Child Migrants, a commitment was given to provide practical help to former child migrants.

We agreed to increase funding for the Child Migrants Trust to £500,000 over three years (1999–2002) to assist former child migrants in tracing their relatives and also to provide counselling services.

It has also set up a Support Fund (£1 million over three years managed by International Social Services) to enable first time re-unions between former child migrants and their immediate relatives in the United Kingdom through paying travel and subsistence cost. The International Social Services (ISS) have so far received 209 applications, of which 181 have been successful.

We have also funded a central information index to help child migrants trace their roots. The Index was installed in November 1999 and to date they have received 181 applications.

Departmental officials met with the Agent General for Western Australia, Clive Griffiths on 17 August 2000 formally to receive a copy of the Western Australian Former Child Migrant Referral Index. This Department reciprocated by handing over those records from the UK Central Information Index which were specific to Western Australia. We will continue to work with Australian colleagues to ensure that maximum benefit is derived for child migrants from the information held on the Index.

Although no specific assessment has been made of the effectiveness of these measures the Child Migrants Trust and International Social Services along with the National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organisations, who set up the Child Migrant Information Index provide my officials with regular progress reports on the services they are supplying.

Bed Blocking (Suffolk)

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital beds are being blocked by patients fit enough to be moved out of hospital *(a)* in the Suffolk Health Authority and *(b)* in the West Suffolk NHS Hospital Trust. [138411]

Ms Stuart: The quarterly monitoring figures for second quarter of 2000 show that Suffolk Health Authority had 165 patients over the age of 75, who were ready for discharge but still occupying a hospital bed.

Source: Common Information Core Quarterly monitoring returns based on health authority quarterly activity.

Out-patient Waiting Times

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on variations by region for out-patient waiting times and referral arrangements. [137265]

Mr. Denham: We are aware of variations in out-patient waiting times and are working to improve matters. In July each acute National Health Service trust in the country received a "Step-by-step guide to improving out-patient services", a copy of which is available in the Library. At the same time Trusts were instructed to introduce partial booking systems into clinics with waits in excess of 13 weeks. These systems improve the efficiency of out-patient clinics and reduce long waiting times. We have also recently announced further details of our "Action On" programme, with funding targeted at specialties with the longest waits—orthopaedics, ear nose and throat, dermatology and ophthalmology (cataracts).

To make the best use of resources it is important that only patients who need to see a consultant are referred to hospital. All acute NHS trusts are implementing Out-patient Improvement Plans which include schemes to improve the appropriateness of referrals through collaborative working between hospital consultants and general practitioners. In addition, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the shadow Modernisation Agency are piloting a guide to appropriate referral from general to specialist services for common medical conditions.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of new patients referred to medical, surgical, oncological, obstetric, gynaecological and other out-patient clinics in the West Surrey health authority were seen by *(a)* a consultant in the discipline and *(b)* a junior doctor, in the last year for which figures are available. [137266]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 10 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 432–33W.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Falkland Islands

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit the Falkland Islands. [136397]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence visited the islands in March this year, and I hope to arrange a visit in the new year.

Saint Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the occasions

on which the Governor of Saint Helena took executive action without the approval of the island's Legislative Council in each of the last two years, indicating those occasions on which prior consultation with his Department took place. [137343]

Mr. Battle: The Governor of St. Helena has used his reserved power under Section 34(1) of the St. Helena Constitution Order on two occasions in the past two years; 31 March 1998 and 31 March 1999. On each occasion he used his powers, on the advice of the Executive Council, to implement the budget after the Legislative Council had refused to pass it. He acted properly in line with the Constitution and with the full support of the Department on each occasion.

Iraq

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the value of humanitarian goods the UN Sanctions Committee is currently holding back from delivery to Iraq. [137681]

Mr. Hain: The total revenue available under the Oil for Food programme since its inception in 1996 is over US$37 billion. This year alone, Oil for Food revenue is expected to reach more than US$16 billion. The current value of Oil for Food contracts on hold because of concerns over dual use is approximately US$2.3 billion. The UK accounts for about US$0.3 billion of this, which is less than 1 per cent. of the total value of Oil for Food revenue. The UK, as a responsible member of the UN Iraq Sanctions Committee, scrutinises contracts very carefully to ensure that goods are not supplied to Iraq in violation of Security Council resolutions. Holds are normally lifted after assurances have been received about the end-use or in-country monitoring of these goods. It is noteworthy that at the end of October Iraq's bureaucracy was holding back the delivery of US$1.1 billion worth of goods already approved by the Sanctions Committee.

Tibet

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received in respect of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. [137922]

Mr. Battle: The Government continue to regularly receive representations from hon. Members, non-governmental organisations and members of the public about the situation in Tibet.

Ministerial Visits

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit *(a)* Peking and *(b)* North Korea. [137924]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no plans at present to visit either China or North Korea.

Kursk Submarine

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 536W, what representations he has made to Russia in respect of claims that a British submarine was involved in the Kursk disaster. [137927]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State made no representations to Russia in respect of claims that a British submarine was involved in the Kursk disaster. The Secretary of State for Defence, who led on this issue, has already assured the Russian Defence Minister, that there were no Royal Navy submarines in the area at the time the Kursk sank.

China

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his assessment is of the human rights situation in *(a)* the People's Republic of China and *(b)* Hong Kong. [137923]

Mr. Battle: While there has been some improvement in economic and social rights in China, the overall situation continues to be a matter of serious concern. Over the last two years there has been a marked deterioration in the respect for key civil and political rights including freedoms of assembly, conscience and expression. Fair treatment in the legal process is routinely abused through the use of arbitrary detention, "re-education through Labour" and excessive sentences against democracy activists, Falun Gong Leaders, Tibetan and other activists. We address these concerns through a policy of critical dialogue including Ministerial exchanges and regular bilateral human rights talks with the Chinese.

Arms Exports (Israel)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence Her Majesty's Government have obtained that components or equipment licensed for export to Israel by the United Kingdom Government since 1990 have not been used by Israeli forces *(a)* against civilians in the Occupied Territories and *(b)* in Southern Lebanon. [138006]

Mr. Hain: We have no evidence that equipment licensed for export to Israel by this Government has been used against civilians in the Occupied Territories or in southern Lebanon in defiance of our strict controls. The Government have, however, long had concerns that CS gas exported from the UK has been used by the Israeli Security Forces against Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. Consequently, since taking office, the Government have refused all applications for permanent licences to export CS gas to Israel.

CFSP Headquarters (Thefts)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent thefts from the CFSP Headquarters in the Justis Lipsius building; what classified material *(a)* was and *(b)* is to be stored in that location; and if he will make a statement. [137900]

Mr. Vaz: The UK Representation to the European Communities has made inquiries into this matter with the European Council Secretariat. The Council Secretariat was satisfied that there had been no thefts of classified documents from the CFSP section of the Justus Lipsius building.

The Directorate General for External Affairs, located in the Justus Lipsius building, holds documents relating to council business in the field of external relations, including CFSP and European Defence.

Armed Forces (European Communities)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the operational status is of armed forces personnel on assignment to the European Communities; and if he will list the personnel concerned. [138088]

Mr. Vaz: There are no armed forces personnel on operational assignments with the European Communities. However, as agreed at the Helsinki and Lisbon European Councils, the United Kingdom, along with other EU member states, has sent national experts to the Council Secretariat to give military advice as required on the European Security and Defence Policy in the interim period. The UK currently has two officers working in this capacity.

Foreign Policy Centre

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives of the Foreign Policy Centre; and if he will make a statement on the nature of contacts between his staff and the Centre. [138184]

Mr. Robin Cook: It is established practice for Foreign Office Ministers and officials to have regular contact with policy institutes and NGOs, including the Foreign Policy Centre, to consider their views when developing policy, and to contribute to the debates initiated by them.

Parliamentary Powers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish a command paper listing the matters ceded by Parliament to the European Community and Union since 1 January 1973 broken down under the headings of *(a)* legislation, *(b)* taxation, *(c)* expenditure and appropriation, *(d)* adjudication and *(e)* the negotiation of political and commercial agreements with other states. [138034]

Mr. Vaz: Each Treaty amending the EU Treaties has been presented to Parliament in the form of a command paper. I refer my hon. Friend to these.

European Union Reform

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the progress report on the IGC on institutional reform (CONFER 4790/00). [138215]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the website www.europa.eu.int where he will find all the official documents relating to the intergovernmental conference.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137428]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 531W.

We fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. The Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community. The FCO has implemented policies to encourage this and now approves one day's paid leave a year for employees to undertake voluntary work. The voluntary spirit is very much alive in the FCO and helps animate much of our work. The Foreign Secretary intends to participate during 2001.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the proposed EU Charter of Fundamental Rights on the administration of justice in England and Wales. [136363]

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights on the administration of the court system. [136351]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Members to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 555W.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and what actions are being taken by the Government to bring an end to hostilities there. [138341]

Mr. Hain: We remain deeply concerned about the security situation in the DRC. The UN Security Council has repeatedly called on all parties to the conflict to cease hostilities and to fulfil their obligations under the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement. Bilaterally, we have registered our concerns with all parties through our Special Representative who has just returned from an extensive visit to the region.

Trade (EU Market Access)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what impact the effect of the EC's Everything but Arms initiative will have on negotiations between the EC and WTO members for a new banana regime. [136829]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The Commission's proposal to amend the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) allows for a three year phasing-in period of tariff and quota free access for bananas. The UK continues to work for the achievement of a rapid solution to the WTO banana dispute which is acceptable within the WTO and addresses the needs of Caribbean producers. We will work to ensure that pursuit of this solution and the proposal for amendment of the GSP Regulation are consistent.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what impact extension of unlimited duty and quota free access to the EU market for large least developed country sugar producers will have on the EU agricultural budget and excess EU production and intervention costs. [136828]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The UK is pressing for this to be fully assessed in the context of the consideration given to the Commission's separate proposals on the reform of the EU sugar regime. It will depend on the amount of sugar that least developed countries send to the EU. The EU already has a substantial sugar surplus, and the only tools in the current regime to deal with an increase are intervention buying and/or cuts in EU quotas.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what impact the European Commission's proposals to provide duty and quota free access to the EU market to 48 least developed countries will have on EC proposals for the reform of the EU sugar and rice regimes. [136826]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The Government believe that there is potential inconsistency between the European Commission's proposals for duty free access for sugar and rice from least developed countries and their parallel proposals for reform of the EU sugar and rice regimes. We have pressed for the impact of the LDC proposal to be properly discussed in the context of the reform proposals in the Agriculture Council.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Lone Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of people living in lone parent families in each year since 1995 were *(a)* in the bottom 30 per cent., *(b)* in the bottom 40 per cent. and *(c)* in the bottom 50 per cent. of the income distribution. [134544]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Proportion of individuals living in lone parent families below various percentiles of the income distribution

Individuals below percentiles of income distribution (percentage)/year	*Including self-employed*		*Excluding self-employed*	
	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*
Bottom 30 per cent.				
1995–96	59	67	59	67
1996–97	65	71	63	70
1997–98	63	69	63	69
1998–99	63	69	63	69
Bottom 40 per cent.				
1995–96	73	78	73	78
1996–97	78	81	77	81
1997–98	76	79	76	79
1998–99	77	80	77	80

Proportion of individuals living in lone parent families below various percentiles of the income distribution

Individuals below percentiles of income distribution (percentage)/year	*Including self-employed*		*Excluding self-employed*	
	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*	*Before housing costs*	*After housing costs*
Bottom 50 per cent.				
1995–96	83	85	83	86
1996–97	86	87	86	87
1997–98	84	85	84	86
1998–99	86	87	85	87

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set which is derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland, and 1998–99 is the latest year for which data is available.
2. The estimates are sample counts, which have been adjusted for non-response using multipurpose grossing factors that control for region, Council Tax band and a number of other demographic variables. Estimates are subject to both sampling error and to variability in non-response. All percentages are rounded to the nearest per cent.
3. The income measure used is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say income that is adjusted to reflect the composition of the household). While the proportion of individuals below various income thresholds may be sensitive to the precise way in which incomes are equivalised, changes shown over time generally are not.
4. The estimates are presented on both a Before Housing Costs (BHC) and an After Housing Costs (AHC) basis in line with HBAI conventions. Figures are also provided including and excluding the self-employed, as research suggests that, for self-employed people, income as reported in surveys is often a poor indicator of living standards.

Source:

Family Resources Survey

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what the average claim period for Incapacity Benefit has been; and how many people have left the caseload, broken down by destination in each year since 1995; [134586]

(2) what proportion of people who stopped claiming Incapacity Benefit, in the last 12 months for which figures are available, did so because they were returning to work, broken down into those who have claimed Incapacity Benefit for *(a)* less than a year, *(b)* between one and two years, *(c)* between two and three years, *(d)* between three and four years, *(e)* between four and five years, and *(f)* over five years. [134655]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how long a claimant for Incapacity Benefit has to wait for a medical assessment of their capabilities. [137520]

Mr. Bayley: There is no set time within which the process has to be completed as this will vary according to the individual circumstances of each case. Until the process is complete, the claimant will continue to receive benefit on the basis of their own doctor's certificates.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action his Department is taking to devise a system to enable recipients of incapacity benefits to return to work. [138074]

Mr. Bayley: The New Deal for Disabled People, a joint initiative of the Department of Social Security and the Department for Education and Employment, has been testing a range of approaches to help recipients of incapacity benefits return to or take up work. These include a personal adviser service, innovative schemes and pilot benefit changes. By the end of September 2000, over 5,100 people have been helped into work by the New Deal for Disabled People pilots.

On 13 November the two Departments launched a prospectus for the extension of the New Deal for Disabled People. This will involve the establishment of a network of providers, known as job brokers, to offer long-term sick and disabled people on incapacity benefits the support, guidance, and preparation they need to find work; and to match the needs of employers with the skills and potential of long-term sick and disabled people.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications resulted from his Department's most recent campaign to improve the take-up of the Minimum Income Guarantee for pensioners; and how many were successful. [136533]

Mr. Rooker: The campaign is still in progress and the final mailshots out of a total of 2.3 million were sent out on Friday 10 November. Given the scale of the campaign, the numbers of inquiries, applications and decisions change daily. It will be January before we can provide comprehensive figures on the results of the campaign. Approximately half of actual claims made are proving successful.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list, by category, the reasons for which applications for the Minimum Income Guarantee have been rejected *(a)* in total and *(b)* in each Benefits Agency area. [137875]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available. Separate figures as a result of the take up campaign will be available in due course on a national basis. However, preliminary indications are that of those applications that fail, they do so because of excess capital and income. Both of these issues are dealt with in the proposals for the new pension credit, details of which are published in Cm 4900.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have applied to date for information packs for the Minimum Income Guarantee; how many applications have been returned; how many are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee in *(a)* Glasgow, Pollok *(b)* Glasgow and *(c)* Scotland; and what this figure is as a percentage of the eligible population. [137766]

Mr. Rooker: Not all the information requested is available.

The current Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign is still in progress, so as yet we do not have comprehensive details of the total number of successful claims. However, we have had over 600,000 responses and around half of those claims already processed have been successful.

The table gives numbers of pensioners receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee in Scotland, Glasgow and Pollok.

Pensioners receiving the MIG in Scotland, Glasgow and Pollok, May 2000

Thousand

	Number of claimants
Scotland[1]	164.4
City of Glasgow Unitary Authority[1]	32.4
Glasgow Pollok Parliamentary Constituency[1]	3.5

[1] All aged 60 and over

Notes:

1. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 or over. The figures may therefore include some claimants aged under 60.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Caseloads have been rounded to the nearest hundred and are expressed in thousands; percentages are given to one decimal place.
4. Cases are allocated to each Unitary Authority/Parliamentary Constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS Postcode Directory.
5. Constituency information represents Constituency boundaries as at May 1997.

Sources:

1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000.
2. Population estimates unit—ONS mid-term estimates for 1999.

Information on the eligible population in Scotland, Glasgow and Pollok is not available. The Department's statisticians do not judge it possible to produce reliable estimates, of the amount by which benefit is under-claimed, for different parts of Great Britain.

The next annual statistics on the take-up of income-related benefits in Great Britain will be published on 8 December 2000. These will cover the financial year 1998–99.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's oral statement of 8 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 315–27, on the Pre-Budget Statement, if he will estimate the number of pensioners eligible for the Minimum Income Guarantee in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [138281]

Mr. Rooker: As a result of the measures outlined in the pre-Budget report, an estimated 2 million pensioners and their families will benefit in 2000–01; this will increase to 2.2 million in 2001–02.

Note:

Based on 1.6 million current claims to the Minimum Income Guarantee, 1.7 million in 2000–01 and 1.9 million in 2001–02.

Sources:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 2000.
DSS case load forecasts.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the effect on tenants of his Department's proposal to restrict the backdating of housing benefit to three months; and if he will make a statement; [137049]

(2) what assessment he has made to the effect of administrative delays on housing benefit awards backdated for more than three months in each of the last three years for which data are available; and if he will make a statement; [137053]

(3) what representations he has received on his Department's proposal to reduce the backdating of housing benefit from 12 months to three months from April 2001; and if he will make a statement; [137047]

(4) what estimate he has made of the total number of people who will be affected by his Department's proposal to restrict the backdating of housing benefit to three months; and how many of those people are *(a)* of pensionable age, *(b)* lone parents, *(c)* disabled and *(d)* working but still entitled to claim housing benefit; [137048]

(5) what estimate he has made of the cost of his Department's proposal to change the arrangements for the payment of subsidies to local authorities to cover the backdating of housing benefit; [137051]

(6) what estimate he has made of the savings to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* local authorities of his Department's proposal to restrict the backdating of housing benefit to three months; [137050]

(7) what assessment he has made of the reasons why claimants have had housing benefit awards backdated for more than three months in each of the last three years for which records have been kept; and if he will make a statement; [137052]

(8) what assessment he has made of the effect of inadequate advice given by statutory agencies resulting in claimants making successful claims to have their housing benefit backdated for over three months in each of the last three years for which data are available; and if he will make a statement. [137054]

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect on *(a)* rent arrears and *(b)* homelessness of the Department of Social Security's proposal to restrict the backdating of Housing Benefit to three months from April 2001; and if he will make a statement. [137056]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to provide reliable estimates of the effects of the proposal to align the Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit backdating rules with those of the other income-related benefits. In terms of benefit expenditure, we have estimated that these changes would be broadly cost-neutral because of the interplay between the proposed tighter prescription and the proposed increase in subsidy paid to local authorities.

These proposals have now been considered by the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), and we have received their report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. We have also received the Local Authority Associations (LAAs) responses to our consultation exercise on these proposals. We are considering the responses from the LAA consultation and points raised in SSAC's report very carefully and will make an announcement shortly.

Income Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many unemployed people are receiving Income Support amounting to (i) £1 to £50, (ii) £50 to £100, (iii) £100 to £150, (iv) £150 to £200, (v) £200 to £300, (vi) £300 to £400, (vii) £400 to £500 and (viii) £500 and over per week. [137087]

Angela Eagle: Claimants who are unemployed do not receive Income Support. Job Seekers Allowance is paid to those who are actively seeking employment.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over the age of *(a)* 60 and *(b)* 70 years claim Income Support in (i) the constituency of Glasgow, Pollok, (ii) Glasgow and (iii) Scotland; and if he will express these figures as a percentage of the total number of people over (1) 60 and (2) 70 years in each category. [137765]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is included in the table.

Pensioners receiving the MIG in Scotland, Glasgow and Pollok, May 2000

	Number of claimants (thousand)	*Percentage of relevant population*
Scotland		
All aged 60 and over	164.4	15.7
60–69	55.9	11.3
70 and over	108.5	19.7
City of Glasgow Unitary Authority		
All aged 60 and over	32.4	27.3
60–69	13.2	24.1
70 and over	19.2	30.0
Glasgow, Pollok parliamentary constituency		
All aged 60 and over	3.5	n/a
60–69	1.3	n/a
70 and over	2.2	n/a

Notes:

1. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over. The 60–69 age group may therefore include some claimants aged under 60.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Case loads have been rounded to the nearest hundred and are expressed in thousands, percentages are given to one decimal place.
4. "Percentage of the population" is based on ONS population estimates for mid-term 1999, and represents Income Support claimants as a proportion of the population in Scotland/Glasgow Unitary Authority who are in the relevant age group.
5. Case load as a percentage of the population is not available for Pollok constituency, as population estimates are not available at this level.
6. Cases are allocated to each unitary authority/parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS postcode directory.
7. Constituency information represents Constituency boundaries as at May 1997.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000.
Population estimates unit—ONS mid-term estimates for 1999.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the percentage fall in the value of the capital limits in Income Support after taking account of inflation from 1988 to May 1997. [138206]

Mr. Darling: Using the published Rossi price index for September 1988 and May 1997, the capital limits had fallen by 30.6 per cent. in real terms.

Note:

The Index was 106.9 in September 1988, risen to 154.0 in May 1997.

Pensions (Married Women)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on the provision of independent pensions for married women who have made full pension contributions; and what response he has made to them. [137271]

Mr. Rooker: I am not entirely clear as to what precise information my hon. Friend is seeking. Married women who have made full pension contributions receive a pension in their own right. If they have insufficient qualifying years for a full pension, the pension is reduced proportionally. If it falls below the married woman's pension rate, it can be topped up when their husband retires to a maximum of £40.40, based on their husband's contributions.

Sickness Benefit

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have been assessed as eligible for sickness benefit on grounds of incapacity caused by *(a)* mental health problems and *(b)* drug/alcohol dependency in each of the last five years. [137373]

Mr. Bayley: Incapacity Benefit replaced sickness benefit and invalidity benefit on 13 April 1995. Where benefit is awarded, the first primary diagnosis from the medical certificate is recorded according to the international classification of diseases. The most recent information available for awards of incapacity benefit made where the main condition is recorded as being a mental or behavioural disorder or alcohol or drug abuse is given in the table.

Annual periods	*Mental and behavioural disorders*	*Alcohol and drug abuse*
1 June 1995 to 31 May 1996	77,900	3,200
1 June 1996 to 31 May 1997	79,100	4,300
1 June 1997 to 31 May 1998	86,100	4,800
1 June 1998 to 31 May 1999	79,600	4,200
1 June 1999 to 31 May 2000	81,000	4,700

Notes:

1. All causes of incapacity are coded using the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Edition. Primary diagnoses of alcohol or drug abuse are normally shown as part of the group under the heading Mental and Behavioural disorders but are shown separately in the above table.
2. Disorders appearing as secondary conditions are not recorded.
3. Figures relate to spells of incapacity benefit commencing in the stated period. More than one spell may relate to the same claimant.
4. 31 May 2000 is the latest date for which information is available.

Source:

These figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of the benefit computer system and will exclude a small number of clerically held cases. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost of extending Winter Fuel Payments to those under the age of 60 who are in receipt of *(a)* the middle or higher rate of Disability Living Allowance care component or *(b)* higher rate of mobility component and who are presently resident within Scotland. [137679]

Mr. Rooker: It is estimated that the extension of Winter Fuel Payments to people in Scotland who are under age 60 and getting Disability Living Allowance higher or middle rate care component or higher rate mobility component would cost around £20 million in the winter of 2000–01. My hon. Friend will be aware that Winter Fuel Payments to people aged 60 and over are not related to receipt of benefits.

Expenditure (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the overall social security bill is for Wales in the last 12 months; and if he will give a breakdown of how the money is spent by constituency. [137715]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the exact form requested. The estimated expenditure on social security benefits for Wales for 1999–2000 (the latest period for which figures are available) is around £5.8 billion. Data showing expenditure by individual constituencies are not available.

Benefit Entitlement

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will amend the benefit regulations to ensure that people who suffer from long-term illness or disability do not suffer a lower benefit entitlement by virtue of discovering after a trial period in work that they are unable to sustain that work because of the effects of their illness or disability. [137812]

Mr. Bayley: We have already taken action to help such people. In October 1998, we introduced a provision whereby people who had been incapacitated for at least 28 weeks, began work or training within seven days of leaving benefit and notified the Benefits Agency within one month that they had done so, may return to benefit without having to requalify for the higher rates if they leave work or training within a year. The period is extended to two years where the person had been getting disabled persons tax credit or a training allowance while they were in work or training.

Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate for pensioners who are in receipt of income-related benefits but not the Minimum Income Guarantee, how much of the pension increase in April 2001 will be clawed back in loss of benefit; and if he will pass on the full effect of the pensions increase to pensioners receiving Council Tax benefit. [138288]

Mr. Rooker: None.

Duplicate Payments of Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the mainframe problems were in the period before the duplicated payments of Income Support started. [138336]

Mr. Bayley: In the week before the duplicated Income Support payments, there was only one mainframe problem directly impacting Income Support customers. Standard recovery action procedures were invoked.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the Affinity contract ensures that any taxpayers' money lost due to errors by the private sector suppliers is recovered by those suppliers. [138334]

Angela Eagle: Under the Department's contracts with EDS (who lead the Affinity Consortium), EDS is accountable for losses accrued to the Department, subject to the limits of liability set out in that contract.

All of the Department's major PFI contracts undergo a rigorous independent test to ensure an appropriate balance of risk between the Department and its suppliers.

Former POWs

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to inform all benefit offices *(a)* about his statement on compensation for former POWs held by the Japanese and *(b)* the exemption of this compensation from social security payment regulations. [138337]

Mr. Bayley: The contents of a War Pensions Agency press release, which summarises the statement made on 7 November by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, and which explains how claims to the Agency for the ex-gratia payment should be made, have been made available to all benefit office staff.

Subject to normal consultation with the Social Security Advisory Committee and the local authority associations, we intend to amend the income-related benefit regulations in advance of the ex-gratia payments being made. As is normal practice, guidance will be issued to local offices 23 days in advance of the legislation coming into effect.

Social Security Spending (OECD Countries)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of gross domestic product in each OECD country is spent on matters which within the UK are the responsibility of his Department. [137541]

Angela Eagle: The OECD publishes comparative information on public social expenditure in its social expenditure database. There is no accurate way to strip out non-social security expenditure so as to arrive at a DSS-equivalent figure.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual amount of benefit fraud in the United Kingdom in each year since 1992. [137129]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available because there was no robust measurement of the level of benefit fraud before 1995.

We have now instituted a regular series of measurement exercises to provide an up to date estimate of the level of fraud in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. The results of this exercise are published regularly by the Government Statistical Service.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the awarding of contracts for the contents of the Millennium Dome to a company headed by Mr. Tim Pyne. [135017]

Janet Anderson: This matter is currently under investigation by the New Millennium Experience Company and the police. It is not therefore possible to comment at this stage. A statement will be made to the House in due course.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions have taken place between officials in his Department and Lord Falconer, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office regarding the report of the National Audit Office on the Millennium Dome. [137841]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* National Audit Office (NAO) reports are routinely circulated in draft to the Accounting Officers of all parties concerned, and comments are requested to ensure factual accuracy. Comments on factual accuracy from my Department, incorporating those from Ministers, including the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, were passed on to the team drafting the National Audit Office Report.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the party planned for the Millennium Dome on 31 December, indicating the financial arrangements agreed between the New Millennium Experience Company and the Ministry of Sound. [135325]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Dome will open to the public from 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. on 31 December. The Ministry of Sound event, in venues adjacent to the Dome, will begin at 9.00 p.m. after the Dome has closed. The risks and costs associated with staging the event (including policing, security, catering, medical etc.) are being fully borne by the Ministry of Sound. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has no exposure to losses arising from the Ministry of Sound event, and the Ministry of Sound are covering the costs to NMEC of providing the venues and the use of the technical facilities in those venues. This is an excellent value for money deal for NMEC which provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate Britain's youth and music.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the criteria and safeguards applied to ensure fairness and probity in the awarding of contracts in respect of the Millennium Dome. [136245]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company's policy is to conduct its procurement in accordance with Government procurement guidelines.

New Wembley Stadium

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his latest estimate is of the cost of the new Wembley Stadium project. [136837]

Kate Hoey: I do not wish to speculate on estimated costs for the new Wembley Stadium. This is a matter for Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Millennium Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what deadline the Millennium Commission has requested for the conclusion of discussions with Legacy plc over the prospective purchase of the Dome. [137234]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 November 2000]:* I have not received any request from the Millennium Commission for a deadline to be set for the conclusion of discussions with Legacy plc.

Broadcasting Standards

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 331–32W, what research has been conducted since May 1997 by the Broadcasting Standards Commission into public attitudes towards the portrayal of violence in broadcast programmes. [137998]

Janet Anderson: The Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) has conducted since May 1997 the following research into public attitudes towards the portrayal of violence in broadcast programmes:

Men Viewing Violence (Stirling Media Research Institute, and Violence Research Centre, Manchester University, 1998; ISBN 1–872521–33–9).

In addition the BSC was a member (with the BBC and the Independent Television Commission) of the Joint Working Party on Violence on Television. The Working Party's report "Violence and the Viewer" was published in 1998.

The BSC's recently published Briefing Update Number 6, "Matters of Offence", (published as part of the BSC's continuing monitoring of public perception of broadcasting, and including results from opinion pools and panels of viewers) includes a section on violence.

Television Reception (High Peak)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when *(a)* digital terrestrial television, *(b)* cable television and *(c)* Channel 5 will be available in High Peak. [137618]

Janet Anderson: Digital terrestrial television (DTT) can already be received in parts of High Peak. DTT is broadcast from the Winter Hill, Sheffield, Chesterfield and Emley Moor transmitters and maps showing the predicted coverage from each of these sites have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses on CD-ROM. The BBC and Independent Television Commission are now considering ways of improving DTT coverage across the UK. The provision of cable services is a commercial matter for the cable operators. I understand from the ITC that no operator has plans to supply cable to the High Peak Area. Terrestrial Channel 5 services are not universally available in the area but are carried free-to-air on DTT and satellite platforms.

Television Subtitling

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is on encouraging television subtitle-users to take up digital television prior to analogue television being switched off. [137920]

Janet Anderson: The Broadcasting Act 1996 sets out a target of 50 per cent. of subtitling of digital terrestrial television programmes by the 10th anniversary of the start of the service. This will give viewers access to additional free-to-air and subscription channels with subtitles if they switch to digital terrestrial television. More generally, we are working with the broadcasting industry and consumer groups to ensure that viewers get accurate and sensible information about digital television. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an agreed set of clear and simple messages on 31 October. We are keeping the rate of take-up of digital television under review to assess what further action might be needed to encourage take-up by all viewers.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137424]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I intend to participate in volunteering during 2001.

I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. Everyone benefits from volunteering and the Prime Minister has issued a challenge to employers to give their employees paid time off to work in the community. My Department has accepted this challenge and issued a notice to all staff advising them that they may take at least one day of paid leave a year to undertake voluntary activity.

Royal Art Collection

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it an objective of his Department to provide for the entire Royal Art Collection to be placed on public display. [137547]

Mr. Alan Howarth: No. The Royal Collection is not the responsibility of the Government. Responsibility for the care and display of the Royal Collection rests with the Royal Collection Trust. Any question concerning the Royal Collection should be addressed to the Trust.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Sheep

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many headage payments were paid for sheep in England in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; how many sheep were subsequently marketed in each of these years; and what factors underlay the totals in each category. [136440]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Information on sheep headage payments in England for the years requested was given in the answer to my hon. Friend on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1115–16W.

To be eligible for payment the sheep concerned must be ewes kept for breeding which meet the rules of the two schemes. For the sheep annual premium scheme—SAPS—these include that appropriate quota is held by the producer, and for the hill livestock compensatory allowance—HLCA—that the sheep were kept in the less-favoured areas.

We have no information on whether the sheep are subsequently marketed in the same year. However around a quarter of the breeding flock is culled most years, as are the majority of those ewes which turn out to be barren.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Reed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has made to the EU on the level of agrimonetary compensation in relation to the performance of the Euro; and if he will make a statement. [137057]

Ms Quin: Agrimonetary arrangements currently in place offset the effects of fluctuations between the euro and sterling. As a result, between 1999 and 2001, UK farmers are likely to benefit by around £496 million, in addition to the £133 million paid under the previous arrangements.

The most recent representation made to the EU Commission on this subject referred to the proposed payment of £34 million in agrimonetary compensation to arable farmers to offset the effects of currency fluctuations during 1999–2000: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W.

GM Trials

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason the trials of the forage maize, Chardon LL, genetically modified to be resistant to the herbicide glufosinate ammonium, did not involve the use of that herbicide. [136489]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* Glufosinate ammonium was used to establish distinctness of Chardon LL by the French Authorities who conducted the DUS (Distinctness, Uniformity and Stability) tests on behalf of the UK. However, I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 472W and 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 389W relating to those tests. Herbicide tolerance was not claimed by the National List applicant to be a special characteristic of Chardon LL for the purpose of trials for value for cultivation and use (VCU).

Sugar Beet (Self-sufficiency)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the sugar beet production in each of the EU member states showing the current level of self-sufficiency. [137550]

Ms Quin: The table provides details of sugar production, sugar consumption and the level of self-sufficiency in each member state for the July 1999 to June 2000 marketing year.

	Thousand tonnes			*Percentage*	
Member state	*Total beet sugar production*	*Total beet and cane sugar production*[1]	*Sugar consumption*	*Self sufficiency (beet)*	*Self sufficiency (beet and cane)*
Austria	501	501	320	157	157
Belgium/Luxembourg	1,092	1,092	543	201	201
Denmark	552	552	200	276	276
Finland	167	227	213	78	106
France	4,522	4,819	2,211	205	218
Germany	4,380	4,380	2,734	160	160
Greece	232	232	306	76	76
Ireland	212	212	131	162	162
Italy	1,705	1,705	1,423	120	120
Netherlands	1,117	1,117	635	176	176
Portugal	75	367	325	23	113
Spain	1,105	1,105	1,268	87	87
Sweden	431	431	367	117	117
UK	1,546	2,676	2,147	72	125
Total	17,637	19,416	12,824	138	151

[1] Total sugar includes sugar produced from cane grown in the EU under quota, or refined from cane maximum supply needs, in Finland, France, Portugal and the UK

Carlisle Office

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the number of staff at his Department's Carlisle regional office will be increased; and if he will make a statement. [137711]

Ms Quin: The number of staff based at the Carlisle Regional Service Centre varies according to business needs. The number of staff in post at the office on 1 November this year was 259, compared to 236 staff in post on 1 January 2000. The numbers are expected to continue to increase during the course of 2001.

Swine Fever

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will discuss with the devolved administrations legislation to provide for a levy from pig farmers as part of a package of compensation for swine fever. [138097]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Frequent discussions take place with the devolved Administrations at both ministerial and official level on all manner of topics, including classical swine fever. The industry is committed to consulting interested parties, including organisations based in Scotland and Wales on a levy based Development Scheme that will be used to top-up Government payments under the Pig Welfare (Disposal) Scheme.

Antibiotics

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence he has assessed which supports the proposition that antibiotics fed to animals cause resistance to that antibiotic in humans. [137743]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* An in-depth review of antibiotic resistance in relation to food safety was undertaken by the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) and it was published in September 1999. The Government's response to the ACMSF's recommendations was published on 24 March 2000. Copies of the Report and the Government's response are available in the Library of the House.

The ACMSF report included recommendations for further research to characterise the origins of resistance in foodborne pathogens and commensal micro-organisms so as to improve the identification of the sources and routes of transfer of resistant organisms from the farm through food to humans. The ACMSF also recommended research into the use of microbiological risk assessment to quantify the magnitude of the key pathways by which microbial antibiotic resistance can transfer from food animals to humans via the food chain and the environment.

The Government are committed to a co-ordinated research programme to investigate problems associated with resistance to antimicrobials in the context of public health. Such a programme is being co-ordinated by an Interdepartmental Steering Group on Resistance to Antibiotics and other Antimicrobial Agents. The Steering Group carries out this work as part of the implementation of the Government Strategy to combat antimicrobial resistance which was published in June. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

Fisheries

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the economic link measures introduced for the fisheries sector on 1 January 1999; and if he will make a statement. [138655]

Mr. Morley: From 1 January 1999 all British registered fishing vessels over 10 metres catching more than two tonnes of quota stocks have had to demonstrate an economic link with fisheries dependent communities in the United Kingdom. This link can be demonstrated in a number of ways, for example, by vessels landing at least 50 per cent. by weight of their quota catch into the UK or by employing a crew of whom at least 50 per cent. are normally resident in a UK coastal area.

In the first year of operation over 1,750 vessels caught more than two tonnes of quota stocks and in almost every case achieved a satisfactory economic link, primarily through landings into the UK. Where a small number have failed to make the full list in 1999 they will be expected to make this up in 2000 and future years. The new arrangements have resulted in a significant increase both in the volume of landings made by foreign owned UK flagged vessels and in local expenditure on goods and services in the UK. They have also led to over 300 tonnes of additional quota being made available to fishermen in the under 10 metre fleet and non sector.

A full report by the Fisheries Departments in the United Kingdom on the operation of the economic link measures and their impact in 1999 has been placed in the Library of the House.

Farming and Rural Conservation Agency

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the 1999–2000 Annual report for the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency. [138656]

Mr. Nick Brown: The 1999–2000 Annual report and accounts for the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency were laid before Parliament today. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

Hedges

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 5 October, reference 142881, if he will make a statement on hedges, field margins and area-linked payments. [136222]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 150W.

PRIME MINISTER

Road Fuel

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Prime Minister what assurances were *(a)* exchanged and *(b)* discussed with the oil companies at his meeting with them on Thursday 14 September concerning (i) petroleum revenue tax on North Sea oil producers, (ii) future levels of road fuel duties and (iii) measures to ensure continued delivery of road fuel; and if he will make a statement. [138280]

The Prime Minister: I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations, it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what were the reasons for the increase in the number of Government special advisers from 53 in June 1997 to 79 in June 2000. [136564]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The Government believe that experience over the last quarter of a century has shown that special advisers have a useful role to play. It also made no secret of its

intention to strengthen the centre of Government. The reason for the lower number in June 1997 is that a number of appointments had yet to be made.

TREASURY

Aviation Fuel (Taxation)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts regarding the taxation of aviation fuel. [137749]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* This subject was discussed at a meeting of Finance Ministers in June where it was agreed that the European Union should pursue negotiations on the international taxation of aviation fuel in the forum of the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

Diesel Fuel

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what conditions apply to the supply of diesel fuel to farmers at a reduced rate of duty. [137778]

Mr. Timms: The use of diesel charged at the 3.13p per litre rate of duty (red diesel) is restricted by schedule 1 to the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979. This usually means that farmers can use red diesel only in agricultural vehicles, including tractors, that are used solely for purposes relating to agriculture.

Independent Petrol Retailers

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to provide additional tax relief for small independent petrol retailers. [137635]

Mr. Timms: There are currently no plans for introducing additional tax relief for petrol retailers.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Devolution Issues

29. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Advocate-General how many devolution cases have been referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. [136349]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: Thus far, seven cases raising devolution issues have been referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

SCOTLAND

International Criminal Court

5. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive about giving effect in Scotland to the Rome treaty relating to the setting up of the International Criminal Court. [136325]

Mr. Wilson: I understand that the Scottish Executive will be introducing a Bill on the International Criminal Court next year.

Border Transport

6. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the new First Minister on the impact of the pre-Budget report on transport between Scotland and England. [136326]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with the First Minister on a wide range of issues including the benefits to Scotland from the Government's economic policies. In this context my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's recent pre-Budget report contains further measures of benefit to all transport users.

Vehicle Fuel Tax

7. **Mr. Peter Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the impact of vehicle fuel tax on the economy in Scotland. [136327]

Dr. Reid: Vehicle fuel tax is only one of many factors that have an impact on Scotland's economy and needs to be seen in the context of overall UK fiscal policy.

The measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his pre-Budget report to reduce fuel duties for cleaner fuels and vehicle excise duty will all bring significant financial benefits to Scotland's economy.

Dounreay

10. **Mr. Maclennan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will discuss the future of the Dounreay site in Caithness with the Atomic Energy Authority. [136330]

Dr. Reid: The UK Atomic Energy Authority published their Dounreay Site Restoration Plan on 9 October. The Authority's plans will require approval by the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Industries Inspectorate, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. I will be keeping in close touch with the progress of these considerations.

Petrol Prices

11. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact of petrol prices on the Scottish rural economy. [136331]

17. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the impact of vehicle fuel duties on rural communities in Scotland. [136337]

Mr. Wilson: Fuel prices are only one element that determines the effectiveness of the rural economy in Scotland. The impact of any individual item of taxation can only sensibly be seen within the overall context of fiscal policy.

The measures announced by the Chancellor in his pre-Budget report to raise the limit for the lower rate of Vehicle excise duty for cars of up to 1500cc, to remove vehicle excise duty for tractors and other agricultural vehicles, rebates of up to 50 per cent. of vehicle excise duty for heavy goods vehicles and the proposed reform of the VED system for HGVs will all bring significant financial benefits to Scotland's rural economy.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the First Minister on the impact of fuel prices on the Scottish economy. [136334]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with the First Minister on a number of issues relevant to all aspects of the Scottish economy.

Govan Shipyard

12. **Mr. Sarwar:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his recent visit to the Govan shipyard. [136332]

Dr. Reid: Following the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Defence that BAE Systems Govan would build two ALSLs, I visited the yard on 26 and 27 October to meet management, union officials and workers. This order is expected to secure jobs at the yard and sustain it for the future.

Scottish Executive

13. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the arrangements for liaison between his Department and the Scottish Executive. [136333]

Mr. Wilson: Effective liaison arrangements are in place at all levels, both ministerial and official.

Rosyth Dockyard

15. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has held with the Secretary of State for Defence about repairing Trafalgar and Swiftsure class submarines at the Rosyth dockyard. [136335]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence on a range of issues. The Ministry of Defence expect that the repair of Trafalgar and Swiftsure class submarines will be carried out at the submarines' home bases: Devonport or Faslane.

Rail Access (Wheelchair Users)

16. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent representations he has made on the provision by rail operators of full access arrangements for wheelchair-using passengers in Scotland. [136336]

Mr. Wilson: All new trains being introduced into service by operators in Scotland are subject to the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations, which require them to be fully accessible to wheelchair users. These regulations are underpinned by the Rail Regulator's Code of Practice, "Meeting the Needs of Disabled Passengers" which is currently being re-drafted.

I understand that Scotrail have recently introduced into service new "Turbostar" trains which are fully accessible to wheelchair users. Scotrail will also shortly be introducing new fully accessible "Juniper" trains which will be used on Strathclyde PTE services.

New Deal

18. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the operation of the New Deal in Scotland. [136338]

Mr. Wilson: The operation of the New Deal in Scotland has been a success. Over 28,000 young people have found work in just over two years. The New Deal is also helping long-term unemployed people, lone parents, disabled people and people over 50 find work. The success of the New Deal in Scotland is founded on a partnership with the Employment Service, the Scottish Executive and private and public sector partners.

Freight Facility Grants

19. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his oral answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 886, if he will make a further statement on freight facility grants in Scotland. [136339]

Dr. Reid: Administration of the Freight Facilities Grant Scheme for railways in Scotland is the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. The Scottish Executive recently announced a doubling of expenditure on Freight Facility Grants (FFG) to £36 million in the period from April 2001 to March 2004 and an increased target of removing 18 million lorry miles from Scottish roads.

Clydeside Shipyards

20. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent representations he has received concerning employment prospects in relation to commercial and Ministry of Defence contracts in respect of Clydeside shipyards. [136340]

Dr. Reid: Following the recent award by the Ministry of Defence for two ALSLs to BAE Systems at Govan, I received very favourable representations from the workforce about their confidence for the future of Govan. This has been further boosted by the news yesterday that Govan is to build eight Landing Craft. I know that Ferguson's have also had recent successes and BAE Systems at Scotstoun has a secure future in terms of Type 45 Destroyer work. There are, therefore, very good prospects for more than 3,000 workers in Clydeside shipyards.

Banknotes

21. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* the Scottish economy and *(b)* Scotland's identity of the use of Scottish banknotes. [136341]

Mr. Wilson: Scottish banknotes are a long established feature of commerce in Scotland. Apart from a very slight liquidity benefit accruing to Scottish banks authorised to issue their own notes, there is no direct impact on the Scottish economy. The issue of banknotes is determined according to UK monetary policy.

Disability Rights Commission

22. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the Disability Rights Commission in Scotland. [136342]

Dr. Reid: The Government are committed to full civil rights for disabled people. The Disability Rights Commission, which was set up on 25 April this year, is a major step forward towards achieving this. The Commission's remit extends throughout Great Britain and

it has an office in Scotland. Both the UK Government and the Scottish Executive are working closely with this office.

Since it was established, the Disability Rights Commission has been active on a number of fronts. It runs a Disability Discrimination Act helpline (on 08458 622633) and it expects to take some 50,000 calls by the end of 2000–01. It is dealing with around 40 cases per month, which involve advice to individuals, providing information on other bodies, conciliation and providing direct support. The Commission will also be preparing Codes of Practice for the Special Educational Needs and Disability in Education Bill. It is also engaged in research.

The Government will continue to work closely with the Commission to ensure that we continue to make progress on issues that concern disabled people.

NGOs

23. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action he has taken to co-ordinate Scottish non-governmental organisations involved in aid programmes and assistance to countries which have experienced conflict or humanitarian and natural disasters with the work of other UK organisations. [136343]

Mr. Wilson: There was a debate in the Scottish Grand Committee on 10 July about the Scottish Contribution to International Development. To mark this debate, my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development hosted an international development reception at the Scotland Office building at Melville Crescent, Edinburgh. This reception enabled representatives of Scottish non-governmental organisations engaged in overseas work to meet in an informal atmosphere and discuss issues of concern with Ministers and officials.

This Government have a strong commitment to International Development. The UK is a leading player in the international objective of halving by 2015 the proportion of those living in extreme poverty. To help achieve this, the proportion of the UK's Gross National Product being devoted to overseas aid will rise from 0.29 per cent. in 2000–01 to 0.33 per cent. in 2003–04.

Scotland plays a major part in the work carried out by the UK. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said at the Scottish Grand Committee, his Department works closely with Scottish institutions and society, and the Scottish Executive, to help achieve the Government's objectives.

Pensioners

24. **Ms Roseanna Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor on the level of the basic State Pension and pensioner poverty in Scotland. [136344]

Dr. Reid: I have frequent discussions with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Social Security on a wide range of issues.

The Government announced in the pre-Budget report that the level of the basic state retirement pension would be increased by £5 a week for single people in April 2001 and by £8 for married couples. The Government also announced that in April 2002 the pension for single people will be further increased by £3 with the pension for couples going up then by £4.80. These increases are excellent news for the around 900,000 pensioners in Scotland.

The Government have taken major steps to combat pensioner poverty in Scotland. In the pre-Budget report, we announced that the Minimum Income Guarantee would be increased, from April 2001, to £92.15 a week for a single pensioner and £140.55 a week for couples. We also indicated that the Minimum Income Guarantee would be at least £100 a week for a single pensioner and £154 for a pensioner couple by 2003. The Winter Fuel Allowance will be set at £200 per eligible household this winter, which helps around one million people in Scotland.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has announced details of the proposed pensions credit which will benefit single pensioners with incomes below £135 and pensioner couples with incomes below £200.

Minimum Wage

25. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what impact the National Minimum Wage has had on wage rates in Scotland. [136345]

Mr. Wilson: The introduction of the National Minimum Wage has resulted in increased wage rates for over 100,000 people in Scotland, especially women and part-time workers, without any indication of significant adverse effect on employment and the economy.

Barnett Formula

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the operation of the Barnett formula. [136329]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about a range of matters. The Barnett formula continues to provide a fair deal for Scotland within a United Kingdom framework.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Violence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many non-molestation orders were issued in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 1989. [137881]

Jane Kennedy: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is as follows:

Non-molestation orders granted

	1999[1]	*1989*[2]
Magistrates court	588	[3]—
County court	17,774	14,239
High Court	103	[3]—
Total	18,465	14,239

[1] Under Family Law Act 1996, Part IV
[2] Under Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976
[3] Not collected

Angel Heights Hostel, Leeds

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what support the National Asylum Support Service is provided for the asylum seekers living in the Angel Heights hostel in Leeds; and if he will make a statement. [135831]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service is aware of two hostels in Leeds used for housing asylum seekers: Angel Hall and Angel House. Angel Group Ltd., a contracted provider of accommodation to the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), operates both of these hostels. Neither of these hostels is currently under contract to the National Asylum Support Service.

However, Angel Group Ltd. has occasionally used Angel Hall as a drop-off point and reception centre for asylum seekers dispersed to Leeds by NASS. These asylum seekers have then been moved to other addresses within the Leeds area.

One asylum seeker supported by NASS was temporarily housed for a short period in one of the Angel hostels in Leeds. NASS does use a hostel in Newcastle upon Tyne operated by Angel Group Ltd. called Angel Heights.

Residence Permits

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the average length of time is of applications for *(a)* residence documents and *(b)* endorsements given to third country national spouses of EU nationals exercising Treaty rights who have been granted indefinite leave to remain; [137823]

(2) how many applications for residence permits or leave to remain as the spouse of an EEA national exercising Treaty rights were refused on the basis that he believed the marriage to be one of convenience in 1999; [137274]

(3) what the average time was for consideration of *(a)* applications for residence documents and *(b)* evidence made by third country national family members of EU nationals exercising Treaty rights in the United Kingdom in 1999; [137284]

(4) how many applications for *(a)* residence documents and *(b)* endorsements by third country national spouses of Community nationals exercising Treaty rights were refused on the basis that he considered the marriage to be one of convenience during 1999; [137279]

(5) what was the average time for consideration of applications for residence permits for EU nationals exercising Treaty rights in the United Kingdom in 1999. [137285]

Mrs. Roche: This information is no longer recorded centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The way in which the Immigration and Nationality Directorate handles European Economic Area (EEA) applications is currently being reviewed. Once the review has taken place we should be in a position to provide more detailed statistical information relating to EEA applications.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many applications for residence permits were made by EU nationals exercising Treaty rights in the United Kingdom in 1999; [137276]

(2) how many applications for residence documents by EU nationals exercising Treaty rights in the United Kingdom were granted in 1999; [137288]

(3) how many applications for residence permits for EU nationals exercising Treaty rights were issued for a period of less than five years, during 1999; [137280]

(4) how many residence documents and evidence of residence were granted to third country national family members of EU national exercising Treaty rights in the United Kingdom during 1999; [137286]

(5) how many applications for residence documents by third national family members of EU nationals exercising Treaty rights were made in 1999. [137287]

Mrs. Roche: Available statistics do not record separately European Economic Area (EEA) decisions made on applications for residence permits and residence documents and this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. During 1999, 7,322 EEA decisions were made, although this figure will include some decisions on applications that were made in late 1998. This figure does not include numbers of persons who have been admitted to the United Kingdom in line with EEA family permits or numbers of those whose applications were made during the end of 1999, but not resolved until early this year.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many EU nationals he estimates exercised Treaty rights in the UK during the period 1 January to 31 December 1999. [137282]

Mrs. Roche: Because of the principles of freedom of movement there is no obligation for an European Economic Area national to hold a residence permit. It is therefore not possible to provide this information.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many letters were sent to Community nationals in the United Kingdom in 1999 advising them that they were no longer considered to be exercising Treaty rights and should therefore leave the United Kingdom. [137281]

Mrs. Roche: This information is not specifically recorded.

Service Providers

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statutory measures the Government have adopted in the UK to give third country national employees of service providers based in another member state the right to provide services in the UK. [137291]

Mrs. Roche: No statutory measures have been adopted. Effect is given to implementing this judgment through instructions that third country national employees of service providers established in another member state are not required to obtain work permits for employees being sent to provide services in the United Kingdom.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is as regards applications for exceptional leave to remain in respect of persons who are *(a)* HIV positive and *(b)* have AIDS and who if returned to their home country would not be able to receive appropriate medical treatment. [137374]

Mrs. Roche: The United Kingdom is a signatory to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) now given effect in domestic law by the Human Rights Act 1998. In accordance with our obligations under Article 3 of the ECHR, exceptional leave to remain may be granted where credible medical evidence exists that return to the country of origin, due to a lack of medical facilities in the country concerned, would substantially reduce an applicant's life expectancy and subject them to acute physical and mental suffering, in circumstances where the United Kingdom can be regarded as having assumed responsibility for their care. Each case is considered on its own merits.

Drug Abuse Projects

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those projects his Department supports which highlight the dangers of drug abuse to children and young people. [137338]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office does not fund such projects which, at local level, are the responsibility of Drug Action Teams. The Drugs Prevention Advisory Service of the Home Office, however, does support local initiatives and the work of Drug Action Teams.

The Prison Service drug strategy, which includes counselling and information leaflets as well as detoxification, drug testing and treatment, applies equally to young offenders and adults.

At a national level, the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator Unit (UKADCU) has responsibility for the 10-year strategy of joint action to tackle the problem of drug misuse. One of the aims of the strategy is to ensure that young people have access to all the information and support they need in order to resist drug misuse and thus to achieve their full potential in society. The Department of Health, which is the lead department in the area, is contributing to this objective through a wide range of projects and initiatives that are listed in the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's Annual Report 1999/2000, copies of which are available in the Library.

The Young Justice Board, which is a non-departmental public body, currently funds 32 projects for young people with a drugs and alcohol focus.

Special Police Constables

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special police constables were recruited to the Kingston Metropolitan Police Division in each year from 1992 to 1999. [137595]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collected centrally in the form requested.

I am advised by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) that, the number of police special constables recruited to the Kingston division is as follows:

Year	*Number*
1997	2
1998	1
1999	0

Their latest figures show that three special constables have so far been recruited this year (2000).

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police special constables were on active duty in the Kingston Metropolitan police division in each year from 1992 to 2000. [137596]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am advised by the Metropolitan police Service (MPS) that they define special constables on active duty as being those officers who perform more than 96 hours per annum. Using this definition, the number of police special constables on active duty in the Kingston Metropolitan division in each of the year 1995 to 2000 is as follows:

	Number
1995	18
1996	26
1997	31
1998	11
1999	10
2000	12

The data are based upon the present divisional boundaries of Kingston, which are now co-terminus with those of the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames. It therefore excludes those officers who served within those parts of the Kingston Metropolitan police district which were transferred to Surrey police during 2000. The data on these individuals are not currently available, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Similarly, the equivalent data are not available for the years 1992 to 1994 and, again, could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Police Officer Retirements

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many serving police officers in the Kingston Metropolitan police division are due to retire in 2000–01. [137594]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am advised by the Commissioner of the police of the Metropolis that three officers retired on ordinary pension and a further five were medically retired during the period from 1 April 2000 to 31 October 2000.

Records show that between 1 November 2000 and 31 March 2001 there are a further 10 officers who are eligible to retire by virtue of either age or length of service.

Asylum Seekers (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of management arrangements for asylum seekers at the Landmark and Inn on the Park in Liverpool. [137522]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service Performance Monitoring Inspections section has reviewed all management procedures in place at Landmark Liverpool and all other private sector providers. Where these reviews have identified some shortfalls in procedures these have been addressed.

The National Asylum Support Service Performance Monitoring Inspections section regularly assesses the implementation of these procedures as part of its work.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of support services provided to asylum seekers by private landlords in Liverpool. [137521]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service has a dedicated Performance Monitoring Inspections team. These inspectors regularly review with providers of accommodation, housing management issues and the delivery of the support services specified in their contracts.

NDPBs (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137701]

Mr. Straw: The following non-departmental public bodies, sponsored by my Department, have a remit which covers Great Britain or the United Kingdom:

Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs
Alcohol Education and Research Council
Animal Procedures Committee
Commission for Racial Equality
Community Development Foundation
Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority
Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel
Data Protection Tribunal
Firearms Consultative Committee
Gaming Board for Great Britain
Horse Race Betting Levy Board
Horse Race Totalisator Board
Investigatory Powers Tribunal
Misuse of Drugs Advisory Body
Misuse of Drugs Professional Panel
Misuse of Drugs Tribunal
Office of the Data Protection Commissioner
Poisons Board
Police Arbitration Tribunal
Police Information Technology Organisation
Police Negotiating Board
Office of the Surveillance Commissioners.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested but general information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Library, "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

Charities

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many charities have failed in each year since 1995. [137718]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not collected centrally.

Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when compensation to Mr. John Slough, a constituent, for specialist tooling equipment held by the West Mercia Police, will be paid under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997; and if he will make a statement. [137619]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* Compensation has already been paid to Mr. Slough in respect of a range of items eligible for payment under the terms of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 Compensation Schemes. The Government do not accept that other items on which he is seeking compensation fall within the terms of the schemes. We have made a number of proposals to Mr. Slough as to how further progress might be made on his claim. It is open to Mr. Slough to retrieve from the police those items he surrendered which are not covered by the compensation scheme.

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will place the draft working document of the Fees Regulations for the Freedom of Information Bill in the Library. [138535]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The draft working document for the Fees Regulations required by the Freedom of Information Bill was placed in the Library on 10 November.

National Asylum Support Service

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the level of support provided by the National Asylum Support Service for those aged under 16 years. [138536]

Mrs. Roche: I laid before Parliament, yesterday, regulations amending the Asylum Support Regulations 2000 to enable an increased rate of voucher support to be provided to under 16-year-old dependants of asylum seekers supported by the National Asylum Support Service with effect from 4 December. The rate will rise from £26.60 to £30.95 per week.

Chief Inspector for Prisons and Probation

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome was of the consultation on the appointment of a joint Chief Inspector for Prisons and Probation. [138537]

Mr. Straw: As I announced on 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 392–93W, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham's appointment was extended until the end of July 2001 when Sir Graham Smith, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation, is also due to retire.

In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for the Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 879W, I told the House that I had established a consultation exercise to gauge public opinion on proposals, including the option of a joint Chief Inspector, designed to ensure that the Inspectorates of prisons and probation support closer working between the two services while maintaining the independence and rigour of the inspection process. The consultation exercise ended on 31 October. Copies of the responses to the consultation exercise will be placed in the Library.

A majority of those consulted favoured some change—establishing terms of reference for the inspection of joint working between the criminal justice agencies and the sharing of inspectors between the Inspectorates. In contrast, only small minorities were in favour of the status quo, or of the appointment of a joint Chief Inspector for prisons and probation.

During the consultation exercise a helpful scheme was put forward by Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors of Constabulary, the Crown Prosecution Service, Magistrates' Courts, Probation, and Prisons to inspect practice across their boundaries systematically. This scheme has much to recommend it and the consultation exercise also suggests that it will command broad support. It is therefore the option which I propose to pursue, along with the arrangements canvassed in the consultation exercise for bringing the work of the Inspectorates closer together.

Both Sir David and Sir Graham have made significant contributions to raising standards in the prison and probation services respectively, and I am grateful to them for their work. In view of the retirements in July next year I shall be advertising both Chief Inspector posts in the New Year.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he has given to magistrates on implementing anti-social behaviour orders. [136352]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Training for lay magistrates is organised and delivered locally but is based on the advice and syllabuses prepared by the Judicial Studies Board. In addition to the training pack and handout on anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO) which were sent out by the Board last year, we have issued two booklets to the relevant agencies including the magistrates' courts service: "Anti-Social Behaviour Orders—Guidance", produced by the Home Office in March 1999; and "Anti-Social Behaviour Orders—Guidance on drawing up local ASBO Protocols", produced jointly by the Home Office and the Local Government Association in June 2000.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those local authorities that have issued anti-social behaviour orders since April 1999 and the number of orders in each case. [138327]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Over 100 anti-social behaviour orders have been issued since the measure was implemented on 1 April 1999. Figures for the numbers of orders obtained by local authority area are not held centrally.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions there were in each police force area in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1987, *(c)* 1992, *(d)* 1997 and *(e)* in each following year up to the latest date for which figures are available. [137859]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information for 1979 to 1998 can be found in the following annual publications:

Tables 3A and 7A of Criminal statistics England and Wales 1979 (Command Paper 8098).

Tables S3.2(A) and S3.4(A) of Criminal statistics England and Wales 1987, 1992, 1997 and 1998 Supplementary tables Volume 3.

Copies of these publications are in the Library.

Copies of tables providing data for 1999 have also been placed in the Library. The Command Paper Criminal statistics England and Wales 1999, along with its Supplementary tables, Volumes 1 to 4, will be published next month.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* violent crimes and *(b)* total recorded crimes there were in each police force area in (i) 1979, (ii) 1987, (iii) 1992, (iv) 1997 and (v) in each following year up to the latest date for which figures are available. [137858]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested data are shown in the following tables. The violent crime figures are the total of violence against the person offences, sexual offences and robbery.

The figures before and after 1 April 1998 cannot be directly compared. This is because the Counting Rules for recorded crime were changed on 1 April 1998, with an expanded coverage of offences and the emphasis more on measurement of one crime per victim. All offences that are triable on indictment and triable either-way have been counted since this date, as are some summary offences which are closely linked to more serious offences. The change increased the overall count in England and Wales of the offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery by 118 per cent., 4 per cent. and 1 per cent. respectively. More details of the change in counting rules can be found in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/99, entitled "Recorded Crime Statistics England and Wales April 1998 to March 1999", which is in the Library.

Recorded crime—total violent crime

Police force area	*1979*	*1987*	*1992*	*1997*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]	*1999–2000*[1]
Avon and Somerset	2,661	4,766	7,057	12,176	13,219	14,985	16,061
Bedfordshire	1,846	2,421	2,759	4,516	4,476	5,668	6,121
Cambridgeshire	1,324	1,981	3,505	4,104	4,202	6,213	7,056
Cheshire	1,785	2,692	3,563	4,584	4,733	7,623	6,645
Cleveland	1,720	2,677	3,208	3,397	3,432	4,237	4,278
Cumbria	908	1,584	2,213	3,158	3,378	5,901	5,456
Derbyshire	2,410	3,001	4,736	6,264	6,692	9,569	11,149
Devon and Cornwall	2,645	3,695	4,901	7,746	7,828	13,096	13,902
Dorset	911	1,433	2,014	2,540	2,583	3,325	4,034
Durham	1,558	2,467	3,012	2,407	2,408	5,370	5,884
Essex	2,818	4,093	5,484	5,781	6,016	9,443	11,480
Gloucestershire	737	1,272	2,183	2,065	2,121	3,847	4,854
Greater Manchester	6,696	10,873	15,847	21,802	25,275	45,615	51,076
Hampshire	3,380	4,750	6,971	9,710	9,761	14,253	17,494
Hertfordshire	1,550	2,182	2,525	2,890	2,995	3,884	4,471
Humberside	3,382	5,980	6,142	7,758	7,741	10,947	10,752
Kent	2,633	3,865	7,441	8,924	8,666	14,045	14,683
Lancashire	2,654	3,757	4,146	5,550	5,718	12,183	11,615
Leicestershire	1,816	2,975	4,913	6,856	6,971	11,715	12,976
Lincolnshire	1,206	1,859	2,664	3,487	3,548	4,781	4,369
City of London	225	281	321	241	255	570	595
Merseyside	5,162	7,291	9,875	11,130	11,399	15,711	18,237
Metropolitan Police	24,995	44,537	67,098	87,393	84,344	165,981	202,386
Norfolk	1,064	1,741	2,429	3,565	3,570	6,189	7,094
Northamptonshire	1,386	2,374	3,054	3,688	3,730	5,995	5,896
Northumbria	4,172	5,811	8,178	6,503	6,584	14,767	15,935
North Yorkshire	1,182	1,713	2,276	2,885	2,930	5,294	5,607
Nottinghamshire	5,079	7,582	10,462	10,247	10,238	14,312	16,384
South Yorkshire	3,824	5,171	6,205	6,155	6,088	8,210	9,372
Staffordshire	3,421	4,705	6,289	8,178	8,373	11,188	14,640
Suffolk	1,178	1,897	2,612	2,989	3,105	4,365	5,915
Surrey	1,453	2,023	2,644	3,061	3,447	4,914	6,099
Sussex	2,693	3,425	4,521	7,561	7,482	16,613	18,947
Thames Valley	3,142	5,370	6,618	8,589	8,557	12,990	16,531
Warwickshire	769	1,080	1,640	1,637	1,712	2,427	2,581
West Mercia	2,112	2,920	4,180	4,213	4,080	7,964	9,157
West Midlands	8,337	11,910	18,228	17,833	19,286	40,319	55,026
West Yorkshire	6,703	8,940	13,727	12,518	12,677	21,529	22,632
Wiltshire	1,065	1,959	3,180	2,892	3,063	4,989	5,135
Dyfed-Powys	773	1,310	2,626	2,503	2,511	5,039	5,839
Gwent	1,330	1,980	2,845	6,139	6,131	11,980	14,493
North Wales	1,516	2,335	3,060	3,167	3,310	5,164	6,258
South Wales	3,064	4,151	6,847	8,262	8,238	12,587	13,990
England and Wales	129,285	198,829	284,199	347,064	352,873	605,797	703,105

[1] The counting rules for recorded crime were revised on 1 April 1998

Recorded crime—all offences

Police force area	*1979*	*1987*	*1992*	*1997*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]	*1998–99*[2]	*1999–2000*[2]
Avon and Somerset	51,333	100,823	175,404	143,128	144,556	131,955	150,089	147,104
Bedfordshire	28,097	40,707	59,436	47,426	45,250	43,947	49,076	53,607
Cambridgeshire	24,645	34,097	66,339	60,050	58,864	59,678	67,256	68,722
Cheshire	30,396	51,376	79,491	60,363	60,716	59,414	65,119	64,528
Cleveland	34,846	60,236	84,312	64,445	63,634	63,726	67,030	65,185
Cumbria	19,531	28,655	45,336	35,810	35,777	35,171	40,202	37,729
Derbyshire	38,640	46,722	88,449	73,792	74,436	74,047	84,459	85,650
Devon and Cornwall	43,480	74,495	114,675	94,828	92,800	88,484	110,644	110,361
Dorset	23,260	38,663	52,238	44,104	43,536	43,903	52,755	52,332
Durham	27,351	45,023	67,315	47,976	47,311	44,178	50,413	48,796
Essex	54,060	75,419	115,062	90,158	89,380	87,147	95,797	102,777
Gloucestershire	16,589	33,997	60,601	47,533	46,044	44,000	48,206	50,993
Greater Manchester	169,749	318,869	395,195	307,403	315,000	336,172	362,450	377,086
Hampshire	66,910	99,649	153,256	124,306	121,042	115,008	128,253	135,174
Hertfordshire	38,801	42,769	59,129	50,050	49,426	46,255	49,309	52,741
Humberside	48,195	88,570	128,743	121,330	123,722	119,290	130,691	121,442
Kent	55,370	78,629	159,881	122,955	118,892	110,244	129,340	124,918
Lancashire	57,105	94,117	132,138	119,755	116,947	105,161	118,085	108,866
Leicestershire	30,351	50,900	97,468	81,259	81,183	81,714	93,397	94,577
Lincolnshire	17,539	34,729	49,306	43,381	41,792	39,718	46,670	46,170
City of London	6,809	7,524	6,768	5,130	5,137	6,035	7,144	7,775
Merseyside	108,433	166,513	149,672	125,979	125,312	130,606	140,874	148,172
Metropolitan Police	557,378	737,151	942,876	791,732	778,279	767,880	934,254	1,052,047
Norfolk	22,655	41,575	66,996	53,332	52,580	51,167	57,129	59,387

Recorded crime—all offences

Police force area	*1979*	*1987*	*1992*	*1997*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]	*1998–99*[2]	*1999–2000*[2]
Northamptonshire	22,966	39,926	59,550	54,047	53,645	55,842	65,466	61,240
Northumbria	99,512	172,057	224,442	140,166	134,457	132,588	151,298	142,279
North Yorkshire	21,887	37,494	54,816	50,252	50,297	48,372	55,309	53,554
Nottinghamshire	72,659	97,957	164,417	128,015	125,097	123,680	135,255	136,875
South Yorkshire	56,340	95,372	137,336	130,960	125,907	124,427	133,059	131,700
Staffordshire	37,952	57,766	97,536	89,957	89,820	84,495	91,919	98,852
Suffolk	20,152	31,656	44,721	35,639	35,262	34,280	39,908	43,355
Surrey	26,965	32,971	53,468	38,440	38,015	36,376	42,467	46,288
Sussex	48,609	66,976	119,364	111,624	110,320	111,468	130,402	136,566
Thames Valley	75,740	117,823	197,799	157,423	154,014	161,646	176,477	191,875
Warwickshire	13,986	25,213	44,996	35,725	35,604	35,659	38,485	38,593
West Mercia	35,088	52,658	79,175	76,762	75,330	69,451	81,782	84,797
West Midlands	156,671	266,799	329,260	278,975	277,970	276,512	314,628	364,887
West Yorkshire	128,675	184,049	305,264	244,142	242,646	246,438	273,809	260,237
Wiltshire	20,545	27,471	42,229	33,039	32,831	32,984	38,189	38,461
Dyfed-Powys	11,752	18,655	28,539	18,098	17,994	17,858	24,588	23,709
Gwent	20,498	27,093	40,961	47,268	47,043	47,381	58,738	60,132
North Wales	23,589	37,415	49,204	40,684	38,658	36,570	43,848	44,606
South Wales	71,628	111,642	168,554	130,886	128,811	120,890	134,820	127,040
England and Wales	2,536,737	3,892,201	5,591,717	4,598,327	4,545,337	4,481,817	5,109,089	5,301,185

[1] Estimate of total for year if counting rules in force up to 31 March 1998 had been used.
[2] Using the counting rules for recorded crime which came in on 1 April 1998.

Police Numbers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total number of police per head of population was in each police force area in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* the latest date for which figures are available. [137860]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is set out in the table in the form of population per police officer.

Force	*Population per officer as at 31 March*			
	1979	*1992*	*1997*	*2000*
Avon and Somerset	472	464	491	507
Bedfordshire	549	489	502	541
Cambridgeshire	536	536	540	582
Cheshire	517	516	479	489
City of London	7	5	6	7
Cleveland	426	378	382	396
Cumbria	447	416	429	455
Derbyshire	573	551	537	546
Devon and Cornwall	513	523	538	549
Dorset	520	514	531	529
Durham	460	435	416	390
Dyfed-Powys	474	496	474	461
Essex	555	510	511	547
Gloucestershire	460	459	491	500
Greater Manchester	415	363	372	379
Gwent	454	443	447	441
Hampshire	532	531	508	518
Hertfordshire	451	497	491	497
Humberside	457	431	434	457
Kent	532	501	478	491
Lancashire	442	440	439	449
Leicestershire	490	483	476	456
Lincolnshire	453	496	515	559
Merseyside	349	312	336	345
Metropolitan Police	333	259	284	302
Norfolk	556	537	543	572
Northamptonshire	570	507	513	551
Northumbria	444	414	390	376
North Wales	479	486	479	469
North Yorkshire	493	516	549	578
Nottinghamshire	460	436	444	468
South Wales	439	415	414	424
South Yorkshire	512	430	413	412
Staffordshire	504	481	477	489
Suffolk	557	544	561	586
Surrey	504	450	479	441
Sussex	466	479	477	531
Thames Valley	659	523	559	561
Warwickshire	558	495	541	563
West Mercia	560	540	547	602
West Midlands	453	377	371	365
West Yorkshire	437	406	405	438
Wiltshire	518	471	514	542
Total for England and Wales	447	406	414	430

Women in Prison

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has commissioned on the impact of a mother receiving a custodial sentence on her children; and if he will make a statement. [137353]

Mr. Boateng: The most recently published study of imprisoned mothers was "Imprisoned Women and Mothers" by Caddle and Crisp. It was commissioned by the Prison Service and published in 1997 (Home Office Research Study 162). The entire female prisoner population at the end of 1994, comprising 1,766 women, were surveyed. In-depth interviews were conducted with the 61 per cent. of that population who were either pregnant or mothers of children under 18.

In the report of a "Review of Principles, Policies and Procedures on Mothers and Babies/Children in Prison" (Her Majesty's Prison Service July 1999) and the Prison Service's Response and Action Plan (December 1999), a number of areas of research concerning the children of women prisoners was recommended. The Prison Service is giving consideration to these recommendations. Copies of both documents were placed in the Library.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the cost of keeping a mother and child in a mother and baby unit for one week. [137356]

Mr. Boateng: At present no separate budget is allocated to the mother and baby units. The cost of running the unit is met from the individual establishment's central budget. Mother and baby units (MBU) do not have a standard cost

as the physical accommodation offered is different in each one. Additionally the regimes offered differ from prison to prison depending on its security category and its function within the female estate. The information requested is given in the table.

	Prisoner places	Open/closed	Weekly cost per prisoner place on MBU (£)
Askham Grange	20	Open	636
Holloway	13	Closed	858
New Hall	9	Closed	863
Styal	20	Closed	939

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women received a custodial sentence; what was the average length of sentence; and what proportion of those women were imprisoned for offences of violence, in each of the past five years. [137351]

Mr. Boateng: Available information, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table.

Number of females sentenced to immediate custody for indictable and all offences, average sentence length given and proportion of these sentences which were for violent[1] offences England and Wales 1995–99

	Total immediate custody	Average sentence length (months)	Percentage of custodial sentences which were for violent[1] offences
Indictable offences			
1995	3,344	11.0	16
1996	3,883	12.3	16
1997	4,807	10.9	15
1998	5,779	9.9	14
1999	6,608	9.8	13
All offences			
1995	3,792	10.0	15
1996	4,403	11.1	14
1997	5,506	9.8	13
1998	6,567	9.0	12
1999	7,504	8.9	11

[1] Includes indictable offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women were remanded in custody in each of the past five years; what proportion of these women later received a custodial sentence; and how many of them were mothers of children under 18 years. [137352]

Mr. Boateng: Information on the number of females remanded to custody is given in the tables. This information is published in successive volumes of "Prison statistics England and Wales" (Tables 2.2 and 2.6 of the 1999 edition, column 4805), copies of which are in the Library. Survey research suggests that about 60 per cent. of women in prison are pregnant or have children under 18 years. Separate figures are not available for those on remand.

Table 1: Receptions[1] of untried and convicted unsentenced females into prisons in England and Wales 1995–99

Year	Untried	Convicted unsentenced
1995	2,940	1,778
1996	3,343	1,994
1997	3,974	2,436
1998	4,540	3,442
1999	4,587	3,935

[1] Total receptions cannot be calculated by adding together receptions in each category because there is double counting

Table 2: Final court outcome for females remanded in custody at some stage in magistrates court proceedings[1]

England and Wales	Estimated percentages				
Final court outcome[2]	1995[3]	1996	1997	1998	1999[4]
Acquitted etc.	24	24	23	21	21
Convicted[5]	76	76	77	79	79
Discharge	7	7	8	8	7
Fine	7	6	8	7	7
Community Service[6]	22	22	25	25	25
Fully suspended sentence	1	1	1	1	1
Immediate custody[7]	33	32	31	32	35
Total	100	100	100	100	100

[1] Includes persons remanded in custody by magistrates during proceedings or on committal
[2] Includes estimated outcome at the Crown court for those committed for trial or sentence
[3] Uses Crown court (CREST) data from 1 July to 31 December 1995
[4] Provisional figures
[5] Includes offences otherwise dealt with
[6] Includes CSO, probation, supervision orders and attendance centre orders
[7] Includes detention in a young offender institution and unsuspended imprisonment

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women's prisons provide facilities for extended day visits for children; and if he will make it his policy that all women's prisons should provide such facilities. [137355]

Mr. Boateng: Nine women's prisons offer extended visits, two have recently considered the feasibility of providing them, and the other two have open conditions. Our policy is to encourage establishments to provide such facilities wherever possible, although the extent to which each establishment is able to deliver this will depend upon individual operational and resource considerations. For this reason, I do not plan to make mandatory the provision of such facilities, either in women's prisons or the prison estate as a whole.

Correspondence

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the hon. Member for Manchester, Central's letters of 31 August and 12 September concerning the case of Mr. F. (F245203). [137901]

Mrs. Roche: I replied to my hon. Friend on 7 November. I am sorry for the delay.

Immigration

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average timescale is for dealing with family reunion cases referred to the Home Office by the High Commission in Nairobi. [137988]

Mrs. Roche: This information is not available. A number of new initiatives have been put in place to clear all backlogs of entry clearance applications and to provide a faster turnround time for new applications in the future.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when a decision will be made in the case of RHJ (reference AS31747) whose case was referred to the Home Office from the High Commission in Addis Ababa on 14 September. [137902]

Mrs. Roche: The case will be considered urgently and a decision will be made as soon as possible. I am sorry that one has not been made before now.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances is *(a)* exceptional leave and *(b)* indefinite leave granted to applicants seeking leave to remain in the United Kingdom. [137989]

Mrs. Roche: Indefinite leave to remain is granted to qualifying applicants in accordance with the criteria set out under a number of categories in the Immigration Rules (HC 395, as amended). Grants of exceptional leave to remain outside the Immigration Rules will be based on the particular circumstances of individual cases. More detailed information may be obtained from the published version of the Immigration Directorate's Instructions which is available on the Home Office website.

Drug-related Crimes

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the target times following arrest are for an individual to have an assessment under the arrest referral scheme for drug-related crimes. [136610]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are no specific target times for arrest referral assessments for drug related offenders. The aim is for referred arrestees to have an assessment as soon as possible.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Child Abduction Unit

36. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the work of the Child Abduction Unit in assisting UK citizens whose children have been abducted to Greece. [136358]

Jane Kennedy: The Child Abduction Unit exercises the Lord Chancellor's day-to-day responsibilities as the Central Authority for England and Wales and Northern Ireland for the operation of the Hague and European Conventions on international child abduction, both in relation to Greece and other countries. In addition to receiving and transmitting requests for the return of children or for exercising rights of access, the Child Abduction Unit gives help and advice to parents, other Central Authorities, the judiciary, the legal profession and anyone else who asks for it.

Magistrates Courts (Closures)

37. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many successful appeals against closure of magistrates courts there were in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; what this figure represents as a percentage of all appeals made; and if he will make a statement. [136359]

Jane Kennedy: In 1997 there were two successful appeals against the closure of magistrates courts; in 1998, there was one successful appeal; and one in 1999. In percentage terms, this is 12 per cent. for 1997; 4 per cent. for 1998 and 11 per cent. for 1999.

The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that decisions concerning the future of magistrates courts in an MCC area are for the relevant Committee to determine.

Public Trust Office

38. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the work of the Public Trust Office. [136360]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor made a statement on the Public Trust Office on 11 April 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords,* WA28–29, and issued "Making Changes: The Future of the Public Trust Office". This document sets out a programme of reform for the Public Trust Office which, after allowing for an appropriate period of consultation, we are now proceeding to implement in the light of the representations received.

Solicitors (Redress)

40. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to improve the methods of seeking redress against solicitors. [136362]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor wrote to the President of the Law Society on 23 July 1999, when he set down targets and a timetable for improvements in the performance at the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. A copy of this letter is available in the Libraries of both Houses. Following my visit to the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors on 9 October, the Law Society is considering suggested improvements to the avenues and mechanisms through which clients seek redress.

Access to Justice (Cheshire)

41. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on access to justice in Cheshire. [136364]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave him on 25 July 2000, *Official Report,* columns 541–42W.

There are nine magistrates courts, nine county courts and three Crown courts. In Cheshire, as elsewhere, courts are been modernised, fit for the 21st Century. For example, one of the aims of the Crown Court Programme is to improve efficiency and enhance the facilities at all Crown court centres, irrespective of size, location or current accommodation limitations.

The Community Legal Service (CLS) will improve access to good quality legal advice, through local networks of legal services. There are now 154 firms of solicitors and advice agencies in Cheshire in the latest edition of the CLS Directory, which means they either

have the CLS Quality Mark already or are likely to apply for the Quality Mark in the near future. They will provide the local CLS network in Cheshire. A CLS Partnership has also been set up covering Cheshire, which will co-ordinate the funding and provision of local services. Since its launch in May, the Cheshire CLS Partnership has been particularly focused on developing referral procedures for the local network, and it has recently held training days for local solicitors and advice agencies on referrals.

NDPBs (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137626]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor is responsible for the Council on Tribunals, which has a Scottish committee looking after issues relating to Scotland. The chairman of the committee, and two of its members, are also members of the main council and are jointly appointed by the Lord Chancellor and the Scottish Ministers. Although not having direct responsibility for the Scottish committee, the Lord Chancellor does reimburse the cost of the Committee at the end of each year.

The budget for the committee for the year ending 31 March 2000 was £89,000. The committee is supported by a secretariat of two officials. The Lord Chancellor is jointly responsible for three members (the other four are appointed solely by the Scottish Ministers). The Scottish committee chairman is paid £20,803 p.a. Committee members are paid £7,567 p.a.

Of the Lord Chancellor's other non-departmental public bodies, only the Advisory Council on Public Records has some duties relating to Scotland. This is because the Public Record Office is the UK national archive and some of the records and issues considered by the Council will affect Scotland as part of the UK. However, there is a separate statutory body in Scotland—the Scottish Records Advisory Council—run by the National Archives of Scotland.

Land Registry

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how he intends to take forward the quinquennial review of Her Majesty's Land Registry. [138470]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, announced the launch of the second Quinquennial Review of Her Majesty's Land Registry on 6 September. The review will include an assessment of its performance as well as a thorough consideration of all options for carrying forward its work, including the Better Quality Services approach to delivery. The agreed terms of reference have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Andrew Edwards CB has been appointed to carry out the review which will include widespread consultation with those who have an interest in the work of the Land Registry. It is expected that the report of the review will be published in spring 2001.

Legal Aid Reform (Northern Ireland)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor's proposals for legal aid reform in Northern Ireland will be published. [138471]

Mr. Lock: The White Paper "The Way Ahead" (Cm 4849) was published on 19 September, when copies were placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 November 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Drink Driving

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has for an advertising campaign in the run-up to Christmas to discourage drinking and driving; and if he will make a statement; [136512]

(2) what representations he has received about previous advertising campaigns which sought to highlight the dangers of drinking and driving; [136506]

(3) what budget he has set aside for an advertising campaign to discourage drinking and driving during the Christmas period; [136510]

(4) what budget he has set aside for the on-going advertising campaign against drinking and driving. [136509]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* In June this year, we launched the THINK! road safety publicity campaign which brings together the range of road safety messages for all road users. The total publicity budget for THINK! for the current financial year is £9 million.

Drinking and driving is a year-round issue, and is one of the issues we tackle as part of the THINK! campaign advertising, on television, on radio and in other media.

However, we shall be focusing again on the drink-drive issue in the run-up to Christmas and the new year, and we have set aside around £1.9 million for this. Television advertising will run from 27 November, supported by radio advertising and poster advertising. In addition we are producing display materials for use by the police and road safety officers around the country in support of their own campaigns.

We have received no formal representations about previous advertising campaigns.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets *(a)* were in place on 1 January and *(b)* he has set recently for the performance of (i) the London Underground and (ii) its contractors; and if he will make a statement. [137303]

Mr. Hill: The Government have set performance targets for London Underground covering the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2001. These were announced to the House of Commons in response to a question from the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on 4 April 2000, *Official Report,* columns 309–10W.

The targets, which are to be met by the end of 2000–01, are as follows:

Measure	*Government target*
Capacity (train kms run)	10 per cent. increase on 1998–99 performance
Reliability (unweighted excess journey time—minutes)	4 per cent. improvement on 1998–99 level
Customer satisfaction measures (measured through LT's Customer Satisfaction Survey)	*Average score (out of 100)*
Train service	77
Information	77
Customer safety and security	83
Staff helpfulness and availability	70
Cleanliness	69

The Government do not set specific targets for the performance of London Underground's contractors. Their performance is, however, reflected in the targets set for London Underground itself.

In addition to the above targets, the 10-Year Plan includes a target to cut journey times on London Underground services by increasing capacity and reducing delays. Specific targets will be agreed with the Mayor after the Public Private Partnership has been established.

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury of 23 October 2000, *Official Report,* columns 73–76W, on ministerial directions, (1) if he will place in the Library the text and supporting documentation of the directions made by Ministers in his Department in 1998; and if he will make a statement; [137297]

(2) if he will place in the Library the text and supporting documentation of the directions made by Ministers in his Department in 1997; and if he will make a statement. [137296]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have considered these requests under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and concluded that providing this information would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion within government. The request therefore falls within the terms of exemption 2 of the Code of Practice.

Area Cost Adjustment

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from local authority associations concerning the use of the most recent earnings data in the area cost adjustment. [137329] [138077]

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from the local authority associations in relation to the Area Cost Adjustment Settlement for 2001–02. [137511]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Representations have been received both from the Local Government Association and from the Association of London Government on the use of the 1999 New Earnings Survey data in the Area Cost Adjustment. Both pressed the Government to update this data.

Representations have also been received from two special interest groups, SIGOMA and the "Cliff Edge" group. Both pressed the Government not to update this data. Over 175 representations have been received from local authorities, hon. Members and other interested parties.

Emissions

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by how much the output of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide have been reduced in the last five years; and which power stations continue to emit these substances. [137719]

Mr. Meacher: The latest figures available from the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory show that in 1998 the total UK emissions of SO_2 and NOx were as 1,615 and 1,753 kilotonnes respectively. Between 1994–98 emissions of SO_2 have been reduced by 56 per cent. and of NOx by 76 per cent. Emissions will continue to reduce under the Environment Agency's ongoing regulation of sulphur emissions and, in the longer term, the revised EC Large Combustion Plant Directive and the proposed National Emission Ceilings Directive, which from 2010 will set annual ceilings of 585 and 1,167 kilotonne for SO_2 and NOx respectively. A list of large power stations[1], that continue to emit one or both of these substances, is listed.

[1] (Combustion plants >300MW)

Combustion plant >300 Mw continuing to emit SO_2 and/or NOx

	Power station
TXU (was Eastern Merchant Generation)	Drakelow B Power Station, Burton on Trent
TXU (was Eastern Merchant Generation)	High Marnham Power Station, Newark
TXU (was Eastern Merchant Generation)	Ironbridge Power Station, Buildwas Road, Telford
TXU (was Eastern Merchant Generation)	Rugeley Power Stations, Armitage Road, Rugeley
TXU (was Eastern Merchant Generation)	West Burton Power Station, Retford
Innogy (was National Power plc)	Aberthaw Power Station, Nr Barry, S Glam.
Nitrogen Two Ltd. (was National Power plc)	Blyth Power Station, Welwyn Components Site, Bedlington
Innogy (was National Power plc)	Didcot A Power Station, Didcot
AES Drax Power Ltd. (was National Power)	Drax Power Station, PO Box 3, Selby
Eggborough Power Ltd. (was National Power plc)	Eggborough Power Station, Goole
Innogy (was National Power plc)	Fawley Power Station, Southampton
Innogy (was National Power plc)	Littlebrook D Power Station, Littlebrook Manor Way, Dartford
Innogy (was National Power plc)	Tilbury Power Station, Fort Road, Tilbury
Powergen (UK) plc	Cottam Power Station, PO Box 4, Retford
Edison First Power Ltd.	Ferrybridge C Power Station, PO Box 39, Strangland Lane, Knottingley
Edison First Power Ltd.	Fiddlers Ferry Power Station, Widnes Road, Warrington
Powergen plc	Grain Power Station, Isle of Grain, Rochester
Powergen plc	Ince B Power Station, Chester
Powergen plc	Kingsnorth Power Station, Hoo St. Werberg, Rochester
Powergen plc	Ratcliffe on Soar Power Station, Nottingham
Powergen plc	Richborough Power Station, Ramsgate Road, Sandwich
Scottish Power	Longannet
Scottish Power	Cockenzie
Scottish Hydro Electric	Peterhead
NIE	Belfast West
NIE	Premier Power (Ballylumford Power Station)
NIE	Coolkeeragh
NIE	Kilroot
BASF plc	Seal Sands, Middlesbrough
BP Chemicals Ltd.	Baglan Bay Works, Seaway Parade, Port Talbot
Alcan Smelting and Power UK	Lynemouth Power Station, Ashington
British Steel plc	Integrated Works, Llanwern, Newport
British Steel plc	Port Talbot Works, Port Talbot
Corus UK Ltd. (formerly British Steel)	Teesside Works, Steel House, Redcar
Corus UK Ltd. (formerly British Steel)	Sections Plates and Commercial Steels, Scunthorpe Works, PO Box 1, Scunthorpe
Brunner Mond (UK) Ltd.	Winnington IP Boilers, Winnington Site, Northwich
Ford Motor Co Ltd.	Main Site, Dagenham
ICI Chemicals and Polymers Ltd.	Weston Point Power Station, Castner Kellner Site, Runcorn
Enron Teesside Operations Ltd. (ICI Chemicals and Polymers Ltd.)	Wilton Power Station, Wilton
Phillips Petroleum Co UK Ltd.	Seal Sands, Middlesbrough
UML Ltd.	Merseyside Power Station, Thermal Road, Wirral

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his latest estimate is of the number of *(a)* hostel places for rough sleepers available and *(b)* rough sleepers in (i) London, (ii) Liverpool, (iii) Leeds, (iv) Birmingham and (v) Manchester. [138001]

Ms Armstrong: Each of the cities mentioned has a large number of hostels providing a range of different types of accommodation. Information about the extent of emergency access provision that can be accessed by rough sleepers is collected locally and contained in the table. The table also contains the single night street count figures for each area as at June 2000.

	Emergency access accommodation[1]	*Number of rough sleepers*
Greater London	2,574	546
Liverpool	42	19
Leeds	249	17
Birmingham	260	23
Manchester	66	23

[1] Number of beds

Millennium Site, Greenwich (Contamination)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the remaining level of contamination land at the Millennium Site on the Greenwich Peninsula; and what plans exist to remediate the site. [137872]

Ms Armstrong: The site of the Millennium Experience has been remediated fit for purpose in accordance with the requirements of both the London Borough of Greenwich and the Environment Agency. There are currently no requirements for further remediation. Any works in relation to foundations of future buildings which require amendments to the remediation strategy that has been adopted and approved to date will be considered at that time.

Village Speed Limits

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what deadline has been set for the establishment of 30 mph as the normal speed limit in villages. [138067]

Mr. Hill: The Road Safety Strategy outlines our commitment to a rural road hierarchy, one result of which would be 30mph speed limits in villages. A Government amendment to the Transport Bill requires the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the issues relating to the implementation of the hierarchy, and publish a report within 12 months of Royal Assent.

In the meantime, local traffic authorities already have the power to impose 30mph speed limits throughout any village where they feel this is necessary.

Farnborough Airfield

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made about the effect on wildlife and natural habitats of plans to cut down woods near Farnborough Airfield. [137971]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* No such assessment has been made by the Secretary of State as this matter has not come before him formally for determination. The proposal was the subject of a Notice of Proposed Development submitted to Rushmoor Borough Council by the Ministry of Defence. As a competent authority under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994, the Ministry of Defence are required to carry out an appropriate assessment of the implications of the proposed works on the Thames Basin Heaths potential SPA and I understand they are undertaking such an assessment.

Rail Maintenance

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the contractors and sub-contractors responsible to Railtrack for maintenance of the track at Hatfield and *(b)* the names of passenger and freight train operators using that line, together with the (i) owners and (ii) lessees of the motive power and rolling stock used and their contractors for (1) medium and (2) heavy maintenance of that stock. [138213]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack's contractor responsible for maintaining the track at Hatfield is Balfour Beatty Rail Maintenance Ltd. Information is not held centrally on sub-contractors used by Balfour Beatty.

The train companies which use the line at Hatfield and their suppliers of rolling stock and maintenance are given in the table. Train maintenance is normally split into light and heavy maintenance rather than light and medium.

	Owner of motive power and rolling stock	*Lessee of motive power and rolling stock*	*Contractor for light maintenance*	*Contractor for heavy maintenance*
GNER	Angel Trains; HSBC Rail	GNER	GNER	Angle Trains; HSBC Rail
WAGN	Angel Trains; HSBC Rail	WAGN	WAGN; Adtranz	Railcare
Hull Trains	Porterbrook Leasing	Anglia Railways	Hull Trains; Adtranz	Adtranz
EWS	*Locos*			
	Angel Trains; EWS	EWS	EWS	EWS
	Rolling stock			
	Lafarge Redland	EWS	Wabtech	Wabtech

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 457W, what arrangements are made by the Railway Department of the Health and Safety Executive for the licensing and inspection of *(a)* contractors used by the owners and lessors of the stock for medium and heavy maintenance and *(b)* contractors used by other owning or leasing companies with contracts with rail operators. [138212]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive do not license either type of contractor. The duty for ensuring the competence of a contractor in the railway industry lies with the holder of the accepted safety case. The holders of safety cases for the railway industry are (in summary) Railtrack, Railtrack's main contractors, the freight and passenger train operators and London Underground.

Council Tax

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the average percentage rises in Council Tax in each of the past five years. [138219]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Average Council Tax increases in England (both average Council Tax per dwelling and Band D) between 1996–97 and 2000–01 are given in the table.

	Percentage increase on average Council Tax bill per dwelling	*Percentage increase on average Council Tax for a Band D dwelling*
1996–97	5.4	6.1
1997–98	7.4	6.5
1998–99	8.9	8.6
1999–2000	6.8	6.8
2000–01	6.2	6.1

The percentage increases in average Council Tax per dwelling give an indication of the increase in size of the Council Tax bill faced by the average resident. The percentage increases for the average Band D Council Tax (based on a dwelling occupied by two adults) are the measure used for tax-setting purposes.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the percentage rise in public sector current receipts for Council Tax in each of the last five years. [138218]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is given in the table.

Council Tax receipts

	Level (£000)	*Increase (percentage)*
1995–96	7,730,839	8.7
1996–97	8,404,016	8.7
1997–98	9,134,089	8.7
1998–99	10,133,609	10.9
1999–2000	10,992,040	8.5

Source:
Quarterly Return of Council Tax and Rates (QRC4) returns, DETR

Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will meet the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health to discuss the inclusion of housing and health as an agenda item at the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2004. [138056]

Mr. Raynsford: The links between housing and health are important, and I would be happy to meet with the CIEH to discuss the issues in due course. In the first instance they should write to me with their detailed proposals.

Heathrow

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to order *(a)* an environmental impact assessment and *(b)* a health impact assessment for the proposed Terminal 5 at Heathrow; and when he expects to publish these impact assessments. [137986]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Heathrow Terminal 5 was the subject of a major Public Inquiry between May 1995 and March 1999. The Inquiry Inspector has said that he intends to produce his report within two years of the end of the Inquiry. The Terminal 5 proposal was subject to an environmental impact assessment and during the Inquiry the Inspector heard and received evidence on a wide range of environmental issues including the potential impact on health. The final decision on Terminal 5 and the associated applications, orders and appeals considered by the Inquiry rests with the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next plans to review aircraft landing charges at Heathrow. [137750]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Under the 1986 Airports Act the Civil Aviation Authority sets a maximum limit on the amounts that may be levied by way of airport charges, including landing charges, over a five-year period at airports designated by the Secretary of State. Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Manchester are those airports which are currently subject to this detailed price control. New price caps are required for the period 1 April 2003 to 31 March 2008. The CAA is presently conducting a programme of work, including consultation, which will lead to decisions on the new price caps by autumn 2002.

Ultra-Low Sulphur Petrol

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the environmental effects of the large scale production of ultra-low sulphur petrol. [138230]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Ultra-low sulphur petrol will have a direct benefit in reducing traffic related air pollutants. It will also facilitate the introduction of new fuel-efficient petrol engine technology. This emerging technology holds the promise of significant reductions in CO_2 emissions from the vehicle fleet and will help ensure delivery of the voluntary agreements with the car manufacturers to improve new car fuel efficiency by 25 per cent. by 2008.

The reduction of sulphur content of petrol from a maximum of 150 ppm to 50 ppm may result in increased energy consumption in oil refineries and hence CO_2 emissions, due to the additional processing required. The extent to which this is the case is dependent on the configuration of each individual refinery, and on other factors such as processing lower sulphur crude. The

overall effect is, in the short term, likely to be an increase of less than 2 per cent. in the CO_2 emissions from refineries.

Ultra-low sulphur petrol will become mandatory throughout the EU from 2005 and the Government's CO_2 emission projections for 2010 already reflect the impact on refinery emissions of a reduction of sulphur levels in petrol.

As more vehicles are introduced onto the market, fuel efficiency improvement is expected to be larger than increases in refinery CO_2 emissions.

Environment Council (Brussels)

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Environment Council held in Brussels on 7 November; and if he will make a statement. [137763]

Mr. Meacher: The Deputy Prime Minister and I represented the UK at the Special Environment Council in Brussels on 7 November 2000.

The main purpose of this Council was to review the EU's negotiating positions in advance of the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP6), due to take place in the Hague later this month. Ministers discussed the EU's strategy, and exchanged views on possible options which may emerge in the course of the negotiations. Council Conclusions were agreed reaffirming the EU's negotiating position on the main issues—supplementarity, the clean development mechanism, and sinks. These also stressed the Council's commitment to achieving a successful outcome at COP6.

The Commission also reported on the progress of the European Climate Change Programme, noting that while the Community as a whole was achieving stabilisation of CO2 emissions, a number of member states were not. There was a brief exchange of views between member states.

Council Conclusions to guide the final round of international negotiations on the UNEP Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, to be held on 4–9 December 2000, were also taken without discussion.

Car Engines

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many motor cars are registered in the UK with engine sizes *(a)* above and *(b)* below 1500 cc; and how many miles were driven on average in each of the last five years in the UK by motor cars with engine sizes (i) above and (ii) below 1500 cc. [138441]

Mr. Hill: At the end of June 2000, the most recent date for which figures are available, there were 14,420,933 cars licensed in Great Britain with an engine size of greater than 1500 cc and 9,856,665 cars with an engine size of 1500 cc or less.

Average mileage of cars in Great Britain is estimated as part of the National Travel Survey. However, results are not available for individual years and are instead combined over three years to ensure a suitable level of accuracy. In the last five years, there has been little change in the average annual car mileage by engine size:

(i) The average annual distance recorded by cars of above 1,500cc was about 10,850 miles in 1997–99, compared to 11,610 miles in 1992–94.

(ii) For cars up to and including 1,500cc, the equivalent distances were 7,530 miles in 1997–99 and 7,580 miles in 1992–94.

Comparable data are not available for Northern Ireland.

EU Structural Funds (West Midlands)

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the Single Programming Document on aid to the West Midlands was successfully submitted to the European Commission. [138445]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Single Programming Document on aid to the West Midlands was presented to the Commission on 14 April 2000. It was confirmed as acceptable, with full retrospection of eligible spend back to 1 January 2000, in the Commission's letter of 4 May 2000 to the UK Permanent Representation to the European Union.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will report on progress in clearing proposed EU structural funds to the West Midlands with the European Commission. [138446]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The West Midlands region will receive Structural Fund moneys through a number of channels. The bulk of these will be delivered through the Objective 2 Single Programming Document. This document is still the subject of negotiation between the Government Office for the West Midlands and the European Commission.

It is difficult to predict the precise time that the negotiations will be completed. The document is then the subject of consideration by the Commission's internal services committee, a process taking about four weeks. It is currently anticipated that the document will be presented to either the January or February committees for approval.

Quality Mark (Builders)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many builders have applied to join the Birmingham quality mark trial. [138449]

Ms Beverley Hughes: To date, two firms have been awarded a quality mark, a further 17 are in the process of assessment and are expected to complete shortly. In addition, a further 470 builders have shown their interest by requesting, and being issued with a registration pack.

Supporting People Programme

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the Government intends to take forward the implementation in England of the Supporting People programme. [138765]

Mr. Raynsford: A consultation paper entitled 'Phased Implementation' was published on 17 May, inviting all the major stakeholders, local authorities, probation services, health authorities and provider organisations to give us their views on the implementation process for this programme. Specifically they were asked to say whether they supported the view that implementation should be phased.

The responses to the consultation paper have been most helpful to our decision making on this issue, and I am today publishing a summary of the analysis of the consultation responses. Copies are being placed in the Library and will be sent to all those who made responses.

The overwhelming response from stakeholders was that Supporting People should be implemented in all local authorities in England at the same time, and that phasing the programme would only add unnecessary complexities and cause confusion for authorities, their partner organisations, providers and service users.

Following publication of the consultation paper, the Comprehensive Spending Review made available substantial resources for the implementation of this programme, the majority of which will be used to resource implementation at a local level.

The Supporting People programme will therefore be implemented across England in April 2003.

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. [138793]

Mr. Hill: My Department has today initiated a review of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre (QEIICC). It was established as an Executive Agency in 1989 and must be reviewed every five years in accordance with the latest Cabinet Office guidance. The last review led to a market test which resulted in a five-year service level agreement being awarded to the in-house management team from 1 April 1996.

The review will, in particular, take account of:

the role and past performance of QEIICC,

its fit with Government objectives, and

the relationship of QEIICC with other bodies in the public and private sectors.

It will consider all organisational options for the Agency and recommend a preferred course of action. Customers, staff and trade unions will be consulted.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reason no fee is being charged to the Ministry of Sound for the hire of secondary venues at the Dome on 31 December. [135735]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 14 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 620W.

Open University Broadcasts

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make representations to the BBC to continue Open University broadcasts. [138162]

Janet Anderson: The question of making such representations does not arise, since I understand that the BBC has said it remains fully committed to its partnership with the Open University.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people his Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137957]

Mr. Lock: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Lord-lieutenants

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 646W, regarding Lord-Lieutenants, what expenditure was incurred by his Department in support of each Lord-Lieutenant for the financial year 1999–2000. [134858]

Mr. Mandelson: The information requested is contained in the table.

	Expenditure
Antrim	741.37
Armagh	506.82
Belfast	987.09
Down	822.54
Fermanagh	507.85
Londonderry	2,899.49
Tyrone	635.68
Grand total	7,100.84

The Lord-Lieutenancy of County Londonderry is higher than that for other counties because that amount comprises two Lord-Lieutenants—Londonderry City, and Londonderry County.

Pursuant to this, it may be helpful if I provide some further information to put the figures in their proper context.

Lord-Lieutenants are appointed under current legislation by Her Majesty the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister, following consultations locally and, where appropriate, with the First Minister. Lord-Lieutenants are much appreciated in their counties and areas, particularly as a link with the royal family and for their support of a wide range of local voluntary and community work. Lord-Lieutenants are unpaid. They may however claim

expenses from central Government for certain items such as travel and other reasonable non-entertainment expenses incurred in carrying out their official duties. Amounts claimed will clearly vary according to, for example, levels of activity in each county, size and dispersal of populations, and the personal circumstances of each Lord-Lieutenant. Some choose not to claim any expenses.

In addition most counties provide varying levels of administrative support, as do some Government Departments in respect of functions carried out by Lord-Lieutenants on their behalf.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the impact of the New Deal for Young People in Northern Ireland. [136475]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list those Bills to which the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has given a declaration of compatibility with human rights and also list those which have received an adverse declaration in regard to Bills presented to *(a)* Parliament and *(b)* the Northern Ireland Assembly. [136611]

Mr. George Howarth: There is no requirement for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to give a statement of compatibility before Parliament or the Assembly can consider a Bill; this is required from the Minister in charge. In the Assembly, this is part of the Minister's statement that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

Under its statutory functions, the Commission is required to advise the Assembly on whether a Bill is compatible with human rights—including the Convention rights—only when it is asked to do so and on such other occasion as the Commission thinks appropriate.

Decommissioning

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what have been the total costs to date of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. [138099]

Mr. Ingram: The total cost to date of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning is IR £4,131,215. The costs are split on a 50/50 basis shared by the British and Irish Governments.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what have been the total costs to date of the activities of the international arms inspectors. [138100]

Mr. Ingram: The amount paid to the international arms inspectors to date is IR £37,160, which includes some travel costs. This is split on a 50/50 basis shared by the British and Irish Governments.

Service Delivery Agreement

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place in the Library a copy of the Northern Ireland Office's Service Delivery Agreement 2001–02 to 2003–04; and if he make copies available to hon. Members in the Vote Office. [138190]

Mr. Mandelson: Copies of the Agreement have been placed in the Library and also made available to the Vote Office.

DEFENCE

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the purpose of the chemical burns experiments conducted on pigs at Porton Down; what measures have been taken to ensure their welfare is protected; and what involvement Salisbury District Hospital has had with these experiments. [136607]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The primary role of DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence Sector at Porton Down is to provide safe and effective protective measures for the UK and its armed forces.

Sulphur mustard (mustard gas) remains a significant chemical threat both on the battlefield and from terrorists. The burns that result from contact with mustard heal extremely slowly and are prone to potentially life-threatening infection. The studies undertaken at CBD with pigs have conclusively shown that the technique of dermabrasion can significantly accelerate the healing of such burns and reduce the risk of infection. Staff at Porton Down are now confident that dermabrasion will help save lives and reduce the suffering in any future casualties.

To pursue these studies DERA employed the skills and experience of two plastic surgeons who had trained at the Burns Unit at Salisbury District Hospital. These surgeons were not working for the Salisbury Health Care Trust at the same time as they were undertaking this research and the trust was not itself involved in this particular research. All animal research is conducted under licence authorised by the Home Office. In addition to statutory controls, an independent body, the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), reviews the arrangements for animal care and welfare at CBD, monitors the research programmes to ensure the highest possible standards and advises on best practice.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the cost/benefit analysis applied to the chemical burns experiments conducted on pigs at Porton Down. [136608]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* No formal cost/benefit analysis has been applied to the chemical burns experiments conducted at DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence Sector at Porton Down.

However, the work has investigated and developed techniques that improve the rate of healing by three or fourfold. These techniques will be of significant benefit to service personnel and, more generally, to civilians, by

reducing the time currently spent in hospital recovering from the effects of burns form acids, alkalis and other corrosive chemicals suffered at home or in the work place.

European Security and Defence Identity

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the functions and treaty base of *(a)* the European Military Committee, *(b)* the European Military Staff and *(c)* the Political and Security Committee; and if he will make a statement on their relationship to NATO. [138216]

Mr. Hoon: At the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, EU member states agreed to the establishment of a Political and Security Committee (PSC), a Military Committee and a Military Staff within the European Council.

The function of the Political Security Committee is to deal with all aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the Common European Security and Defence Policy, in accordance with the provisions of the EU Treaty. In the case of an EU-led crisis management operation, the PSC will exercise, under the authority of the Council, the political control and strategic direction of the operation. The PSC will also forward guidelines to the Military Committee.

The function of the Military Committee is to give military advice and make recommendations to the PSC and provide military direction to the Military Staff. The Chairman of the Military Committee will attend meetings of the Council when decisions with defence implications are to be taken.

The function of the Military Staff is to provide military expertise and support to the Common European Security and Defence Policy, including the conduct of EU-led operations. The Military Staff will perform early warning, situation assessment and strategic planning for Petersberg tasks.

Permanent arrangements covering the relationship between the EU and NATO on crisis management will be based upon the principle of effective mutual consultation, co-operation and transparency between the two organisations.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137425]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 531W.

Military Medical Staff (Negligence)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in each year since 1990 his Department received complaints from service personnel or their families of medical negligence by military medical staff, stating in each case *(a)* whether the complaint was upheld by his Department in the first instance, *(b)* whether the complaint was upheld after recourse to legal proceedings and *(c)* how much compensation was paid; and if he will make a statement. [138289]

Dr. Moonie: A central record of complaints from service personnel and their families alleging medical negligence is kept only of those cases where compensation is being sought. However, prior to 1996–97 such claims were not recorded separately from other common law claims for compensation. The vast majority of the claims detailed in the table have been the subject of legal proceedings, but this does not necessarily mean that they were all heard in court. The majority of claims are settled amicably on a legal liability basis without recourse to the courts. The payment of compensation does not necessarily occur in the financial year that the claim was received.

Medical negligence claims and costs

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Number of medical negligence claims received	243	308	255	147
Number of medical negligence claims for which compensation was paid	58	58	112	79
Compensation paid (£)	2,766,821	3,545,060	9,816,803	9,688,420

Complaints procedures are available to service personnel and their families wishing to complain of medical negligence by military medical personnel. My Department aims to deal with any such complaints in a fair and timely manner.

Eurofighter Typhoon

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the United Kingdom version of the Eurofighter Typhoon will not be armed with a cannon. [137926]

Mr. Hoon: The improved minimum range of capability of Eurofighter's Advanced Short Range Air-to-Air Missile over previous such missiles, together with the pattern of operations over the last decade, mean that the gun now has only a minimal operational utility, and this is outweighed by its support, fatigue and training cost implications.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is concerning a ground attack role for Eurofighter Typhoon. [137905]

Mr. Hoon: Eurofighter will be a multi-role aircraft, able to carry both air-to-air and air-to-ground weaponry. Its priority role, however, remains air-to-air. With Tornado GR4 and Harriers continuing in-service for many years, there is less immediate need to arm Eurofighter for its air-to-ground role at its entry into service. Existing plans progressively to enhance Eurofighter's capability in both air-to-air and air-to-ground roles, from its entry into service onwards, remain unchanged.

Former Prisoners of War (Compensation)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about compensation payments to former British servicemen and women who were held in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. [138158]

Dr. Moonie: In 1964 the German Government agreed a £1 million settlement to compensate British victims of Nazi persecution. All those, including British service personnel, who were held in Nazi concentration camps were eligible under this scheme.

RAF Leeming

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many deaths of personnel at RAF Leeming occurred in the past three months; how many aircraft based there crashed; and if he will make a statement. [138325]

Mr. Spellar: Three personnel based at RAF Leeming have died in the last three months. In the same period, one aircraft based at RAF Leeming has crashed. The aircrew ejected safely.

Hospital Ships

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make an order for new hospital ships. [138240]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* We have no plans to procure hospital ships, which are subject to restrictions under the Geneva Convention that limit their utility. We are continuing, however, to define the requirement for a new Primary Casualty Receiving Capability, to enhance afloat medical support. A number of procurement options are under consideration, and the timing of an order will be determined by the chosen option.

Air Sea Rescue

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies his Department is involved in of the future role of the Army and Navy in the provision of air sea rescue services around the British Isles; and if he will make a statement. [138331]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* There are no studies in progress which are looking at the future role of the Army and Royal Navy in the provision of air sea rescue services around the British Isles.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his assessment is of the relative effectiveness of the different types of helicopters used in air sea rescue around the British Isles. [138330]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* I can only comment upon the military Search and Rescue helicopters operated by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, as the responsibility for civil SAR rests with other Government Departments.

The military SAR force operates an all Sea King fleet within the British Isles and these aircraft are highly effective in carrying out this role.

HEALTH

Mental Health Act 1983

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 73W, when he will make an announcement on his proposals for reform of the Mental Health Act 1983; and if at or before that time hon. Members will have access to his Department's summary of responses to the Green Paper. [135669]

Mr. Hutton: In my reply to my hon. Friend of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 987W, I stated that we will set out our plans for reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 in a White Paper to be published before Christmas.

We are today publishing the Department's summary of responses to the Green Paper, "Reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 Proposals for Consultation". A copy of the summary is being sent to hon. Members and, where authors have agreed, copies of their responses to the Green Paper have been placed in the Library.

NDPBs (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137688]

Ms Stuart: The following non-departmental public bodies, sponsored by the Department, have a remit which covers Great Britain or the United Kingdom.

Administration of Radioactive Substances Advisory Committee
Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens
British Pharmacopoeia Commission
Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment
Gene Therapy Advisory Committee
Genetics and Insurance Committee
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority
Human Genetics Commission
Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation
National Biological Standards Board (UK)
National Radiological Protection Board
Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health
The Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee
UK Advisory Panel of Health Care Workers Infected with Bloodborne Viruses
UK Tissue Banking Group
United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested but general information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House. "Public Bodies

2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

Cannabis

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the anticipated length is of the clinical trials to test the safety and efficacy of using cannabis for medicinal purposes. [137894]

Mr. Hutton: The duration of a programme of clinical trials to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of a new medicine is determined by the company developing it.

Doubly Incontinent Patients

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy that the NHS should provide free care for doubly incontinent patients on a drip and confined to bed 24 hours a day. [138070]

Mr. Hutton: All residents of nursing homes will have their nursing care needs assessed by the National Health Service. Subject to parliamentary approval, the NHS will be responsible for providing registered nursing care free. When people have health needs at such a level that they need continuing health care in a nursing home, the NHS will be, as now, responsible for meeting the full costs.

Hospital Building

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the new hospital bids expected to be submitted for selection to the Capital Project Advisory Committee this year. [138455]

Mr. Hutton: A decision will be made by the end of November on the hospital development schemes which will go forward for consideration at the next prioritisation round.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to announce the next round of hospital building schemes. [138456]

Mr. Hutton: The start of a process to identify the next round of major hospital building schemes was announced on 14 November.

Cannabis Psychosis

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cannabis psychosis cases there were in each of the last 10 years. [138451]

Ms Stuart: The table shows data from the hospital episodes statistics system (HES) and relates to in-patients with a primary diagnosis of psychotic disorder due to cannabinoids who have finished their hospital episodes under the care of a consultant. There are no comparable data prior to 1995–96.

We know that cannabis can have a range of adverse health effects in addition to those risks associated with smoking tobacco. The Department is currently funding research into patterns of use and the health effects of long-term heavy use of cannabis.

Estimated finished consultant episodes with a primary diagnosis of psychotic disorder due to cannabinoids, England, 1995–96 to 1998–99

	Number
1995–96	360
1996–97	280
1997–98	310
1998–99	300

Notes:
1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest ten.
2. Figures for 1998–99 are provisional as no adjustments have been made for shortfalls in data.

Source:
HES

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Energy Market

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on further measures to liberalise the energy market. [138612]

Mr. Byers: I am satisfied that the programme of reforms of the electricity market set out in the Government's 1998 White Paper is now substantially complete. I am therefore lifting the stricter consents policy on gas powered stations with immediate effect.

We considered the stricter gas consents policy necessary as it provided a breathing space for existing coal fired power stations until distortions in the electricity market were ironed out.

I recognise that the ending of the stricter gas consents policy will create a new market and new challenges for coal which is why we are putting in place an aid scheme for the industry which this morning has been approved by the European Commission.

I am aware that the end of the stricter gas consents policy is eagerly awaited by industry. New power stations are important drivers of economic growth both nationally and regionally:

They bring more competition to the power generation market and so put downward pressure on electricity prices for everyone's benefit;

They can provide cheap power and heat to nearby industry;

They make businesses more competitive and create new investment and job opportunities around the country; and

They also contribute to secure electricity supplies.

I am announcing today decisions on five power station cases which had been placed on hold during the stricter gas consents policy. These power stations are Carrington, Spalding, Fleetwood, Raventhorpe and the Isle of Grain. I am also approving the application in respect of the Langage power station.

It is important developers considering new power station proposals explore the opportunities to use combined heat and power (CHP). CHP can make a major contribution to reducing emissions as well as bringing other benefits such as increased efficiency. We will be publishing guidance to developers on this matter soon.

I have also given careful consideration to the impact of lifting the stricter consents policy on the coal industry.

The Government's policy remains that it is for the coal industry to find its own place in a competitive energy market. However it is the task of Government to help industry through a period of change. That is why we are introducing a coal subsidy scheme. This will provide the industry with transitional funding so that it is able to respond to the challenges of the new market conditions that arise from the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy.

Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the *(a)* role and *(b)* mandate of the Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market, with particular reference to the nature of the harmonization concerned. [138080]

Dr. Howells: The Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market deals with Community-wide intellectual property rights. It is responsible for the registration and subsequent administration of Community trade marks. This role is likely to expand following adoption of a Community Regulation which will create Community-wide rights for industrial designs. It is self-financing from fees paid by businesses who use the system, and expects to receive some 60,000 applications for Community trade marks this year. The Office began its work on 1 September 1994 in Alicante, Spain.

Haulage Companies

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many haulage companies were declared bankrupt each year since 1995. [138279]

Dr. Howells: The following table shows company compulsory liquidations and individual bankruptcies for the road transport industry in England and Wales, 1995–2000. The road transport industry includes road haulage, car hire, taxis, bus services, and other road passenger transport—detailed figures solely for road haulage are not available.

Insolvencies: Road transport industry (England and Wales)

Year	*Company compulsory liquidations*	*Individual bankruptcy orders*
1995	204	824
1996	197	1,008
1997	174	971
1998	174	829
1999	152	979
2000 (to quarter 2)	94	495

Source:
DTI

Late Payment

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many invoices his Department paid in 1999–2000; and how many of these were paid within 30 days of receipt or from the date a supplier dispute was resolved. [138401]

Ms Hewitt: In 1999–2000, DTI paid 46,500 invoices, of which 93 per cent. were paid within 30 days of receipt or from the date a supplier dispute was resolved.

Cluster Munitions (Exports)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences were granted for the export of cluster munitions in each of the last five years. [137690]

Dr. Howells: The export of cluster munitions is controlled under entries ML3 and ML4 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. Other munitions are also controlled under these entries. It would entail disproportionate cost to examine the records to establish which, if any, of the licences issued in the last five years covered the export of cluster munitions.

Details of SIELs and OIELs issued between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 have been set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; copies are in the Library of the House. The Reports list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued and refused in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted.

For the periods not covered by the Annual Reports, the Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and the results are set out in the table.

Individual licences issued covering the export of goods with the ratings ML3 and ML4 to consignees or end-users in all destinations

Issued from	*SIELs*	*OIELs*
1 January to 31 December 1996	937	33
1 January to 1 May 1997	306	9
1 January to 2 November 2000	754	27

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999; *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

In addition, goods on the Military List may have been exported to certain destinations under certain Open General Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences are placed in the Library of the House.

Military Equipment Exports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the countries to which the UK has allowed the export of military equipment in the last 12 months. [137382]

Dr. Howells: The most recent information is set out in the Government's 1999 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls which was published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Report lists by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued and refused in each equipment category and gives details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted.

ADSL Services

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what actions he intends to take to ensure that suppliers of ADSL services do not dilute contention ratios beyond those quoted in their sales literature; and if he will make a statement. [138329]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* ADSL service suppliers are expected to specify a number of quality/performance parameters as part of their sales literature. It is likely that the suppliers will specify contention ratio as one of the quality parameters within a service contract and they will be commercially obligated to fulfil their contractual requirements concerning quality of service. Competition in supply of ADSL services will enable customers to select their preferred ADSL supplier based on quality and price. It is therefore for market forces to determine which services consumers are likely to demand and what price consumers are willing to pay for such services based on service quality information.

Milk Marque

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on legal proceedings against his Department in respect of its division of Milk Marque into three separate processing companies. [137974]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* Milk Marque and the National Farmers Union started judicial review proceedings last year. Their main argument is that it was unlawful for the Monopolies and Mergers Commission to carry out an investigation under domestic competition law and for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to act on their report. The High Court has referred certain questions to the European Court of Justice for a preliminary ruling. When the ECJ has given its views the proceedings in the High court can continue. This legal process is unlikely to be quick.

TrustUK

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much financial support was given to TrustUK in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000 to date. [137842]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The Government have not provided any funding to TrustUK, which is an organisation led by the private sector. The Government do however strongly support TrustUK; the Minister for Small Business and E-commerce took part in its launch in July. Officials of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Office of Fair Trading have contributed to the development of TrustUK and have taken part in its process of approving codes of practice for e-commerce. The Department of Trade and Industry has hosted meetings of TrustUK and is considering what further assistance it can give.

Newspapers and Magazines

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer to the Competition Commission the impact on retail newsagents of W.H. Smith's proposal to extend their newspaper and magazine wholesale operation. [138291]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, it is for the Director General of Fair Trading to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour and if appropriate make a reference to the Competition Commission under the Fair Trading Act 1973 or take action under the Competition Act 1998.

The Director General is aware of proposals by W.H. Smith to change distribution arrangements for magazines. He is monitoring developments and will consider any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will discuss with the Competition Commission the operation of its proposed code of practice in respect of the relationship between supermarkets and suppliers with regard to newspapers and magazines. [138290]

Dr. Howells: The Competition Commission has no role in implementing any remedies it recommends.

The Director General of Fair Trading has been asked to approach those supermarket chains with 8 per cent. or more of the market to agree a Code of Practice concerning relations between supermarkets and suppliers which would meet the concerns identified by the Competition Commission. This process is ongoing.

Nickel Directive

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further discussions he plans to have with, and representations he plans to make to, the European Commission regarding the Nickel Directive. [138072]

Dr. Howells: The Directive has been implemented by The Dangerous Substances and Preparations (Nickel) (Safety) Regulations 2000.

On 2 May 2000, my officials wrote to the European Commission supporting another member state in its request for a review of the Directive. The Commission replied on 8 June 2000, confirming its intention to review the Directive in the light of technical progress since the Directive's adoption in 1994. Reports are currently being gathered and the findings may be referred to the Scientific Committee on Toxicology, Ecotoxicology and the Environment for an independent assessment. On that basis, the Commission expects to examine an adaptation to the Directive in 2001.

I have also instructed my officials to liaise with Industry now on these issues. This will enable the UK to make cogent and reasoned representations to the Commission and to obtain the optimum solution for Industry and the Consumer.

Climate Change

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what strategic measures he is taking to allow for environmental changes induced by climate change. [137181]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment gave on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 469–70W.

Regional Venture Capital Funds

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the proposed regional venture capital funds will be cleared by the European Commission. [138447]

Mr. Byers: As soon as possible.

Ministerial Cars

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the cost was in each of the past three years of petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [135028]

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the cost was in each of the past three years for petrol for his Department's ministerial cars; and how many cars there are in that fleet. [134579]

Dr. Howells: Six cars are used by Ministers in my Department. On fuel consumption, I refer the hon. Members to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 14 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 552W, for the Government Car and Despatch Agency.

Non-departmental Public Bodies (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137696]

Dr. Howells: The following non-departmental public bodies, sponsored by my Department, have a remit which covers Great Britain or the United Kingdom.

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
British Hallmarking Council
Coal Authority
Gas and Electricity Consumer Council
National Consumer Council[1]
Post Office Users' National Council[2]
Design Council
Competition Commission
National Research Development Council
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils
Economic and Social Research Council
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
Medical Research Council
Natural Environment Research Council
Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council
Simpler Trade Procedures Board
United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority
Advisory Committee on Cleaner Coal Technology
Aerospace Committee
Council for Science and Technology
Energy Advisory Panel
Foresight Steering Group
Fuel Cell Advisory Panel
LINK/Teaching Company Scheme Board
Low Pay Commission
Measurement Advisory Committee
OSO Industry Board
Partnership Fund Assessment Panel
Renewable Energy Advisory Committee
Small Business Council
Small Business Investment Task Force[3]
Spectrum Management Advisory Group
Standing Advisory Committee on Industrial Property
Central Arbitration Committee
Copyright Tribunal
Employment Appeal Tribunal
Employment Tribunals
Insolvency Practitioners' Tribunal
Persons Hearing Consumer Credit Licensing Appeals
Persons Hearing Estate Agents Appeals

[1] The National Consumer Council has a sub-committee dealing with Scottish issues—The Scottish Consumer Council

[2] There is a separate Post Office Users' Council for Scotland

[3] The SBITF's remit covers England but advice is made available to the devolved Administrations.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested, but general information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk

Internet (Price Transparency)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what studies his Department has undertaken on the competition effects of increased price transparency due to use of the internet; and if he will make a statement. [137331]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 584W.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Drug Abuse

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those projects his Department supports highlighting the dangers of drug abuse to children and young people. [137340]

Jacqui Smith: DfEE guidance Circular number 4/95 sets out the statutory position on drug education in schools and was supplemented by the guidance "Protecting Young People" (1998) which gives detailed advice to identify what works in drug education and how best to take that forward effectively. To further support schools in the dissemination of effective drug education DfEE in partnership with the Department of Health commissioned the Standing Conference On Drug Abuse (SCODA) to product further guidance for schools, the three "R's", "the right approach", "the right response" and "the right choice". DfEE has also made funding available in partnership with the charity DrugScope to identify, develop , promote and disseminate good practice in drug and alcohol education and prevention programmes for young people, parents and professionals in schools and in informal settings. DfEE will continue to fund the dissemination of guidance and support materials.

Spending on drug education will rise from £7.5 million this year to £17.5 million in 2003–04 (a 133 per cent. increase). This funding is available to all LEAs through the Standards Fund. It will help teachers deliver a drug education programme tailor-made to the needs of all young people which equips them with the knowledge to recognise the dangers of drug misuse and make informed choices. It will also fund drug advisers to work directly with schools, training costs of the Connexions personal advisers for 13–19-year-olds and ensure that key partners are engaged in developing drug education programmes relevant to the needs of the local community.

We have now established a solid base for drug education in schools. A recent Ofsted survey (July 2000) showed 93 per cent. of secondary and 75 per cent. primary schools now had their own anti-drug policies.

Disaffected Pupils

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his assessment of the current trend in *(a)* permanent exclusions and *(b)* fixed term exclusions. [138266]

Jacqui Smith: The rate of permanent exclusions is falling. In 1998–99, the latest year for which data are available, there were 10,400 permanent exclusions compared to 12,300 in 1997–98—a 15 per cent. reduction. We are on course to achieve the national target of 8,400 by 2002.

Data on fixed period exclusions are not collected centrally, but Ofsted estimated in its report "Exclusions from secondary schools" (1995–96) that there are around 100,000 a year. Some of these may be repeat exclusions of the same child.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils are officially classified as Education Otherwise. [138267]

Jacqui Smith: In the January 2000 Annual Schools' Census, nearly 24,000 students were reported as receiving education otherwise than at school, including those at Pupil Referral Units. We do not collect centrally the number of pupils educated at home by their parents.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions his Department has had with excluded young people about the causes of their disaffection. [138292]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him to his supplementary question on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 368–69 and to my answer of 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 358–59W.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to ensure teachers are able to deal effectively with poor behaviour. [138293]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 368, and that given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 293W.

As a result of representations from headteachers, we recently issued new guidance for exclusion appeal panels which indicates that the headteacher's decision to exclude should not be overridden in a range of circumstances including where there is violence or the threat of violence.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of poor behaviour on *(a)* the achievement of individual schools and *(b)* the morale of teachers. [138294]

Jacqui Smith: On *(a)* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 12 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 184W.

On *(b)* we are aware that low morale can sometimes result if teachers feel unable to deal adequately with poor behaviour. That is why we are providing record levels of funding to help schools better manage poor behaviour and why we have made clear that where necessary headteachers can permanently exclude the most disruptive or violent pupils.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure greater recognition of the achievement of schools and teachers who deal most effectively with disaffected pupils. [138295]

Jacqui Smith: Disaffection is often manifested by irregular attendance or prolonged truancy. As part of our wider drive to cut truancy levels, the 50 schools which achieve the most in cutting truancy levels in challenging circumstances will have the chance to win a "Truancy Buster" award of up to £10,000 to help them act as Excellence Centres. The first awards will be made early in the new year.

Beacon status is another way in which we recognise the achievement of schools, and tackling disaffection is one area in which Beacon schools are working to help spread effective practices to other schools.

Special Needs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what decision he has reached on whether statements of special needs will *(a)* specify or *(b)* otherwise set out assistance from a local authority in the proposed code and regulations on special needs. [138324]

Jacqui Smith: We are considering the broad range of representations received to these and other issues relating to the draft revised code and proposed amendments to the regulations. We will decide shortly on the appropriate final wording in the Code of Practice to underpin our determination to achieve both clarity and specificity, as has always been our intention.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

ERDP

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what projections his Department has made for the number of successful claimants per year for each component scheme of the ERDP. [136498]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* We will publish shortly and post on the MAFF website the indicative impact indicators and targets for the ERDP (Table 2). These focus on what the ERDP might deliver, eg the number of training days provided, not the number of claimants.

Bovine TB

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what potential sources of infection he has eliminated in respect of the recent outbreak of bovine TB in South Shropshire. [137552]

Ms Quin: The recent outbreak of bovine TB in cattle in South Shropshire is still under veterinary investigation.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he will take to test badgers for evidence of TB in areas where bovine TB has recently emerged. [137561]

Ms Quin: There is no reliable test for bovine TB in live badgers. All badger carcases from the Government's badger culling trial are tested for bovine TB at post mortem. Additionally, a sample of badger carcases found on roads or on farms will be tested for bovine TB in a new survey in seven counties of England, of which Shropshire is one.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the effect of badger protection upon the health of the UK cattle herd. [137554]

Ms Quin: The Krebs report concluded that the sum of evidence strongly supports the view that in Britain badgers are a significant source of TB infection in cattle. However, it went on to say that it is not possible to quantify what contribution badgers make to cattle infection. The Government accepted the report's recommendation that MAFF should set up a field trial to quantify the impact of culling badgers on TB in cattle. The trial is in progress and results are expected no later than 2004.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy and practice is regarding post mortems on badgers killed on public highways. [137559]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 6 November 2000, *Official Report,* column 48W.

Abattoirs

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the effect of abattoir closures upon the *(a)* length and *(b)* time of journeys for animals consigned for slaughter. [137558]

Mr. Morley: We have no plans for such an assessment. The Welfare of Animal (Transport) Order 1997 sets rules, including journey time limits, for farm livestock in transit, including on journeys to slaughter.

SEAC

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was *(a)* the total amount of remuneration paid to members of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee in each year since its inception and *(b)* the highest remuneration of any one member in these years. [137577]

Ms Quin: This information is available only at disproportionate cost. However, from April 2000, the maximum daily allowances for attending SEAC meetings, including preparatory time, were £259.00 and £219.00 for the Chairman and the members respectively.

Flooding

Mr. Willis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what support his Department offers to private landowners to repair damage to river banks caused by flood water. [137518]

Mr. Morley: None. Grant aid from this Department for new and improved capital schemes is directed to the flood and coastal defence operating authorities—the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and Internal Drainage Boards.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what effect the installation of new flood defences at Pateley Bridge has had on water levels in the River Nidd at Knaresborough during the early November floods; [137517]

(2) what action the Environment Agency took to alert riparian businesses and home owners on the River Nidd at Knaresborough about the probability of flooding in advance of the recent floods; and how many properties were affected by the floods. [137519]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency's staff in the north-east are still fully committed to dealing with the impact of the floods in that region, and it would be inappropriate to divert them at this point of time. I have asked the Agency once the immediate work is completed, in conjunction with their partners, to produce a full report on the flooding, its effects, how the flood warning and emergency response worked and what lessons we can learn; this report should be available by Easter. In terms of the specific questions I will write to the hon. Member as soon as the information can be obtained.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence concerning the deployment of troops to assist in areas of West Sussex disrupted by recent flooding; and if he will make a statement. [137616]

Mr. Morley: There are standing arrangements in cases of serious flooding for the Environment Agency to request for military assistance from the Ministry of Defence. In the case of West Sussex, the military has been used in the Chichester area for sandbagging duties and is on standby for bridging work around the City. It has not yet been deemed necessary to call upon the services of the military elsewhere in West Sussex.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will instruct the Environment Agency to re-assess the risks of flooding in Buckinghamshire. [138003]

Mr. Morley: MAFF has set in place a series of high level targets one of which is for the Environment Agency to ensure that inspections of flood defences, main rivers and critical ordinary watercourses are undertaken and, as

a result of these inspections, to report to the Ministry on its assessment of flood risk. These reports are due to be provided by April 2001.

To this end the Environment Agency is undertaking surveys of all defences and structures on main rivers within Buckinghamshire. Local authorities and internal drainage boards are in the process of identifying critical ordinary watercourses, and inspecting flood defences upon these, assisted by the agency teams.

North Sea Fishery

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* Finnish, *(b)* Spanish and *(c)* Portuguese vessels he estimates will fish North Sea stocks after 31 December 2002; how many vessels (i) from the UK and (ii) in total fish these stocks at present; and if he will commission a study on the effect of such fishing on stocks. [137899]

Mr. Morley: As things currently stand, from 1 January 2003, vessels from Finland, Spain and Portugal will only be entitled to fish for non-quota stocks in the North Sea. The number of vessels from Finland, Spain and Portugal that fish in the North Sea after 31 December 2002 will depend on commercial decisions taken by the fishermen in these countries. It is not possible to estimate accurately how many vessels will chose to fish in the North Sea. The number is likely to be extremely low. In any case they will have no access to any stock covered by quota arrangements as all main commercial stocks are in this category.

945 UK vessels currently fish for North Sea stocks. We do not keep information on other member states vessels fishing in the North Sea.

Foreign Fishing Vessels

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will assess the report of the Irish Government into the Sea Horse-Exodus incident; and if he will make a statement on its impact on his policy towards UK-flagged foreign fishing vessels. [138165]

Mr. Morley: The report of the Irish Government into the collision between the Sea Horse and the Exodus in March 1997 has not yet been published. It is therefore too early to say what impact it may have on policy towards UK flagged foreign owned fishing vessels.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his position towards common EU monitoring procedures for the Common Fisheries Policy, indicating the proposals which are under discussion. [138183]

Mr. Morley: I am aware that the Commission is looking at the division of monitoring and control work between national authorities and the Community. It has not issued any proposals and there have been no formal discussions with member states. We shall, of course, give careful consideration to any proposals that may emerge.

Cetaceans

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he plans to take to address the issue of cetacean bycatch in United Kingdom waters; if he will raise cetacean bycatch in the Council of Ministers; if he will raise the issue of protection of cetaceans in the 2002 review of the Common Fisheries Policy; and if he will make a statement. [138016]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The Sea Mammal Research Unit is currently undertaking a three-year research project funded by my Department which will monitor bycatch in a number of fisheries not previously assessed. It will also attempt to establish definitively why harbour porpoises become entangled in gill nets, with a view to developing suitable mitigation measures.

We are also proposing to produce, jointly with DETR, a strategy for the protection of all cetacean species. This will build on that already established for the harbour porpoise.

The Commission and other member states are already well aware of UK concerns on this issue. The Commission have made clear that addressing the problem of cetacean bycatch is one of the issues for coverage in the 2002 Review. I have already raised this issue in the Fisheries Council.

Community Plant Variety Office

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the *(a)* budget and *(b)* purpose of the Community Plant Variety Office. [138078]

Ms Quin: The purpose of the Community Plant Variety Office (CPVO) is to administer a system of intellectual property rights for plant varieties valid throughout the European Community and to evaluate and decide upon applications for community plant variety rights. The CPVO is self-financing and recovers its costs through fees charged to plant breeders. The CPVO sets a budget each year, which includes estimates of all the office's anticipated revenue and expenditure. The budget is subject to approval by the CPVO Administrative Council, which comprises representatives of all member states and the Commission.

Organic Farming

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason farmers farming organically may not dispose of surplus organic manure to farms not being organically farmed. [137542]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* This requirement is part of Council Regulation (EEC) 2092/91 (as amended). Its intention is to ensure that there is a balance within organic farming between livestock production and land available for the disposal of manure. We shall be assessing the impact of this requirement as part of a review of the effects of the implementation of the Regulations.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the need for the use by organic farms of synthetic amino acids in poultry feed. [137543]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* The use of synthetic amino acids is prohibited by Council Regulation (EEC) 2092/91 (as amended), but we have received a number of industry representations saying that they are important in commercial poultry production. We shall be assessing the need as part of a review of the effects of the implementation of the Regulations.

Poultry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those members of UKROFS who have particular expertise in poultry matters, giving in each case the applicable qualifications. [137544]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* Three members of the board of UKROFS have expertise in poultry matters. Two have no formal qualifications but the third has an Msc in Animal Production with a special interest in and experience of poultry production systems. In addition the board has available to it advice from experts within MAFF.

Pig Disease Eradication Fund

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much money is held by Her Majesty's Government by way of statutory levy in the Pig Disease Eradication Fund. [138413]

Ms Quin: The Meat and Livestock Commission holds a capital sum of £605,000 on behalf of the Pig Disease Eradication Fund Ltd.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Middle East

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made about the use of children in recent violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians. [137208]

Mr. Hain: I deplore the fact that children have been caught up in recent violence in the Occupied Territories, which has led to tragic loss of life and casualties among children. I support the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' recent statement that the protection of children must be an absolute priority for both parties.

Ghana

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of preparations for the elections in Ghana in December. [137941]

Mr. Hain: The UK Government have provided assistance to Ghana's Electoral Commission to help eliminate electoral fraud. We are sending a team of thirteen observers to monitor the electoral process. It is important that the elections are held in a free and democratic manner.

Biological Weapons

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the Biopreparat organisation in Russia and the manufacture of biological weapons. [137929]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of widely-publicised accounts that Biopreparat was originally established to support the biological weapons programme of the former Soviet Union. We do not however comment on intelligence matters.

Russia is a State Party and Depositary Government of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) and is currently involved in negotiations on a legally-binding Protocol to strengthen the Convention. The UK Believes that this Protocol will improve transparency and provide internationally agreed mechanisms with which to pursue compliance concerns.

Non-departmental Public Bodies (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137700]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2000 Annual Report, held in the House Library, contains a list of non-departmental public bodies sponsored by my Department which have a remit that covers the United Kingdom. Information on board members and remuneration are contained within. The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested, but general information on expenditure and staffing is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk.

Foreign Policy Centre

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of the Foreign Policy Centre in formulating his policy. [138181]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Foreign Office welcomes ideas from outside organisations on all areas of its work. It is established practice for Foreign Office Ministers and officials to have regular contact with policy institutes and NGOs, including the Foreign Policy Centre, and to consider their views when formulating policy. Policy institutes and NGOs can also influence policy through their contributions to a wider public debate.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial support his Department gives the Foreign Policy Centre. [138182]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Foreign Policy Centre has received no money from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, nor do we have any plans to provide financial assistance.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has received from the United States in respect of the future of DERA. [138161]

Mr. Battle: None. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and representatives of his Department are, however, in contact with the US Administration on this subject.

EU Council Representatives

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the functions and treaty base of the Secretary General/High Representative of the Council, and the extent to which his functions are autonomous of national Governments of the member states. [138217]

Mr. Vaz: The role and functions of the Secretary General/High Representative are set out in Article 207 of the Treaty establishing the European Community and in Articles 18 and 26 of the Treaty on European Union. Article 26 in particular provides that

> The Secretary-General of the Council, High Representative for the common foreign and security policy, shall assist the Council in matters coming within the scope of the common foreign and security policy, in particular through contributing to the formulation, preparation and implementation of policy decisions, and, when appropriate and acting on behalf of the Council at the request of the Presidency, through conducting political dialogue with third parties.

It is clear from these provisions that the Secretary General/High Representative's role is to assist the Council, which remains the primary EU decision-making body for matters of external policy. It follows that the Secretary General/High Representative is answerable to the Council for all his actions in the name of the EU.

Defence Attachés

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the total *(a)* direct and *(b)* associated costs of defence attachés will be in financial year 2000–01. [138317]

Mr. Hain: The Ministry of Defence accounts for the pay, allowances and certain other costs of defence attachés and defence advisers. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office accounts for office and residential accommodation, as well as the administration costs at overseas Posts in supporting the activities of such staff. The estimated Foreign and Commonwealth costs in 2000–01 are £14 million.

Diego Garcia

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the extent of the exclusion zones around and above Diego Garcia; and what purpose the zones serve. [138296]

Mr. Battle: There are no exclusion zones. Diego Garcia has a three mile territorial sea, within which activities are restricted in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and an area of controlled airspace that extends five miles out and 2,500ft upwards from the runway there.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what requirement there is on the US authorities to notify him of progress with their research undertaken on Diego Garcia. [138297]

Mr. Battle: We would expect the US authorities to seek our approval before conducting any research programmes on Diego Garcia.

GCHQ (Recruitment)

Mr. HomeRobertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the recruitment statistics for GCHQ in 1999; and what the same figures were in 1998. [138792]

Mr. Robin Cook: GCHQ notified the Civil Service Commissioners that, as a result of recruitment schemes run in 1999, 241 individuals have joined the Department or are awaiting completion of the application process. This compares with 187 reported for 1998 recruitment schemes. In addition, nine former members of staff were reappointed in 1999, compared with eight in 1998.

WALES

Environment (Deeside)

6. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the environment on Deeside. [136867]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales regularly meets the First Minister and discusses a wide range of issues. I also hold regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Transport, Planning and the Environment.

Training

7. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to meet the chairman of the National Education and Training Council in Wales to discuss training issues. [136868]

Mr. Hanson: I have no immediate plans to meet the Chairman of the National Education and Training Council in Wales.

Pre-Budget Report (Women)

8. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact of proposals in the pre-Budget Report as they specifically affect women in Wales. [136869]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend announced a number of measures that will benefit women in Wales.

Women will benefit from improved fuel allowances, an increase in pension entitlements and also from improved New Deal measures. This Government welcome the invaluable contribution that women make to family life and economic stability, and we are determined to support families and provide the best opportunities for women.

Flooding

9. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes he has identified in rainfall trends which will require additional flood management planning for Wales. [136870]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Identifying such trends, on a UK basis, is part of the research at the Hadley Centre and UK Climate Impacts Programme. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister recently announced that the Government intend to enhance and speed up the research to improve our prediction and assessment of the effects of climate change. The Government also intend to ask a senior independent engineer to carry out a review of technical approaches to flood alleviation.

13. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the recent floods. [136874]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend on a range of issues affecting Wales, which have of course included the recent floods. A meeting of Ministers, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, was held on 4 November to discuss the flooding issues. Sue Essex, Assembly Minister for Environment, Transport and Planning and one of my senior officials also attended this meeting.

Anti-drugs Strategy

10. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator's second national plan and current levels of drugs misuse in Wales. [136871]

Mr. Hanson: I meet the Assembly Secretaries on a regular basis, when we discuss a range of issues. I am aware that Jane Hutt, Assembly Minister for Health and Social Services, has welcomed the report by Keith Hellawell.

Crime (Young People)

11. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about policies to reduce crime by young people in Wales. [136872]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Minister regularly to discuss a number of subjects, including this one. The Assembly takes great interest in the work of the Youth Justice Board and Youth Offending Teams in Wales, in view of their key role in safeguarding the social wellbeing, health and education of young people in Wales. Wales received some £5 million of the £85 million made available for the Youth Justice Board in the last Comprehensive Spending Review. In addition, the Assembly is providing a grant of £371,000 to the voluntary organisation, NACRO Cymru, to provide advice and guidance to Youth Offending Teams and local agencies in Wales.

Miners (Compensation)

12. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on progress in paying compensation to miners in Wales. [136873]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and other DTI Ministers and discuss a wide range of issues, including miners compensation.

The Government are working hard to bring about greater co-operation from all concerned in order to speed up payments to miners for their claims. In Wales £24.5 million has now been paid out in compensation, £18.8 million of that for respiratory diseases.

Wales Office

14. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many staff work in the Wales Office; and what he expects the cost to be for running this office for the year ending March 2001. [136875]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There are currently 43 full-time equivalent staff working for the Wales Office, with two staff who work part-time. The running cost budget for the Wales Office is £2,250,000 for the year ending 31 March 2001.

Job Losses (Panasonic and Sony)

15. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he was first informed that there were to be job losses at Panasonic and Sony in Wales. [136876]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government were alerted to the announcements on a confidential basis very shortly before their publication. Such decisions are ultimately commercial ones for the companies to take themselves to ensure their long-term future. It is not the Government's policy to intervene in such decisions.

BSE Inquiry Report

16. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on actions he has taken since the publication of the BSE Inquiry report of Lord Phillips on the relationship between civil servants of the National Assembly and those in Whitehall Departments. [136877]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The situation is now different from that on which Lord Phillips' Inquiry reported, in that relationships between civil servants of the National Assembly for Wales and those in Whitehall Departments are governed by the Memorandum of Understanding between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations supported by a series of Devolution Guidance Notes (DGN). DGN 1 deals with working arrangements between officials. An important part of my role is to ensure that these arrangements work smoothly.

I have, however, looked carefully at the report to ensure that current arrangements are compatible with the Inquiry's findings.

Secondary Schools

17. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to meet the National Assembly Education Secretary to discuss secondary school provision. [136879]

Mr. Hanson: Both the Secretary of State and I will be meeting the National Assembly Secretary for Education, Jane Davidson, in the near future, and I plan to meet her on a regular basis to discuss education issues that are important to Wales.

Pensioners

18. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has received from pensioner organisations in Wales. [136880]

Mr. Hanson: In recent months I have received a number of representations from pensioner organisations. I have also met with some pensioner groups.

21. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with Department of Social Security Ministers about *(a)* the take up of the Minimum Income Guarantee for pensioners, *(b)* the issuing of free television licences and *(c)* winter fuel payments in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [136883]

Mr. Hanson: I speak regularly with colleagues in Whitehall and we discuss a range of issues. My officials are also in close contact with their counterparts in the Department of Social Security on matters that affect pensioners in Wales.

The uprated Minimum Income Guarantee will help 105,000 pensioner households in Wales. 10,000 more pensioners in Wales will be eligible and benefits will increase for the 95,000 pensioners currently eligible. Over 200,000 over 75 pension households will benefit from free television licences and the increased Winter Fuel Allowance will benefit 500,000 pensioner households in Wales.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the new measures announced for pensioners by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget statement.

27. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to meet representatives of pensioner organisations in Wales. [136889]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I regularly meet representatives of pensioner organisations and I met a group of pensioners on 9 November to discuss a range of issues with them.

My right hon. Friend has agreed to meet the National Association of Welsh Pensioners shortly to discuss the new measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 8 November.

Public Opinion (Young People)

19. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the operation of the mechanisms in Wales for Government to ascertain the opinions of young people; and if he will make a statement. [136881]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I welcome the way in which the Assembly is taking forward a cross-cutting agenda for support for young people in Wales. They are undertaking extensive consultation with young people and those who work with them in the statutory and voluntary sectors, to develop a Welsh strategy for the young people of Wales.

NHS

20. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly on the NHS in Wales. [136882]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the Assembly First Secretary and the Health Secretary to discuss Health issues in Wales.

In addition we are all members of the Joint Ministerial Committee for health. To date, we have met four times and the opportunities to share ideas are proving very useful.

Fuel Duty

22. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact of fuel duty on the Welsh economy. [136884]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a 2p reduction in duty on Ultra-Low Sulphur Fuel, petrol and diesel, on top of the 1p cut in the 2000 Budget. The Government are sympathetic to the needs of the whole UK economy. However, we also have a duty to environmental protection, and fuel duty and the Climate Change Levy have their part to play.

29. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact of vehicle fuel duties on the rural economy in Wales. [136891]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In this year's Budget, the Government gave a commitment to ending the fuel duty escalator and that there would be no increase in fuel duty, beyond the automatic increase in line with inflation. Fuel duty revenues go straight into a ring-fenced fund for improving public transport and modernising the road network. Wales is allocated a percentage of such moneys on the basis of the funding rules, but it is for the National Assembly to determine how the money is spent.

Manufacturing Industry

23. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent talks he has had with the First Secretary, concerning the prospects for manufacturing industry with particular reference to the steel industry; and if he will make a statement. [136885]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with my right hon. Friend the First Minister and discuss a number of issues, including the steel industry. The Government fully understand the importance of a successful manufacturing sector, and steel is making a vital contribution to the economy and employment.

Manufacturing output in Wales in the four quarters to the second quarter of 2000 was 4.2 per cent. higher than in the corresponding period of 1999 and 7 per cent. higher than in 1995.

Renewable Energy

24. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry regarding the development of renewable energy in Wales. [136886]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues. Both the UK Government and the National Assembly for Wales support the development of renewable energy as a sustainable energy source for the future.

Children's Commissioner

25. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received from the First Minister of the National Assembly for Wales on the Government's legislative programme in respect of the Children's Commissioner for Wales. [136887]

Mr. Hanson: Since February this year, following the publication of the North Wales Child Abuse report, the First Minister and I have been in touch constantly about the legislation required to implement the post of Children's Commissioner.

Hospital Waiting Times

26. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary and the Welsh Health Secretary on the number of people waiting over 18 months for an operation. [136888]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the Assembly First Secretary and the Health Secretary to discuss health issues in Wales.

Moreover, we have all attended meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee on health at which waiting lists and times have been discussed.

On 23 November, the National Assembly will launch the report of the Waiting Times Strategy Group. This will identify a wide range of recommendations to assist in reducing waiting lists/times.

Ambulance Services

28. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representatives he has received concerning the inclusion of the ambulance service in Wales within a UK wide inspection system for ambulance services. [136890]

Mr. Hanson: None.

Rural Economy

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what impact the increases on fuel duty and Vehicle Excise Duty have had on the economy of rural Wales [136878]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In this year's Budget, the Government gave a commitment to ending the fuel duty escalator and that there would be no increase in fuel duty, beyond the automatic increase in line with inflation. Fuel duty revenues go straight into a ring-fenced fund for improving public transport and modernising the road network. Wales is allocated a percentage of such moneys on the basis of the spending rules, but it is for the National Assembly to determine whether the money is spent on transport or on other priorities. Our Budget plans for next year promise an abolition of vehicle excise duty (VED) on agricultural machines which will benefit owners of up to 15,000 such machines in Wales, currently paying £40.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Royal Institute of International Affairs

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the degree of access to confidential Government *(a)* documents and *(b)* briefings afforded to senior members and staff of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. [136246]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have been asked to reply.

All confidential Government documents and briefings are managed under established procedures, which apply without exemption.

We have regular exchanges with the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) and other similar organisations on many aspects of foreign policy, both privately and publicly.

Ministers and officials participate in RIIA hosted meetings. According to Chatham House, meetings of the Institute may be held "on the record" or under the Chatham House Rule. When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, may be revealed; nor may it be mentioned that the information was received at a meeting of the Institute.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he has taken in the past three months to install more safe cells for remand prisoners. [137714]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has developed a safer cell design, which provides protection for those at risk of self-harm. Since 1996, a total of 185 cells have been installed to this "improved cell" standard. 1,088 cells in the new prisons at Forest Bank and Ashfield—Design, Construction, Management and Finance (DCMF) prisons—reflect aspects of the new design requirements.

A strategy to introduce safer cell design features will be developed as part of a revised suicide prevention policy. There have been no improved cells installed since the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), referred in an Adjournment debate to plans to include them in new houseblocks and prisons, 7 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 603. But the Prison Service has confirmed its intention to incorporate the safer cell designed features into some or all of the cells in new houseblocks being built in establishments. Two new DCMF prisons under construction at Dovegate and Rye Hill will provide 1,353 cells reflecting aspects of the new design requirement.

Prisons

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff there are on night duty in each prison holding juveniles; and what the staff to prisoner ratio is in such prisons on night shifts. [137723]

Mr. Boateng: The table shows the night staffing figures for those establishments holding juveniles with the corresponding staff-to-prisoner ratio.

Establishment	*Number of staff*	*Staff to prisoner ratio*
Ashfield	26	1:15
Brinsford	6	1:36
Castington	13	1:37
Feltham	24	1:6.5
Hollesley Bay:		
Carlford Unit	1	1:30
Warren Hill	3	1:61.6
Huntercombe		1:40
Lancaster Farms	13	1:38.3
Onley	5	1:43
Portland	19	1:30
Stoke Heath	5	1:58.7
Thorn Cross	9	1:30
Werrington	6	1:17.6
Wetherby	8	1:45
Female establishments holding under 18's		
Brockhill	6	1:27
Bullwood Hall	7	1:26
Brake Hall	8	1:33
Holloway	28	1:19
Low Newton	7	1:30
New Hall	10	1:32
Styal	16	1:26

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the jurisdiction of HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Probations and the Prisons Ombudsman extends to Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. [137799]

Mr. Boateng: The authority of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation and the Prisons Ombudsman covers England and Wales only. However, both the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates have on occasion carried out inspections at the request of the Islands' authorities.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the ethnic composition is of *(a)* staff and *(b)* prisoners in each prison which holds juvenile offenders. [137722]

Mr. Boateng: The answer is given in the tables.

Table 1: Ethnic composition of staff in juvenile establishments as at 31 October 2000

		Percentage of staff who have declared their ethnicity			
Establishment	*Total SIP*	*White*	*Asian*	*Black*	*Other ethnic groups*
Total	4,252	96.4	1.8	1.5	0.3
Ashfield	267	96.3	0.7	3.0	0.0
Brinsford	372	93.0	3.1	3.6	0.3
Castington	343	99.4	0.0	0.3	0.3
Feltham	633	88.7	7.8	2.4	1.1
Hollesley Bay	326	99.7	0.0	0.0	0.3
Huntercombe	250	96.3	0.8	2.1	0.8
Lancaster Farms	359	99.7	0.0	0.3	0.0
Onley	387	96.9	1.6	1.3	0.2
Portland	319	99.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
Stoke Heath	387	97.2	1.1	1.7	0.0
Thorn Cross	216	99.0	0.0	0.5	0.5
Werrington	154	98.6	0.0	1.4	0.0
Wetherby	239	99.2	0.4	0.4	0.0

Table 2: Ethnic composition of prisoners in juvenile establishments as at 30 September 2000

		Percentage of Ethnic group[2]				
Establishment	*Population*[1]	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*[3]	*Chinese and Other*[4]	*Not known*
Juvenile establishments	5,243	80.2	12.9	2.8	4.0	0.1
Ashfield	362	85.6	10.6	0.5	3.3	0.0
Brinsford	460	74.7	18.4	3.5	3.2	0.3
Castington	247	98.8	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.0
Feltham	724	48.8	37.8	4.8	8.5	0.1
Hollesley Bay	334	74.1	17.3	3.6	5.1	0.0
Huntercombe	352	56.9	35.1	4.5	3.4	0.0
Lancaster Farms	494	92.7	4.7	1.4	1.2	0.0
Onley	593	72.0	21.4	4.1	2.5	0.0
Portland	501	76.9	17.1	3.8	2.2	0.0
Stoke Heath	562	92.8	5.0	0.7	1.5	0.0
Thorn Cross	237	86.9	2.8	4.8	5.6	0.0
Werrington	104	90.4	6.7	1.9	1.0	0.0
Wetherby	273	88.0	5.5	2.9	3.6	0.0

[1] F1032 population returns
[2] Estimated from Inmate Information System (IIS) data
[3] Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani
[4] Includes Other Asian
[5] = 100 per cent.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many mothers and babies were transported from one prison to another in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999. [137810]

Mr. Boateng: The figures for the number of mothers and their babies transported from one prison to another in 1998 and 1999 are set out in the table.

Prisons	1998	1999
Askham Grange	0	0
Holloway	19	21
New Hall	4	6
Styal	7	7

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Prison Service Health Care Department will publish the 1997–98 annual report. [137805]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service Director of Health Care's Annual Report 1997–98 was published early in 1999. I am arranging for copies of the report to be placed in the Library.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners hanged themselves in 1999; [137801]

(2) what operational lessons have been learned, and what changes have been made, following the deaths in HMP Leicester in December 1999; and if he will make a statement; [137721]

(3) how many prisoners suffered permanent damage as a result of an attempted suicide in 1999; [137802]

(4) what was the elapsed time between estimated time of death and discovery of the body for each prisoner who committed suicide in 1998 and 1999. [137800]

Mr. Boateng: 86 of the 91 self-inflicted deaths in custody in 1999 were by hanging. There is no reliable information about attempted suicides as at present no distinction is made between forms of self-harm. Long term or permanent physical or psychological damage can result from a variety of forms of self-harm, including substance abuse.

There were 173 self-inflicted deaths in 1998 and 1999, and full information about the timing of these deaths in relation to the discovery of the bodies could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. Of 40—the first 20 in both years—cases examined, 22 inquest reports contain no record of estimated time of death. Of the remainder, nine deaths are estimated to have occurred between eight minutes and six hours 25 minutes before discovery of the body and nine deaths between 15 minutes and 78 days afterwards.

There have been six self-inflicted deaths in Leicester prison in the last year, including two in December 1999. Internal inquiries are complete in respect of five of the six and have identified no failures of basic procedures or apparent links between the six deaths. Five Coroners' inquests are awaited. Since January 2000, the prison's care suite has been refurbished, is permanently manned and in regular use. Two crisis suites are being introduced. Leicester's good and active Listener scheme has been expanded. Improved accommodation will be provided for new receptions.

The continuing rise in prisoner suicides, particularly in local prisons like Leicester, has prompted a major review of the Prison Service's work on suicide prevention. There will be a focus on local prisons like Leicester because they have high proportions of unconvicted prisoners and large throughputs and disproportionate numbers of their populations at the most risk of suicide or self-harm.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women prisoners applied for a place in a mother and baby unit in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 during the reception procedure. [137809]

Mr. Boateng: It is not the practice in any of the female prisons for a woman to make an application for a place on a mother and baby unit during the reception procedure. The Prison Service Order to Governors on the "Management of Mother and Baby Units and the Application Process" was published in February. This requires all women's prisons, as part of the reception process, to identify all eligible women and provide them with the prisoners' handbook "All About Mother and Baby Units" so that they can apply as soon as possible after the reception process. The order also required all women's prisons to appoint a named liaison officer, to be responsible for ensuring that all women, sentenced or unsentenced, who are pregnant or have a child under 18 months, are identified and informed of the arrangements for applying for a place on a mother and baby unit. All women's prisons now have a named liaison officer.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women have given birth while held in HMP Brockhill in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [137806]

Mr. Boateng: Brockhill prison we re-roled to a female prison in 1997. Since then, six women have given birth while held in the prison. Five of these were at the Alexandra Hospital, Redditch, and one this year within the prison.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement regarding the young woman who gave birth inside New Hall prison this summer. [137808]

Mr. Boateng: To date, three births have taken place within New Hall prison this year. These happened in July, August and October. However, in all three cases, staff were only alerted when labour was at a very advanced stage. Therefore, there was not enough time to transfer the women to hospital.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were committed to prison in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 for each imprisonable offence. [137712]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table. This information is also published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (Tables 1.16, 3.8 and 4.5 of the 1999 edition Cm 4805) copies of which are in the Library.

Receptions under sentence into prisons in England and Wales by offence, 1998–99

Offence group	*1998*	*1999*
All offences[1]	91,282	93,965
Violence against the person	12,942	12,778
Murder	241	268
Manslaughter	194	164
Other homicide and attempted homicide	895	894
Wounding	6,746	6,678
Assaults	3,371	3,318
Cruelty to children	96	112
Other offences of violence against the person	1,399	1,344
Sexual offences	2,715	2,665
Buggery and indecency between males	114	113
Rape	857	781
Gross indecency with children	492	527
Other sexual offences	1,252	1,244
Burglary	11,570	11,391
Robbery	3,595	3,722
Theft and handling	19,866	21,763
Taking and driving away	3,103	3,050
Other thefts	14,999	16,956
Handling stolen goods	1,764	1,757
Fraud and forgery	3,374	3,296
Fraud	3,124	3,116
Forgery	250	180
Drug offences	7,560	7,810
Other offences	27,274	28,306
Arson	400	416
Criminal damage	1,680	1,653
In charge or driving under the influence of drink or drugs	2,607	2,433
Other motoring offences	11,800	12,202
Drunkenness	534	459
Blackmail	111	111
Kidnapping	182	218
Affray	1,504	1,430
Violent disorder	470	347
Perjury/Libel/Pervert the course of justice	696	699
Threat/disorderly behaviour	1,184	1,228
Breach of Court Order	3,387	4,203
Other	2,719	2,907
Offences not recorded	2,386	2,234
Non-criminal prisoners		
All offences	3,290	3,271
Committed for non-payment of:		
Wife maintenance (including wife and child maintenance)	8	8
Child maintenance	14	9
Arrears under an affiliation order	2	1
Rates	13	4
Community charge/council tax	194	101
Other debts	21	10
In contempt of court	588	586
Persons held under the 1971 Immigration Act	2,348	2,443
Others	64	79
Committal type not recorded	38	30

[1] Excludes non criminal offences

Fuel Theft

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to reduce the number of thefts of fuel from service station forecourts. [137629]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Both my Department and the Association of Chief Police Officers are represented on the British Oil Industry Security Syndicate. We support initiatives the Syndicate has developed to combat service station forecourt crimes, including the theft of petrol. The Syndicate aims to share information among its members and work with other partners to encourage the spread of best practice.

One such initiative is the establishment of 'Forecourt Watch' schemes in several areas of the country. These schemes, operated in conjunction with the local police, provide service stations with an early warning system of vehicles and individuals involved with crime on forecourts. When a crime is committed local petrol retailers immediately report the incident to the local police, who transmit warnings via a communications system such as 'Ringmaster'. A number of other schemes are currently being developed.

Number Plates

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will amend the legislation relating to the issue of registration plates for vehicles in order to reduce the incidence of crime involving the misuse of number plates. [137628]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The possibility of amending the legislation relating to the supply and issue of registration plates for vehicles was discussed in the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team's five-year strategy 'Tackling Vehicle Crime', published in September 1999. We are looking closely at the proposal to legislate in this area.

Voting

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what pilot projects have been introduced since May 1997 on alternative methods of voting at elections in the United Kingdom. [137948]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Act 2000 enabled local authorities to pilot alternative methods of voting for the first time. A total of 38 pilot schemes were carried out at last May's local elections. Of these, there were 15 early voting schemes, seven all-postal ballots, five electronic voting and/or counting schemes, four which offered postal votes on demand, three schemes involving mobile polling, two schemes involving extending polling hours, one weekend voting scheme and one scheme which offered candidates free delivery of election material.

Police (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many civilian police personnel were based in Gloucestershire on 1 January *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 1999, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1997, *(e)* 1996 and *(f)* 1992; [137946]

(2) how many uniformed police personnel were based in Gloucestershire on 1 January *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 1999, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1997, *(e)* 1996 and *(f)* 1992. [137945]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Since April 1995, police numbers have been collected twice a year, in March and September. The information in the table is therefore for 31 March of each year requested.

Gloucestershire Constabulary

Year[1]	*Number of police officers*	*Number of civilian support staff*
2000	1,114	484
1999	1,104	504
1998	1,104	423
1997	1,133	435
1996	1,333	415
1992	1,174	367

[1] As at 31 March in each year

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers began basic training in Gloucestershire in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; and how many he estimates will do so in 2000. [137947]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Chief Constable of Gloucestershire Constabulary informs me that in 1992 the number of police officers who commenced basic training was 16.

Since 1994, in accordance with the requirements of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, figures have been compiled on the basis of financial (not calendar) years:

Year	*Number*
1995–96	28
1996–97	60
1997–98	28
1998–99	61
1999–2000	59

The number of recruits commencing basic training in 2000–01 up to the end of December is expected to be 53.

Proof-of-age Cards

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy on proof-of-age cards. [137938]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We support schemes which issue credible proof-of-age cards, believing that they have an important part to play in strategies to control the sale of age-restricted goods to young people.

Drugs (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in Gloucestershire were *(a)* arrested and *(b)* convicted for drug related incidents in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [137937]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collated centrally on drug-related incidents or offences, neither are data collected centrally on arrests for drug offences. However, information is published annually in the Home Office Bulletin on Drug Seizure and Offender Statistics, United Kingdom, on the number of persons found guilty of, or cautioned for, drug offences. Information for the period 1990 to 1999 is given in the table.

Number of people found guilty of, or cautioned for, drug offences, Gloucestershire, 1990–99

	Found guilty	*Cautioned*	*Total persons*
1990	154	187	341
1991	186	310	496
1992	187	432	619
1993	225	419	644
1994	249	553	802
1995	342	736	1,078
1996	368	517	885
1997	339	526	865
1998	496	890	1,386
1999	537	591	1,128

Source:
Drugs Research Unit, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

Probation Services

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the overall spending on probation services was for each county in England and Wales in the last 12 months; and what was the average cost of maintaining a person on probation in the last 12 months. [137720]

Mr. Boateng: The financial year 1998–99 is the latest year for which the Home Office has details of audited revenue expenditure by Probation Services.

Probation Services' revenue expenditure in England and Wales for the financial year 1998–99 is shown in the table.

Probation services revenue expenditure in England and Wales

£

Probation service	*1998–99 expenditure*
England	
Avon	6,951,677
Bedfordshire	3,762,279
Berkshire	5,778,970
Cambridgeshire	4,236,916
Cheshire	6,396,271
Cornwall	2,770,344
Cumbria	4,241,989
Derbyshire	6,046,441
Devon	7,347,901
Dorset	4,459,880
Durham	4,394,551
Essex	9,220,583
Gloucestershire	4,019,954
Hampshire	9,763,218
Hereford and Worcester	4,471,940
Hertfordshire	5,591,181
Humberside	6,652,265
Kent	10,273,525
Lancashire	10,272,761
Leicestershire	5,714,639
Lincolnshire	4,122,468
Inner London[1]	39,188,000
North East London	9,449,257
South East London	6,335,178
South West London	4,660,922
Middlesex	16,908,882
Greater Manchester	25,593,669
Merseyside	15,505,714
Norfolk	4,450,188
Northamptonshire	3,638,041
Northumbria	12,596,167
Nottinghamshire	8,828,196
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire	7,805,070

Probation services revenue expenditure in England and Wales

£

Probation service	*1998–99 expenditure*
Shropshire	2,610,026
Somerset	3,879,240
Staffordshire	7,420,133
Suffolk	3,804,565
Surrey	5,757,167
East Sussex	4,465,125
West Sussex	3,511,260
Teeside	5,419,117
Warwickshire	3,495,556
West Midlands	25,768,067
Wiltshire	3,526,718
North Yorkshire	3,904,279
South Yorkshire	12,345,562
West Yorkshire	20,001,100
Wales	
Dyfed	2,246,946
Mid Glamorgan	3,494,755
South Glamorgan	4,127,093
West Glamorgan	3,345,800
Gwent	4,020,632
North Wales	4,179,887
Powys	845,487

[1] Pre-audit estimate

The estimated annual average cost of maintaining a person on probation in 1998–99 was as follows:

	£
Probation Order	1,710
Community Service Order	1,400
Supervision under Children's and Young Persons Act 1969	1,460

Elderly Prisoners

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female prisoners are (i) over the retirement age and (ii) over 80-years-old. [138170]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional information for 30 September 2000 shows that there were 578 persons (568 male and 10 females) aged 65 years or over in prisons in England and Wales. This includes both remand and sentenced prisoners. Of these, 12 (all of which were male) were aged over 80 years.

Constituency Boundaries

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes to parliamentary constituency boundaries are due to take place before *(a)* March 2001 and *(b)* May 2002. [138023]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None. The Parliamentary Boundary Commission for England is required to report on its review of parliamentary boundaries between April 2003 and April 2007. The Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Wales is required to report on its review of parliamentary boundaries between December 2002 and December 2006. Any changes recommended as a result of those reviews would not take effect until the following general election. There will be no changes before then.

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish an inter-departmental committee to consider the workings of section 24 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and if he will make a statement. [138185]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have a clear commitment to Freedom of Information. I am well aware of the need for increased openness and am equally aware of the concerns within the scientific community about security and commercial sensitivity.

I have recently held a seminar comprising representatives of animal protection groups and the scientific community to discuss Freedom of Information issues and officials are currently in the process of holding a series of separate meetings with those organisations. In due course, I will be reconvening the group to discuss progress made.

Private Sector Prisons

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each prison which is managed by the private sector, the number of *(a)* prisoners and *(b)* full-time and part-time equivalent staff at the most recent date for which figures are available, indicating the total annual saving to public funds resulting from the use of private sector operated prisons. [138196]

Mr. Boateng: The number of prisoners and full-time and full-time equivalent staff at private sector prisons is shown in the table.

Prison	*Prisoners at 13 November 2000*	*Staff*
Wolds	398	262
Blakenhurst	836	315
Doncaster	1,050	618
Parc	841	350.5
Altcourse	795	526
Lowdham Grange	513	254.3
Ashfield	366	253
Forest Bank	706	339.5

The comparative costs of the non-Public Finance Initiative (PFI) private sector prisons (Wolds, Blakenhurst and Doncaster) and their closest public sector counterparts have been reviewed annually. In the most recent report for 1998–99, private sector prisons offered on average a saving of 13 per cent. in terms of cost per prisoner but little or no saving when cost per baseline and in-use places were compared.The contractual Net Present Value (NPV) of the PFI prisons assessed against their public sector comparator (PSC) is shown in the table.

Prison	*NPV (£ million)*	*PSC (£ million)*	*Saving (per cent.)*
Parc	266	319	17
Altcourse	247	248	less than 1
Lowdham Grange	127	157	19
Ashfield	122	141	14
Forest Bank	204.5	234.5	13
Rye Hill	154	209	26
Dovegate	241	292	18

Work is under way with a view to establishing a methodology for comparing the costs of PFI prisons with comparable public sector counterparts.

Cannabis

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 430W, how many of those convicted in England and Wales in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998 for possession of cannabis have been convicted again since then. [137999]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data are available on a sample of 1,324 offenders convicted of possession of cannabis in 1998. The following table shows whether these offenders have been reconvicted of any recordable offence at any time. For those offenders originally convicted in the first half of 1998, the table also presents whether they have been reconvicted of any recordable offence within two years of the original offence. A distinction is made between offences where possession of cannabis was the principal original offence, and where it was a secondary offence.

Reconviction of sampled offenders convicted of possession of cannabis in 1998

Measure—whether cannabis possession was original principal offence	*Percentage reconvicted*[1]
Ever reconvicted	
Principal offence	49.3 (819)
Non-principal offence	56.6 (505)
All offences	53.0 (1,324)
Reconvicted within two years	
Principal offence	47.5 (402)
Non-principal offence	51.2 (244)
All offences	48.9 (646)

[1] Total number in sample

Reconvictions are counted only for offences committed after the original conviction. No comparable figures are available for 1997.

Schengen Information System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if UK nationals have been placed on the Schengen Information System by non-UK Government authorities. [137895]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 428W. The United Kingdom does not yet have access to data entered on to the Schengen Information System by Schengen partner countries.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans *(a)* to put data on the Schengen Information System and *(b)* to obtain access to its data. [137893]

Mrs. Roche: The Government are considering, in consultation with law enforcement agencies and other interested parties in the United Kingdom and Schengen partner countries, the arrangements for putting data onto the Schengen Information System (SIS) and having access to SIS data. I am not yet in a position to say when the arrangements will be in place.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons the United Kingdom will not make any inquiries of the Schengen Information System during its first year of membership. [137892]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 427W. The United Kingdom is not in a position to make inquiries of the Schengen Information System because the necessary arrangements for sharing data with Schengen partner countries through the system are not yet in place.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the average custodial sentence imposed in each of the last three years on persons convicted of repeat offences of domestic violence; [137878]

(2) how many individuals convicted of a second offence of domestic violence were imprisoned in each of the last three years. [137880]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available. Offence classifications used by the Home Office are based upon legal definitions. From the data held centrally it is not possible to identify the relationship between the victim and the offender convicted of committing a crime.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of sentencing policy towards persons convicted of offences of domestic violence. [137879]

Mr. Boateng: Statistics held centrally do not distinguish the relationship between an offender and the victim of the crime. It is therefore not possible to tell from those data what sentences offenders who commit domestic violence offences receive or what effect those sentences have. Projects under the Crime Reduction Programme's violence against women initiative, and earlier research, looks at different aspects of domestic violence, including criminal remedies. This work focuses on effective interventions rather than individual sentences. Relevant information is on the Home Office's domestic violence website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/domesticviolence/index.htm. The probation service Pathfinder initiative is currently looking at perpetrator programmes run by the service for those put under its supervision, to see what works for wider adoption.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue guidelines to the courts on the sentencing of persons convicted of offences of domestic violence. [137876]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no power to issue sentencing guidelines.

Powers in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 empower the Home Secretary to direct the Sentencing Advisory Panel to propose to the Court of Appeal that it issue guidelines for specific offences or categories of offence. However, the term "domestic violence" can include a range of behaviour, which could amount to one of a number of criminal offences: it is not confined to one

particular offence. It is difficult to see how the Court of Appeal could issue guidelines relating specifically to domestic violence.

Drugs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with his Dutch counterpart about the policy of the Government of the Netherlands towards drugs. [137887]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to his question on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 431W. I have had no recent separate bi-lateral discussions with my Dutch counterpart.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 610W, on the home detention curfew scheme, if he will list the sentences imposed on those prisoners released under the home detention curfew scheme who have since been convicted of a further offence. [137967]

Mr. Boateng: Information about sentences imposed upon prisoners placed on the home detention curfew scheme who have since been convicted of a further offence is not held centrally.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people who have been released from prison under the home detention curfew scheme have committed two or more offences since their release; and what sentences they have received. [137884]

Mr. Boateng: As of 30 September 2000, the Prison Service was notified of 242 prisoners who had been convicted, cautioned or were awaiting prosecution for two or more offences committed while they were subject to the home detention curfew scheme. Information on the sentences imposed upon those prisoners who have been convicted is not held centrally.

Gay Relationships

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 425W, how many representations he has received *(a)* supporting and *(b)* opposing the civil registration of homosexual and lesbian relationships. [137997]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since May 1997, we have received 37 representations supporting, and 10 representations opposing civil registration. These were predominantly from individual members of the public rather than from campaigning organisations.

Sex Videos (Juvenile Protection)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 590W, when he will publish his conclusions regarding measures to protect children from exposure to sexually explicit material contained in videos with an R18 classification. [137991]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I will publish my conclusions as soon as I have had an opportunity to consider the responses to the consultation paper.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses he received to the consultation paper published on 24 July regarding the protection of children from exposure to sexually explicit material. [137890]

Mr. Charles Clarke: To date, 107 responses have been received to the Consultation Paper on the Regulation of R18 videos. The consultation period formally ended on 31 October although several individuals and organisations have sought permission to send responses after this date.

Football Hooligans

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people arrested at Premiership and Nationwide league grounds during the *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1997–98 seasons were (i) convicted of an offence and (ii) given a custodial sentence. [137889]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available. Most types of offences committed in connection with football are not specific to football; because convictions are recorded by category of offence rather than by the location or circumstances of the offence, no separate record is kept as to which offences took place at football grounds.

Child Abuse

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will commission a statistical study of the link between domestic violence and child abuse. [137883]

Mr. Boateng: The Government are well aware of the links between domestic violence and child abuse. These have already been documented by a number of research studies. A useful guide is contained in "Making an Impact: children and domestic violence: a training and resource pack". This document prepared by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Barnardo's and the University of Bristol was published by the University of Bristol in 1998. The Government's own publication "Working Together to Safeguard Children"—a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, makes clear that everyone working with women and children should be alert to the frequent inter-relationship between domestic violence and the abuse and neglect of children. It also notes that domestic violence in itself is likely to have a damaging effect on children's health and development.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many instances of child abuse were reported in each police force area in each of the last three years. [137882]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not known how many instances of child abuse were reported to the police in the last three years.

Offences recorded by the police are not collected by age of victim nationally. The number of offences recorded by the police, which can be identified as committed against children, is given in the table, by police force areas for the years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000. Data for cruelty to or neglect of children were not collected separately prior to April 1998.

Number of offences against children by offence and police force area for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000

	Cruelty to or neglect of children		*Abandoning a child under the age of two years*			*Child abduction*			*Gross indecency with a child*		
	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Avon and Somerset	25	3	1	—	2	8	7	4	29	30	22
Bedfordshire	3	11	—	—	—	—	1	4	31	11	10
Cambridgeshire	30	42	2	—	1	6	5	3	8	5	17
Cheshire	59	71	—	3	—	1	4	—	60	37	24
Cleveland	8	7	—	—	—	—	1	1	14	2	5
Cumbria	14	23	—	—	—	1	—	1	6	20	6
Derbyshire	19	22	1	—	—	3	4	6	21	17	14
Devon and Cornwall	35	74	—	—	3	9	17	16	29	47	54
Dorset	3	11	—	—	—	—	—	1	28	16	10
Durham	15	19	—	1	1	5	6	2	16	29	13
Essex	43	53	—	1	3	11	21	27	40	38	46
Gloucestershire	12	21	—	—	—	4	1	9	20	7	16
Greater Manchester	80	102	2	—	2	33	38	45	64	84	121
Hampshire	24	70	1	2	1	20	18	21	58	38	66
Hertfordshire	75	15	—	—	—	—	3	2	4	20	18
Humberside	39	38	1	1	4	21	20	21	33	36	23
Kent	36	57	1	—	—	7	13	12	39	53	26
Lancashire	52	37	1	—	1	4	14	13	—	49	50
Leicestershire	8	17	1	—	2	10	13	14	10	8	18
Lincolnshire	24	13	—	1	1	2	6	2	13	27	14
City of London	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—
Merseyside	30	35	4	1	—	27	10	37	31	25	28
Metropolitan Police	884	1,023	20	20	18	117	144	125	291	206	201
Norfolk	8	18	1	2	—	1	4	1	10	10	17
Northamptonshire	12	10	1	—	—	3	7	8	7	12	19
Northumbria	66	49	—	—	—	15	16	24	16	23	42
North Yorkshire	22	12	1	—	2	2	5	4	18	9	13
Nottinghamshire	71	65	1	1	—	2	8	9	3	34	26
South Yorkshire	14	23	3	—	—	2	6	17	41	41	31
Staffordshire	11	28	2	2	4	3	4	11	25	21	23
Suffolk	13	10	—	—	—	4	3	6	20	15	34
Surrey	21	26	—	1	—	7	3	5	40	48	20
Sussex	45	30	—	—	—	9	18	19	19	30	38
Thames Valley	26	45	2	1	—	5	7	7	23	24	26
Warwickshire	7	6	—	—	—	1	4	1	18	10	9
West Mercia	55	9	1	—	—	3	5	15	23	16	38
West Midlands	86	202	—	1	3	12	21	40	31	40	63
West Yorkshire	104	113	—	3	—	9	15	15	72	54	64
Wiltshire	22	13	—	1	—	5	3	6	17	10	19
England	2,101	2,424	47	42	48	372	475	554	1,230	1,202	1,284
Dyfed-Powys	42	66	1	—	—	—	1	2	23	29	19
Gwent	53	99	2	—	1	11	12	9	27	19	33
North Wales	34	17	3	—	1	—	2	2	10	7	7
South Wales	70	25	1	—	1	8	12	10	24	36	22
Wales	199	207	7	—	3	19	27	23	84	91	81
England and Wales	2,300	2,631	54	42	51	391	502	577	1,314	1,293	1,365

Corpus Juris

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those proposals, originally set out in Corpus Juris, which are under discussion at EU level *(a)* separately and *(b)* conjointly; and what his policy is regarding the exercise of the UK's veto in each case. [137896]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. and noble Friend Lord Bassam of Brighton, in another place on 25 October 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords*, column 45WA.

The Corpus Juris proposals as a whole have not been discussed in any meeting of the Council of the European Union (EU). A proposal by the Commission concerning the creation of a European Public Prosecutor has been discussed briefly in the Inter-governmental Conference (IGC) but the United Kingdom, as well as the majority of other EU member states, opposed its inclusion in the Treaty of Nice.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 435W, how many

responses he has so far received to the consultation paper 'Setting the Boundaries: reforming the law on sex offenders'. [137996]

Mr. Charles Clarke: To date, the Government have received 170 responses from a wide range of people and organisations. The closing date for comments is March 2001.

Credit Card Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the level of credit card fraud over the last three years; and what plans he has to reduce its incidence. [137886]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Recorded crime figures for credit card fraud and cheque fraud are not separately identified. The total figures for England and Wales in the years ending March 1999 and March 2000 were 141,948 and 173,857 respectively.

The Association for Payment and Clearing Services (APACS) estimates that the value of credit card fraud relating to cards issued within the United Kingdom for the years ending March 1999 and March 2000 at £135 million and £189.4 million respectively.

The Government take the problem of card fraud very seriously and we liaise closely with the Association for Payment and Clearing Services and others to establish and promote best practice in protecting cards.

The Home Office held a seminar at the end of June to seek views from the banks, retailers and others about how the increasing levels of credit card fraud in the United Kingdom could be addressed. The main issues are the introduction of chip cards which would significantly reduce the use of fraudulent cards, and the introduction of a cardholder verification system, probably using a Personal Identification Number (PIN) number, to confirm that the user of the card is genuine. We want to see these important measures introduced as soon as possible. We are working in partnership with the industry to examine other ways in which the response to credit card fraud can be improved. A further seminar to take stock of the outcome of these discussions will take place later this month.

Carriers (Illegal Immigrants)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy toward the European Council Initiative on the adoption of a directive on the harmonisation of financial penalties imposed on carriers for carriage of third country nationals lacking necessary documents. [138087]

Mrs. Roche: The adoption of penalties on those who transport inadequately documented third-country nationals into member states is one of a number of initiatives agreed by the European Council to tackle the problem of illegal immigration across Europe. It forms an important part of the European Union strategy for tackling this serious problem. We are fully committed to co-operating with other member states on the issue. The United Kingdom has opted in to this initiative. Doing so is consistent with our policy of participating in immigration measures which do not conflict with our position on frontiers.

The United Kingdom already has legislation in place whereby a financial charge may be imposed on carriers transporting inadequately documented passengers. The United Kingdom Government have some reservations about the terms of the draft directive implementing this initiative. We are currently seeking changes to the draft through negotiation.

Police Procedures

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 520W, when the review of the Codes of Practice which govern police procedures under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 will be completed and its findings published. [137990]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The current intention is to publish initial draft revised Codes of Practice for consultation by the end of this year and to lay final drafts before Parliament by the end of March 2001. The revised Codes should be in force by 1 July 2001.

National Confiscation Agency

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is in respect of the creation of a National Confiscation Agency. [137935]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to a question by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1158W.

Licensed Sex Shops

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the proposal by the president of the British Board of Film Classification for an increase in the number of licensed sex shops in British cities. [137934]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 provides a means of control of sex shop premises. It is for local authorities to decide whether or not to issue a 'sex shop' licence and there are no plans to relax these controls.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Commissioners Decision

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he proposes to take following the recent decision (reference number: C.DLA/714/1998) of a tribunal of Social Security Commissioners in relation to the lower rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance; and if he will make a statement. [138882]

Mr. Bayley: The decision, which we generally welcome, should help to achieve more consistency in decision making on entitlement to the lower rate mobility component. However, a part of the decision, which relates to a disabled person's fear or anxiety while out of doors, goes beyond what Parliament intended. That part of the decision proceeds on the assumption that a person may, for the purpose of entitlement to disability benefit, be

considered to be incapable of doing something even though he is physically and mentally capable of doing it, but chooses not to do so.

We are, therefore, considering scope for the introduction of amending regulations which would, subject to parliamentary approval, restore and clarify the original policy intention. However, it would not be our intention that any amendment would affect the legitimate conditions of entitlement to the lower rate mobility component, which would allow those people disabled by serious mental conditions, such as agoraphobia, to remain potentially eligible for benefit.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his Department will publish the study of Minimum Income Guarantee take-up. [136943]

Mr. Rooker: The Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign is still in progress.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications resulted from his Department's most recent take-up campaign for the Minimum Income Guarantee for pensioners; how many were successful; and what were the principal reasons for failure. [137267]

Mr. Rooker: The current Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign is still in progress. So far, we have had over 600,000 responses, and around half of those claims already processed have been successful.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many staff are employed by his Department under the New Deal for Young People. [137962]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

Housing Benefit

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects the review of Housing Benefit claims from people living in supported and sheltered housing to be completed; and if he will list those local authorities that have not yet submitted information on this matter. [137706]

Angela Eagle: Research information from local authorities suggests that the majority will have completed the review of claims from people living in supported accommodation by the end of this calendar year. However, because the information was collected through research we are unable to supply the names of individual authorities which have not, as yet, reviewed their cases. We are collecting management information on other aspects of the scheme and this will be published in the usual way.

Duplicate Benefit Payments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 347W, how much of the £10.5 million lost in duplicate payments of Income Support on 17 and 18 January has been recovered to date. [138342]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 14 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how much of the £10.5 million lost in duplicate payments of Income Support on 17th and 18th January has been received to date.

To date, £7.6m has been recovered.

I hope this is helpful.

Disability Living Allowance (Appeals)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what maximum time is permitted for the chairman of a Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunal to produce a full written decision of the tribunal chairman's findings. [138035]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for the President of the Appeals Service.

There is no statutory time limit by which a chairman of a Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunal should produce a full written statement. However, the President is keen to ensure that the public has a clear understanding of the level of performance they can expect. That is why he has set a standard of 10 days for the tribunal Chair to produce a full statement of reasons. This is in addition to standards set by the Appeals Service agency of two days to refer the statement to the Chairman, and three days to type and issue the statement to the appellant. This results in an overall standard of fifteen days.

We recognise that anecdotal evidence has shown that these standards are not always met. And unfortunately, the management information systems (MIS) in place do not yet give robust information to enable us to establish the proportion of cases in which these standards are being met. MIS are currently being put in place to enable these standards to be monitored.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many families will be subject to a marginal rate of income tax of more than 40 per cent. during the period that the Children's Tax Credit is withdrawn from them. [138307]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The highest rate of income tax is 40 per cent.

National Insurance Fund

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the additional income would be of the National Insurance Fund in 2000–01 and 2001–02 if *(a)* the reductions in employers' contributions in 1997 and subsequent years to compensate for the (i) landfill tax, (ii) climate change levy and (iii) aggregates levy, were cancelled and *(b)* the Treasury supplement were reintroduced at the rate specified in section 1(5) of the Social Security Act 1975. [136049]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

For part *(a)* of the question, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 375W.

For part *(b)* of the question, section 1(5) of the Social Security Act 1975 specified a supplement of 18 per cent. of the gross contribution income.

CABINET OFFICE

Sniffing Tunnels

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her letter of 31 August, what contact has taken place with Ion Track Instruments on drug and explosive sniffing tunnels; and what has been done to monitor the progress of the development and evaluation of these devices. [136807]

Marjorie Mowlam: Officials in HM Customs and Excise have maintained contact with Ion Tack Instruments, but there have been no significant developments with this portal detection system since my hon. Friend received the letter of 31 August from the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney). I understand that further tests in the United States will take place early in the new year, in which UK Government officials will maintain an interest in the progress and outcomes.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to her which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137627]

Mr. Stringer: The following non-departmental public bodies, sponsored by my Department, have a GB or UK-wide remit:

Advisory Committee on Business Appointments
Advisory Committee on Advertising
Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission
Better Regulation Task Force
Civil Service Appeal Board
Committee on Standards in Public Life
House of Lords Appointments Commission
Political Honours Scrutiny Committee
Security Commission
Security Vetting Appeals Panel
Senior Salaries Review Body
Sustainable Development Commission
Women's National Commission.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested; but general information on expenditure, staffing board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House; and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration is also available from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

Relocation

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which relocation companies hold contracts with her Office for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137195]

Mr. Stringer: There are no relocation companies who hold contracts with the Cabinet Office, COI or the Government Car and Despatch Agency for the relocation of civil servants.

PRIME MINISTER

Lord Falconer

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what factors he took into account in appointing Lord Falconer to each of the Cabinet committees of which he is a member. [137546]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* As under successive Administrations, appointments to Cabinet Committees are entirely a matter for the Prime Minister.

TREASURY

IR35

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total cost to public funds arising from the implementation of IR35 and the handling of queries and appeals from businesses affected by it. [138442]

Dawn Primarolo: So far, the main additional activity undertaken by the Inland Revenue associated with the introduction of the 'IR35' legislation has been the provision of advice to taxpayers and their advisers. This service has been provided by existing staff as part of their normal duties.

Contingency Reserve

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received requesting the contingency reserve to be used to defray additional costs incurred as a result of recent extreme weather conditions. [138214]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Reserve is meeting the costs of the additional £51 million recently set aside by the Government for flood defence activity in England on top of the resources allocated to flood defence in the 2000 Spending Review. Devolved Administrations will also receive increases, calculated according to the Barnett formula. These are likewise being met from the Reserve.

Money Laundering

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 2 November 2000, *Official*

Report, column 613W, on money laundering, which identification measures for clients involved in distance transactions it is his policy to introduce. [138033]

Miss Melanie Johnson: All persons and institutions subject to the Money Laundering Regulations 1993 must identify their customer at the start of an ongoing business relationship, when carrying out a one-off transaction of more than 15,000 euro, or where there is a suspicion that a transaction is related to money laundering. These obligations apply for face to face and distance transactions.

Pensioners (Taxation)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost of (a)(i) an untapered and (ii) a tapered age-related allowance of £15,000 a year for pensioners of over 75 years and (b) excluding all pensioners of over 80-years-old from income tax. [136274]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated full year costs for 2001–02 are in the table.

	Costs (£ million)
Increase the 75+ personal allowance to £15,000 and not tapering	1,400
Increase the 75+ personal allowance to £15,000 and tapering from the aged income limit	1,100
Excluding people aged 80 and over from income tax	1,100

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2000 Pre-Budget Report.

WFTC (Tooting)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people living in the Tooting constituency receive working families tax credit. [13[illegible]6]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 515W.

G-CAT

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what work has been undertaken for his Department in the last three years by G-CAT. [136198]

Mr. Andrew Smith: For the three financial years ending in March 2000, the Treasury has placed orders for PC servers and other related computer equipment with G-CAT.

Trader Registration

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what investigations the Inland Revenue has undertaken this year to check whether individual traders utilising internet auction sites are wrongfully failing to register as businesses; [136158]

(2) in how many cases this year the Inland Revenue has successfully detected traders wrongfully failing to register as businesses; and how much unpaid tax has been recovered; [136157]

(3) in how many cases this year the Inland Revenue has requested access to the electronic records held by the operators of internet auction sites to check whether individual traders are wrongfully failing to register as businesses. [136156]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue can formally ask for information that would identify vendors on internet auction sites, although they would not normally be entitled to see the electronic records for that purpose. Requests for information like this form part of the intelligence gathering process carried out in local offices. Local officers have discretion on how to use their powers, subject to central guidance, and it is not possible to quantify the number of cases where formal requests for information have been from internet auction sites. it is not possible to say how many traders were identified.

Elan

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* reports, *(b)* research and *(c)* projects have been undertaken for his Department in the last three years by Elan. [134460]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Elan Computing provided IT support to the Office of Government Commerce during the 2000–2001 Financial year. We have no record of any other dealings with a company of that name.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 November 2000

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Accommodation Questionnaire

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what the cost was of issuing the questionnaire to hon. Members on the type of accommodation they preferred; how many hon. Members replied to the questionnaire; and what action has been taken to accommodate the requests contained in the replies. [138543]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Other than the cost of the stationery, there was no cost in issuing the questionnaire. 556 hon. Members responded. The results of the survey were analysed, presented to the Committee and passed to the Accommodation Whips.

PRIME MINISTER

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to receive the seventh Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; and if he will make a statement. [138994]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that the seventh Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, entitled "Standards of Conduct in the House of Lords", has been published today by the Committee. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Libraries.

The recommendations in the Report are for the House of Lords. The Government welcome the Report and hope and expect that the House of Lords will give it the serious consideration that it deserves.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Post Office

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what the value is of the social network payment anticipated in the Post Office Network Business Plan for each year to 2005–06; [138042]

(2) how much of the £80 million per annum payment towards the Post Office Network's fixed costs from the Government Practitioner Services and Internet learning access points anticipated in 2005–06 in the Post Office Network Business Plan will be offset by savings in other Government Departments currently offering similar services; [138037]

(3) what proportion of the extra revenues anticipated as a result of the Post Office's Business Plan for the Post Office Network are assumed to come from Government agencies. [138041]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* It is established practice under section II paragraph 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose such information.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a list of the sub-post offices which have closed since May 1997. [136704]

Mr. Byers: I understand from the Post Office that a full list of sub-post office closures since May 1997 is not readily available in one central location.

Ultra-low Sulphur Fuel

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of filling stations which *(a)* supply ultra-low sulphur petrol and *(b)* will supply ultra-low sulphur petrol by April 2001. [138440]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 15 November 2000]:* The Department does not hold information on the number of petrol retail outlets in the UK selling ultra-low sulphur petrol (ULSP). According to HM Customs and Excise data, ULSP currently constitutes around a third of petrol released for consumption in the UK.

Future levels of supply for ULSP will be a matter for individual companies to determine.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many fuel retail outlets sell low sulphur petrol in *(a)* Wales, *(b)* rural Wales, *(c)* England and *(d)* rural England; and what proportion this is of total petrol outlets. [138268]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) .

Information Technology

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) which Departments had not produced e-business strategies by the end of October; [138640]

(2) in which disadvantaged communities the Government plan to pilot the costs and benefits of universal broadband access; [138637]

(3) which Government Departments have introduced low cost personal computer leasing schemes for public service employees; and how many public service employees have benefited from these schemes; [138638]

(4) which Government Departments and agencies are not connected to the Government secure internet; [138636]

(5) if the methods for monitoring the achievement of the target of conducting 90 per cent. of low value Government procurement electronically have been agreed; [138641]

(6) when the last monthly progress report to the Prime Minister on e-commerce was *(a)* submitted and *(b)* published on the e-Envoy website; [138642]

(7) when he will publish his plans to liberalise re-use of Government information by internet content providers. [138741]

Ms Hewitt: I would like to thank my hon. Friend for the interest he has shown in key elements of the Government's strategy for the information age. I have been asked to reply as the Minister with overarching responsibility for that strategy, which the e-Envoy and I published in the UK Online Annual Report on 11 September.

Yesterday, we published our plan for implementing all the commitments to action in the UK online report. This is on the internet at www.e-envoy.gov.uk/2000/progress/montprog.htm. The e-Envoy and I report monthly to the Prime Minister on progress against these targets. These progress reports are accessible on the internet at www.e-envoy.gov.uk/2000/progress/progress.htm.

On the specific questions my hon. Friend asks, the position is as follows:

Universal broadband access

The Wired Up Communities initiative will be piloting the impact that providing access to the internet might have on disadvantaged communities. On 11 October the Minister responsible for Learning and Technology, the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), announced that the first wired up community will be Kensington, Liverpool. We expect to announce further pilot areas in the new year.

Electronic Government procurement

Departments will monitor their own progress towards the target that

> by 2001 90 per cent. of low value goods (by volume) will be purchased electronically.

A tool to enable them to measure their progress has been developed and extensively trialled by the Office of Government Commerce. The measurement tool will be distributed to Principal Finance Officers shortly.

Liberalising re-use of Government information

I announced on 6 September our plans to boost the Knowledge Economy by overhauling the way Government information can be acquired and reused by publishing and internet businesses. This announcement was in the context of the Government's Review of the Knowledge Driven Economy as part of the Spending Review 2000. Her Majesty's Stationery Office colleagues are in the process of finalising details of key reforms with Treasury colleagues and are planning to publish these in late November.

Personal computer leasing schemes

We are committed to encouraging low cost leasing schemes in the Public Sector, and are currently auditing existing schemes. Over 27,000 teachers have purchased low cost computers through DfEEs 'Computers for Teachers' programme.

Publication of UK online monthly progress reports

The last monthly progress report to the Prime Minister was submitted on 15 November and published on the e-Envoy's website, www.e-envoy.gov.uk, on the same day.

Government Departments and Agencies connected to the Government secure intranet

All sizeable central Government Departments have joined, or are in the process of linking to, the Government secure intranet. Details of those Government Departments which are connected, or planning to connect, will be placed in the Library.

Government Departments' e-business strategies

Most Government Departments have submitted their plans.

Many of the actions we are taking forward relate to matters for which the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are responsible for setting targets and implementing initiatives. Details of these are included in the UK Online Annual Report.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Malaria

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what target the Government have set for combating malaria; what additional resources have been allocated to meet this target; and if she will make a statement. [136971]

Clare Short: The United Kingdom is strongly supporting the World Health Organisation (WHO) led Roll Back Malaria (RBM) initiative to achieve the goal of reducing the malaria burden by half by 2010. The RBM initiative provides the vehicle for concerted action by partners, especially in Africa, to deliver more widely the benefits of currently available methods of malaria control to the poorest. Overall UK developmental programme spending on malaria control activities increased to over £19 million in 1999–2000 and is set to increase further. We have contributed £12 million to WHO RBM this year alone. The UK is also supporting public-private partnerships to develop the new generation of affordable drugs required for malaria control in developing countries, both by direct funding to WHO for the Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV) initiative, the Lapdap product development programme and the Malarone donation.

Palestinian Education

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will suspend the transfer of further funds to the Palestinian Authority for education purposes until the schools under their control are reopened. [137501]

Clare Short: We have provided technical assistance to the Palestinian Ministry of Education for a number of years. Our help has focused on building the capacity of the Ministry, districts and schools to deliver high quality education to Palestinian children. To achieve this we have provided the services of experts, training and a limited amount of equipment. In company with other development partners we are considering further

assistance to the education sector. There is no reason to delay this work because of school closures for valid security reasons.

Kosovo

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with her European counterparts on the reconstruction of Kosovo; and if she will make a statement. [138195]

Mr. Foulkes: We have not had recent discussions on Kosovo with other Ministers but I met key officials on my visit to Kosovo earlier this year and officials of this Department attend meetings of the Management Board of the EU Agency for Reconstruction, which is responsible for the EU's programme in Kosovo. The Department's office in Pristina liaises directly with the agency and with other donors, including EU member states, on reconstruction issues. The agency has made good progress on developing its 360 million euros programme of reconstruction activities in 2000 since its establishment in March. The United Kingdom's contribution to this programme is about £39 million. In addition, we are providing £5 million in bilateral technical assistance in this financial year.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many staff her Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137959]

Mr. Foulkes: We currently employ two members of staff under the New Deal for Young People and have recently embarked on a new recruitment process for the New Deal arrangements.

Departmental Employees (HIV)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will take steps to ensure that people who are HIV-positive do not suffer discrimination as a result of employment practices followed by her Department. [137792]

Mr. Foulkes: Staff who are HIV-positive are not discriminated against in any of DFID's employment practices. Staff who have AIDS are treated in the same way as others with potentially serious health conditions, bearing in mind DFID's duty of care to ensure the health and safety of staff with immuno-suppressive conditions.

Child Labour (Rugmark Initiative)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the international Rugmark initiative; and what steps she has taken to encourage British carpet companies to take part. [137744]

Mr. Foulkes: We have not been involved with the Rugmark initiative and therefore we have not made an assessment of it.

In general terms labelling can make a positive contribution to the elimination of child labour but impact hinges on effective monitoring, sustainable income replacement and/or access to quality education—if not children may simply be displaced into non export oriented work.

Debt Relief

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received from Oxfam regarding reducing Third World debt. [138405]

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State and I meet regularly with representatives of non-governmental organisations, including Oxfam, to discuss debt and other development issues.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Petrol Costs (Ministerial Cars)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the cost was in each of the past three years of petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [135029]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 552W.

Housing Investment

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total amount was of Government expenditure on capital investment in housing in each year since 1979–80 in *(a)* England and *(b)* London, separately identifying expenditure under capital receipts; and what the projected expenditure is in each category for each year until 2003–04. [135802]

Mr. Mullin: The available information on Government allocations, or outturns, for expenditure on housing capital investment made since 1979–80 is set out in the tables. A revised local authority finance regime was introduced from 1990–91, and thus prior years' figures are not directly comparable. Some of the resources allocated through the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund and City Challenge are applied to housing, but this element is not distinguished in the allocations and is therefore not included. Allocations under the Capital Receipts Initiative over the period 1997–98 to 1999–2000 are identified separately in the table.

Government expenditure plans from 2001–02 to 2003–04 which were set out in the reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 398–04W, are as follows.

Spending Review 2000 Settlement Housing Capital Programmes

£ million

England	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Housing Corporation ADP (including Rough Sleepers initiative)	789	940	1,236
Local Authority Credit Approvals	2,305	2,465	2,545
Disabled Facility Grants and Housing defects loans	87	88	89
Starter Homes Initiative	50	100	100
Safer Communities Supported Housing Fund	20	40	60

Programme allocations at Regional level are yet to be decided.

Specific allocations for Estate Action and Housing Action Trusts within the Regeneration Programme are as follows:

Estimated capital allocations

	2001–02	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Estate Action			
England	39.5	11.1	4.7
of which London	35.5	11.1	4.7
Housing Action Trusts			
England	70	92.3	54.3

Allocation has yet to be distributed between individual HATs.

Housing capital expenditure allocations 1979–80 to 1989–90[1]—England

£ million

	1979–80	*1980–81*	*1981–82*	*1982–83*	*1983–84*	*1984–85*	*1985–86*	*1986–87*	*1987–88*	*1988–89*	*1989–90*
Development Programme (ADP)—Gross expenditure	[2]—	[2]—	521	755	734	697	711	715	752	791	935
Local Authority Basic Block allocations (prior to 1990–91)	2,544	2,186	1,771	1,847	1,769	1,821	1,572	1,392	1,262	1,119	874
Estate Action	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	42	67	129	176
Other allocations	0	17	25	345	464	32	33	25	71	83	45

Housing capital expenditure allocations 1990–91 to 2000–01[1]—England

£ million

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Housing Corporation Approved Development Programme (ADP)—Gross expenditure	1,063	1,586	1,760	1,796	1,484	1,142	1,044	684	607	638	542
Local Authority Credit Approvals (ACGs—from 1990–91)	1,296	1,343	1,290	1,378	1,038	994	943	628	544	609	2,019
Estate Action	175	264	347	357	373	239	203	155	99	65	68
Other Credit Approval	221	187	110	45	70	88	88	51	31	[3]—	[3]—
Capital Receipts Initiative	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	174	569	570	[3]—
Private Sector Renewal Support Grant	413	413	397	392	308	283	271	192	166	165	[3]—
Disabled Facilities Grant	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	56	59	65	72
Estate Renewal Challenge Fund	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	30	103	146	165	81
Housing Action Trusts	[3]—	10	27	57	73	47	66	69	76	68	63

Housing capital expenditure allocations 1979–1980 to 1989–90[1]—London

£ million

	1979–80	*1980–81*	*1981–82*	*1982–83*	*1983–84*	*1984–85*	*1985–86*	*1986–87*	*1987–88*	*1988–89*	*1989–90*
Development Programme (ADP)—Gross expenditure	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Local Authority Basic Block allocations (prior to 1990–91)	887	767	548	617	532	555	480	427	385	371	290
Estate Action	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	15	14	30	37
Other allocations	0	3	3	14	64	5	7	3	17	26	2

Housing capital expenditure allocations 1990–91 to 2000–01[1]—London

£ million

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Housing Corporation Approved Development Programme (ADP)—Gross expenditure	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	424	408	261	252	264	276
Local Authority Credit Approvals (ACGs—from 1990–91)	436	451	454	474	355	321	299	194	162	184	602
Estate Action	33	67	93	91	98	88	87	86	68	46	54
Other Credit Approvals	123	100	29	3	28	43	43	31	18	[3]—	[3]—
Capital Receipts Initiative	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	53	167	170	[3]—

Housing capital expenditure allocations 1990–91 to 2000–01[1]—London

£ million

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Private Sector Renewal Support Grant	55	52	57	55	42	44	45	39	33	33	[3]—
Disabled Facilities Grant	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	9	9	11	12
Estate Renewal Challenge Fund	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	13	58	114	79	46
Housing Action Trusts	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	21	32	23	24	39	33	39	34

[1] Cash prices
[2] Denotes figures not available
[3] Not applicable

Notes:
1. ADP Gross Expenditure—excludes ADP funding of City Challenge, Rough Sleepers Initiative and ERCF. Data prior to 1981–82 are unavailable as Corporation expenditure was not cash limited in this period. London boroughs' expenditure was not separately identifiable prior to the Corporation's regional re-organisation from 1995–96. The 1992–93 figure excludes £591 million under the Housing Market Package. 2000–01 figure is forecast expenditure.
2. Estate Action—figures up to 1994–95 represent supplementary credit approval (SCA) and continuation scheme allocations; thereafter, direct grant payment outturns within the Single Regeneration Budget. 2000–01 outturn is estimated.
3. Other allocations/credit approvals—covers special programmes for Energy Conservation, Home Insulation, Home Improvement, Private Sector Initiative, Homelessness, Special Grant Allowances, Rural Housing Defects Act, New Town Defective Dwellings, Flats over Shops, Cash Incentive Scheme and Housing Partnership Fund. Figures represent final outturn.
4. Capital Receipts Initiative—initial allocations.
5. Private Sector Renewal Support Grant—distributed via Specified Capital Grant Allowances 1990–91 to 1992–93; SCG-dependent SCAs 1993–94 to 1996–97.
5. Disabled Facilities Grant—initial allocation. DFG was incorporated within SCG and SCG-dependent SCAs prior to 1997–98.
6. Estate Renewal Challenge Fund—2000–01 outturn is estimated.
7. Housing Action Trusts—2000–01 outturn is estimated. Separate figure for London expenditure in 1991–92 and 1992–93 not available.

Low Carbon Technology

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much he has spent on the development of low carbon technology in each year since 1995. [137214]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has spent under its Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme in each year since 1995 the following amounts directly supporting Research and Development (R&D) into low-carbon technologies. On average an additional 30 per cent. has been spent each year on R&D related promotion. The amounts vary from year-to-year according to opportunities and programme priorities. For example, the number of quality R&D proposals put forward changes, the needs of energy users move between R&D and requirements for other types of support. In the last few years needs have focused on more impartial advice.

	£ million
1995–96	1.7
1996–97	1.7
1997–98	1.2
1998–99	0.7
1999–2000	0.5
2000–01	[1]1.1

[1] estimated outturn

The Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme is the UK Government's principal energy efficiency information, advice and research and development programme for the public and private sectors. The programme covers industrial processes, buildings and the managed housing stock.The Department's Partners in Innovation scheme has also supported collaborative projects on low carbon technologies broadly at the level of £50,000 per year. The Partners in Innovation scheme is a central part of the Department's Construction, Innovation and Research programme.

It is the Department's intention to provide a significant stimulus to R&D in future years through the funding recently announced for the Carbon Trust in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 357W.

Bus Fuel Rebate

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how much was paid to bus companies under the bus fuel rebate scheme between the financial year 1998–99 and the latest available date; [137761]

(2) what will be the cost of his plans to extend the bus fuel rebate to community transport schemes; and if he will estimate for each of the last three years the cost of the scheme had the same rebate been extended to community transport schemes in that period; [137760]

(3) what progress he has made on extension of the bus fuel rebate to community transport schemes; and if he will make a statement. [137814]

Mr. Hill: My Department's expenditure on payments of bus fuel duty rebate to bus operators in England was £222 million in 1998–99 and £277 million in 1999–2000. Payments this year are expected to total about £300 million.

As promised in 'Transport 2010', the 10-year plan for transport, we are now working up proposals for extending the rebate to a wider range of community transport schemes. We shall be consulting on these proposals shortly with the intention of having new rules in place for the 2001–02 financial year.

It is not possible at this stage to give an estimate of what the cost of this change will be in future years, or would have been in past years, since this depends on

decisions still to be taken on the precise definition of the services which will benefit and on the eligible mileage which they run.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of EU directives on wildlife on SSSIs in England. [138032]

Mr. Mullin: No assessment has been made of the general impact of EU directives on wildlife. However, two EU directives specifically address the protection of wildlife: Council Directive 92/43/EC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora ("the Habitats Directive") and Council Directive 79/409/EC on the conservation of wild birds ("the Birds Directive"). These generally serve to reinforce the protection of wildlife in England. Under the directives, we have classified 83 special protection areas for birds and have submitted 148 sites to date for possible designation as special areas of conservation for inclusion in a network of sites of European importance. These sites are all already or will be notified as SSSIs, and benefit from special protection under the provisions of the directives.

Aircraft Fuel

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research has been conducted *(a)* into the quantity of aircraft fuel that is used while aircraft are (i) stacked and (ii) delayed due to air traffic control processes and *(b)* into the impact on the use of aircraft fuel of introducing a single European air traffic control system; and if he will make a statement. [138262]

Mr. Mullin: Air traffic control delays are, of course, imposed for safety reasons when there is a lack of en-route air traffic control or airport capacity. Stacking and en-route delays do exacerbate fuel burn, but the Government are unaware of any research undertaken to specifically calculate additional fuel burn due to these delays.

Much work has, however, been done across Europe to accommodate high rates of traffic growth safely while minimising air traffic delays. These efforts have resulted in delays in summer 2000 being comparable to summer 1998, but it is recognised that this record needs to be improved.

The reduction of air transport delays is one of the principal objectives of the European Commission's single European sky initiative. The recommendations arising from this initiative are to be presented to the December Transport Council. These are likely to include the need to improve civil/military co-operation and to strengthen the regulatory regime to compel European States to implement commonly agreed capacity enhancements in order to optimise airspace use, and hence reduce delays and fuel burn.

Noise Act 1996

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the local authorities which have implemented in full the provisions of the Noise Act 1996. [138510]

Mr. Hill: There is no requirement for local authorities to inform the Department once they have decided to adopt the Act. The local authorities in England which have, so far as we are aware, adopted the Act, are:

London Borough of Barnet
London Borough of Bromley
London Borough of Havering
London Borough of Waltham Forest
Westminster City Council
East Devon District Council
Guildford Borough Council
Hertsmere Borough Council
Newark and Sherwood District Council
Rushcliffe Borough Council
Shepway District Council
Surrey Heath Borough Council

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions he has taken to encourage local authorities to implement the provisions of the Noise Act 1996. [138511]

Mr. Hill: The Noise Act was introduced following consideration of the effectiveness of neighbour noise controls by the Neighbour Noise Working Party and consultations with local authorities. When the Act was introduced the Government at the time left open the option of adopting it to local authorities in the light of their local requirements and available resources.

Following a commitment made to Parliament, we commissioned a review of the Act last year and expect to announce the outcome of this to the House shortly.

Noise Strategy

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce a noise strategy; and if he will make a statement. [138512]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have given a commitment to consider the case for a national ambient noise strategy. A first step will be to issue a consultation paper on the options.

National Forest

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will report on the National Forest Company's progress in creating the national forest in the East Midlands. [139110]

Mr. Mullin: I have arranged for copies of the National Forest Company's Annual Report and its Accounts for 1999–2000 to be placed in the House Libraries.

Trunk Roads

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce further additions to the targeted programme of trunk road improvements. [139225]

Mr. Hill: At the time of the Roads Review in July 1998, we decided to take forward consideration of the A63 Melton Grade Separated Junction in Yorkshire. I can now confirm that following further work, including a full appraisal, and consultation with the regional planning body, the scheme has been added to the targeted programme of improvements. By removing three existing junctions the scheme will improve safety and reduce delays. It will also facilitate access to enable regeneration of a large area of brownfield land to the south of the A63 on the banks of the Humber. Draft orders for the scheme were published on 17 October.

Further additions to the programme will in general depend on the outcome of studies commissioned as a result of the Roads Review and priorities identified in the course of development of Regional Transport Strategies within the context of Regional Planning Guidance.

However, if the objectives of investment in trunk roads under the 10-Year Plan are to be delivered it is important that we make some immediate progress. Therefore, we have initiated consultations with regional planning bodies to consider possible targeted improvements to tackle problems on those parts of the core trunk road network not being considered within a study. As part of this exercise we will also consider whether decisions can be taken on taking forward some targeted improvements within the areas covered by studies without prejudicing the strategic context of the study in question or the emerging Regional Transport Strategy. Specific proposals for improvements will be evaluated using the New Approach to Appraisal to ensure they are consistent with our transport criteria of safety, economy, environmental impact accessibility and integration. We will make an announcement about the outcome of this exercise in the spring.

I can also confirm that work on the programme of 100 early action schemes to tackle localised safety and congestion problems on the trunk road announced at the time of the 10-Year Plan has begun. Copies of a leaflet showing the locations of these schemes have been placed in the Library.

HEALTH

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the element of SSA for each local authority in England was for the placement of children in residential care in the last five years for which figures are available. [135104]

Mr. Hutton: The standard spending assessment for children's personal social services does not include a specific element relating to the placement of children in residential care. The SSA reflects differences between authorities in the potential need for all children's social services, based upon the socio-economic and health characteristics of each authority. It also reflects unavoidable variations in the costs of supplying these services.

The total SSA for children's personal social services in the current financial year is £1,997.7 million. Allocations for each local authority are given in the tables.

Standard spending assessments for 2000–2001

£ million

Summary table	*Children's SSA*
Principal Metropolitan Cities	199.597
Other Metropolitan Districts	326.132
Metropolitan sub total	525.729
Inner London	309.502
Outer London	263.918
London sub total	573.420
Shire Counties	570.033
Shire Unitary Authorities	328.518
Shire sub total	898.551
England total	1,997.700

£ million

Local authority	*Children's SSA*
Principal Metropolitan Cities	
Birmingham	64.179
Leeds	28.549
Liverpool	33.142
Manchester	36.239
Newcastle upon Tyne	15.828
Sheffield	21.660
Sub-Total	199.597
Other Metropolitan Districts	
Barnsley	8.119
Bolton	10.872
Bradford	22.913
Bury	6.477
Calderdale	7.191
Coventry	14.907
Doncaster	11.102
Dudley	9.522
Gateshead	8.970
Kirklees	13.820
Knowsley	12.530
North Tyneside	8.316
Oldham	10.050
Rochdale	10.558
Rotherham	9.706
Salford	12.145
Sandwell	14.704
Sefton	12.164
Solihull	6.468
South Tyneside	8.596
St. Helens	7.029
Stockport	8.882
Sunderland	13.637
Tameside	9.177
Trafford	7.622
Wakefield	10.904
Walsall	11.070
Wigan	10.411
Wirral	15.798
Wolverhampton	12.471
Sub total	326.132
Metropolitan sub total	525.729
Inner London	
City of London	0.637
Camden	22.246
Greenwich	21.633

Local authority	£ million Children's SSA
Hackney	29.076
Hammersmith and Fulham	17.967
Islington	26.735
Kensington and Chelsea	15.430
Lambeth	39.037
Lewisham	28.318
Southwark	35.360
Tower Hamlets	28.416
Wandsworth	23.308
Westminster	21.338
Sub total	309.502
Outer London	
Barking and Dagenham	12.559
Barnet	13.875
Bexley	8.848
Brent	21.538
Bromley	10.403
Croydon	19.217
Ealing	21.099
Enfield	14.439
Haringey	22.787
Harrow	7.902
Havering	7.240
Hillingdon	10.245
Hounslow	13.199
Kingston upon Thames	4.899
Merton	9.359
Newham	25.673
Redbridge	10.239
Richmond upon Thames	5.541
Sutton	7.372
Waltham Forest	17.487
Sub total	263.918
London sub total	573.420
Shire Counties	
Bedfordshire	9.351
Buckinghamshire	10.003
Cambridgeshire	11.712
Cheshire	16.211
Cornwall	13.165
Cumbria	12.495
Derbyshire	16.369
Devon	16.781
Dorset	7.913
Durham	17.541
East Sussex	14.832
Essex	35.037
Gloucestershire	13.910
Hampshire	28.499
Hertfordshire	27.363
Kent	39.941
Lancashire	37.147
Leicestershire	10.974
Lincolnshire	14.857
Norfolk	19.772
North Yorkshire	11.241
Northamptonshire	17.844
Northumberland	8.120
Nottinghamshire	19.487
Oxfordshire	14.396
Shropshire	5.512
Somerset	11.172
Staffordshire	18.502
Suffolk	15.944
Surrey	22.833
Warwickshire	11.569
West Sussex	17.480
Wiltshire	9.106
Worcestershire	12.954
Sub total	570.033

Local authority	£ million Children's SSA
Shire Unitary Authorities	
Isles of Scilly	0.030
Isle of Wight Council	4.310
Bath and North East Somerset	3.991
Blackburn with Darwen	7.089
Blackpool	6.687
Bournemouth	5.915
Bracknell Forest	3.179
Brighton and Hove	11.324
Bristol	18.960
Darlington	3.719
Derby	9.974
East Riding of Yorkshire	6.015
Halton	6.549
Hartlepool	4.194
Herefordshire	3.933
Kingston upon Hull	14.065
Leicester	16.391
Luton	9.492
Medway	8.428
Middlesbrough	8.453
Milton Keynes	7.788
West Berkshire	2.680
North East Lincolnshire	6.276
North Lincolnshire	4.449
North Somerset	4.202
Nottingham	19.207
Peterborough	6.526
Plymouth	11.510
Poole	4.137
Portsmouth	9.467
Reading	6.596
Redcar and Cleveland	6.088
Rutland	0.574
Slough	6.372
Southend-on-Sea	7.921
South Gloucestershire	5.010
Southampton	10.978
Stockton-on-Tees	7.620
Stoke-on-Trent	10.784
Swindon	5.566
Thurrock	5.982
Torbay	4.923
Warrington	5.373
Windsor and Maidenhead	3.238
Wokingham	2.184
Telford and The Wrekin	5.871
York	4.498
Sub total	328.518
Shires sub total	898.551

School Nurses

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many school nurses were employed in each health authority in England and Wales in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1987, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; and if he will make a statement; [137869]

(2) what proposals he has for adopting a benchmark for the provision of school nurses within a health authority in terms of the number of pupils per school nurse; [137867]

(3) if he has received a copy of the report 'School Nursing within the Public Health Agenda' jointly published by the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association, the Queen's Nursing Institute and the Royal College of Nursing; and if he will make a statement; [137866]

(4) what proposals he has to increase the total number of school nurses across England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [137868]

Mr. Denham: Data on the numbers of school nurses employed by health authority in 1987 are shown in the table. This information is not available for the other years. Information on numbers of school nurses after 1995 is not available due to a change in occupation codes used.

The school years offer an invaluable opportunity for the promotion of healthy living which sets the pattern for lifestyle and health status in adulthood. School nurses have an important role to play in meeting the needs of school-aged children and young people. The documents "Saving Lives", "Supporting Families" and "Making a Difference" identify and support a comprehensive programme of action for developing the public health role of school nursing. We look forward to receiving a copy of the report "School Nursing within the Public Health Agenda".

It is for health authorities and GP purchasers, with advice from professional colleagues, to determine benchmarks for the numbers, nature and levels of nursing staff and the training required to deliver cost effective school health services. The National Health Service Plan sets out increases in the numbers of nurses undertaking nursing training. Between now and 2004 there will be 5,500 extra nurses and midwives being trained each year than today and around 45,000 nurses and midwives will have come out of training. This means an increased supply of qualified nurses from which school nurses can be recruited and trained.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): School nursing staff by Health Authority in England as at 30 September 1987

	Whole time equivalent
England	2,960
Northern	240
North Tees District HA	20
South Tees District HA	40
East Cumbria District HA	10
South Cumbria District HA	10
West Cumbria District HA	10
Darlington District HA	10
Durham District HA	10
North West Durham District HA	10
South West Durham District HA	10
Northumberland Health Authority	'—
Gateshead District HA	10
Newcastle District HA	40
North Tyneside District HA	10
South Tyneside District HA	10
Sunderland Health Commission	30
Hartlepool District HA	10
Yorkshire	240
Hull District HA	20
East Yorkshire District HA	10
Grimsby District HA	10
Scunthorpe District HA	10
Northallerton District HA	'—
York District HA	20
Scarborough District HA	10
Harrogate District HA	'—
Bradford District HA	60
Huddersfield District HA	10

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): School nursing staff by Health Authority in England as at 30 September 1987

	Whole time equivalent
Dewsbury District HA	10
Leeds Western District HA	30
Leeds Eastern District HA	50
Wakefield District HA	'—
Pontefract District HA	'—
Trent	340
North Derbyshire District HA	10
Southern Derbyshire Health	30
Leicestershire HA	70
North Lincolnshire District HA	10
South Lincolnshire District HA	20
Bassetlaw District HA	10
Central Nottinghamshire District HA	30
Nottingham HA	50
Barnsley District HA	'—
Doncaster District HA	20
Rotherham HA	30
Sheffield Health	50
East Anglia	80
Cambridge District HA	20
Peterborough District HA	10
West Suffolk District HA	10
East Suffolk District HA	10
Norwich District HA	20
Great Yarmouth and Waveney District HA	10
West Norfolk and Wisbech District HA	10
Huntingdon District HA	10
NW Thames	230
North Bedfordshire District HA	10
South Bedfordshire District HA	30
North Hertfordshire District HA	'—
East Hertfordshire District HA	10
North West Hertfordshire District HA	10
South West Hertfordshire District HA	10
Barnet HA	30
Harrow District HA	10
Hillingdon Health Agency	'—
Hounslow and Spelthorne District HA	20
Ealing District HA	30
Brent District HA	20
Paddington and North Kensington District HA	20
Riverside District HA	30
NE Thames	220
Basildon and Thurrock District HA	20
Mid Essex District HA	10
North East Essex District HA	10
West Essex District HA	10
Southend District HA	20
Barking, Havering and Brentwood District Health	10
Hampstead District HA	20
Bloomsbury District HA	20
Islington District HA	20
City and Hackney District HA	20
Newham District HA	10
Tower Hamlets District HA	30
Enfield District HA	20
Haringey District HA	10
Redbridge District HA	'—
Waltham Forest District HA	10
SE Thames	190
Brighton District HA	20
Eastbourne District HA	'—
South East Kent District HA	10

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): School nursing staff by Health Authority in England as at 30 September 1987

	Whole time equivalent
Canterbury and Thanet District HA	10
Dartford and Gravesham District HA	10
Maidstone District HA	10
Medway District HA	10
Bexley District HA	10
Greenwich District HA	20
West Lambeth District HA	10
Camberwell District HA	30
Lewisham and North Southwark District HA	30
SW Thames	150
North West Surrey District HA	10
West Surrey and North East Hampshire District HA	10
South West Surrey District HA	10
Mid Surrey District HA	10
East Surrey District HA	[1]—
Chichester District HA	10
Mid Downs District HA	20
Worthing District HA	10
Croydon Health Commissioning Agency	30
Kingston and Esher District HA	10
Richmond, Twickenham and Roehampton District HA	20
Wandsworth District HA	10
Merton and Sutton District HA	10
Wessex	130
East Dorset District HA	20
West Dorset District HA	[1]—
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Commissioning Agency	30
Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Commissioning Agency	20
Winchester District HA	10
Basingstoke and North Hampshire District HA	10
Salisbury District HA	[1]—
Swindon District HA	10
Bath District HA	30
Isle of Wight Health Commission	10
Oxford	110
East Berkshire District HA	20
West Berkshire District HA	30
Wycombe District HA	10
Milton Keynes District HA	[1]—
Kettering District HA	20
Northampton District HA	10
Oxfordshire District HA	10
South Western	180
Bristol and Weston District HA	30
Frenchay District HA	20
Southmead District HA	20
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly District and Family Health	20
Exeter District HA	20
North Devon District HA	10
Plymouth District HA	20
Torbay District HA	10
Cheltenham and District District HA	10
Gloucester District HA	10
Somerset HA	10
West Midlands	340
Bromsgrove and Redditch District HA	10
Herefordshire HA	[1]—
Kidderminster and District District HA	[1]—
Worcester and District District HA	10

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): School nursing staff by Health Authority in England as at 30 September 1987

	Whole time equivalent
Shropshire HA	10
Mid Staffordshire District HA	10
North Staffordshire HA	40
South East Staffordshire District HA	20
Rugby District HA	[1]—
North Warwickshire District HA	20
South Warwickshire District HA	10
Central Birmingham District HA	20
East Birmingham District HA	10
North Birmingham District HA	10
South Birmingham District HA	30
West Birmingham District HA	20
Coventry HA	10
Dudley HA	20
Sandwell HA	30
Solihull Health	10
Walsall HA	20
Wolverhampton HA	20
Mersey	230
Chester District HA	20
Crewe District HA	10
Halton District HA	10
Macclesfield District HA	10
Warrington District HA	20
Liverpool HA	70
St. Helens and Knowsley HA	40
Southport and Formby District HA	10
South Sefton (Merseyside) District HA	20
Wirral HA	30
North Western	260
Lancaster District HA	[1]—
Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde District HA	10
Preston District HA	[1]—
Blackburn, Hyndburn and Ribble Valley District HA	30
Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale District HA	20
West Lancashire District HA	[1]—
Chorley and South Ribble District HA	10
Bolton District HA	30
Bury District HA	10
North Manchester District HA	20
Central Manchester District HA	20
South Manchester District HA	20
Oldham District HA	[1]—
Rochdale District HA	20
Salford District HA	20
Stockport Health Commission	30
Tameside and Glossop District HA	20
Trafford District HA	10
Wigan District HA	10

[1] Five or less and greater than zero

Notes:

1 Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

2 Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts

3 Figures exclude learners and agency staff

Source:

Department of Health Non-medical Workforce Census.

Hospital Staff Assaults

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 242W, on hospital staff assaults, how

many of the violent incidents against NHS trust staff in 1998–99 led to *(a)* prosecution and *(b)* conviction. [137968]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not held centrally. The cross-Government National Health Service zero tolerance zone campaign, to stamp out violence against staff working in the National Health Service, has been strongly supported by my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney-General. The campaign makes clearer that employers need to work with the police, magistrates and the Crown Prosecution Service in order to apply a zero tolerance on violence against staff.

At the launch of the campaign last year, the Lord Chancellor said it was entirely legitimate for magistrates to respond decisively to a particular form of criminal behaviour, such as assaults on National Health Service staff, and to impose sentences which have deterrent components. New national sentencing guidelines issued to the Magistrates Courts in September underline our commitment to tackle violence against National Health Service staff. The guidelines now include as aggravating factors, to be taken into account when sentencing, whether the offence occurred in hospital or medical premises and whether the victim was serving the public.

Harrogate and York NHS Trusts

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on proposals to merge Harrogate and York NHS Trusts; and if he will make a statement. [138314]

Mr. Denham: At the present time there are no formal proposals to merge the Harrogate Health Care National Health Service Trust and the York Health Services NHS Trust. Discussions between the North Yorkshire Health Authority and the trusts are ongoing concerning the future configuration of acute services. Should any proposals to change management structures come out of these discussions, they will be the subject of formal consultation.

Elderly People (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the designated time scale and programme for action is to improve the care and health available to older persons in ethnic minorities. [138320]

Mr. Hutton: The National Service Framework for Older People, which is to be introduced from April 2001, will help to ensure that the health and social care needs of older people from all backgrounds are properly addressed.

Guidance on access to social care services to be issued to local councils soon will include advice on addressing the needs of older persons from ethnic minorities.

Out-patient Waiting Times

Mr. St.Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on out-patient waiting times in the West Surrey Health Authority. [137264]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* At 30 June this year (latest available figures) there were 3,713 patients who had been waiting 13 weeks or over for an appointment in West Surrey Health Authority following referral by a general practitioner.

The health authority and the South East Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive are in close liaison with the three trusts in West Surrey to address this position.

Hospital Mortuaries

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 379W, on hospital mortuaries, if he will list NHS pathology service sites where all or part of the site fails to meet necessary minimum standards. [138461]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 November 2000]:* With the exception of cervical cytology screening laboratories, accreditation of National Health Service laboratories is voluntary and carried out by Clinical Pathology Accreditation (CPA) UK Ltd. Laboratories accredited by Clinical Pathology Accreditation (CPA) UK Ltd. are listed on the company's website at www.cpa-uk.co.uk. I have placed a copy of this information in the Library.

DEFENCE

Shipyards

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the shipyards in the United Kingdom which are capable of building ships of the size of the future generation of aircraft carriers. [136273]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from David Gould to Mr. William Ross, dated 16 November 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence asking if he will list the shipyards in the United Kingdom which are capable of building ships of the size of the future generation of aircraft carriers. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The competing Prime Contractors for the future aircraft carrier—BAE Systems and Thomson Naval Systems—have identified a number of UK shipyards with the potential capacity to participate in the build of the vessels. These include Harland and Wolff in Belfast, Swan Hunter on Tyneside, Cammell Laird at Birkenhead and the BAE Systems' yards at Govan and Barrow. Much will depend on the carrier design that is taken forward and the method of construction; consequently, other UK yard options have not been ruled out. Some of the yards identified by the Prime Contractors face potential build limitations or have access restrictions that could prevent whole-ship construction.

We do not plan to award a contract for the build of CVF until 2004 and no decisions are planned at this stage on yard selection. Ongoing assessment work will include a thorough review of all UK facilities and will address yard suitability, construction/access limitations and the overall cost-effectiveness of potential build strategies.

I hope this explains the position.

Eurocorps

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 271W, on Eurocorps, if he will identify by *(a)* rank and *(b)* role the augmentees supplied by the United Kingdom to Eurocorps in Kosovo. [138000]

Mr. Spellar: The 62 posts filled by the United Kingdom in Headquarters Kosovo Force 3 (KFOR3), whose kernel was provided by Headquarters Eurocorps, were as follows:

NATO rank	*UK rank*	*Role*
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	Military Assistant to Commander KFOR
OF-6	Brigadier	Chief Joint Implementation Commission (JIC)
OR-5	Sergeant	Driver to Chief JIC
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	JIC Liaison Officer to the Kosovo Protection Corps
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	Chief Staff Officer Operations JIC
OR-7	Staff Sergeant	Administrative Supervisor JIC
OR-4	Wren Writer	Administrative Clerk Public Information Staff
OF-2/3	Flight Lieutenant	Staff Officer (SO) Media Operations
OF-2/3	Major	Escort Officer Joint Visitors Bureau
OR-5	Sergeant	Administrative Assistant Coordination Office
OF-3	Lieutenant Colonel	SO Information Operations Civil/Military Cooperation
OR-6/7	Staff Sergeant	Staff Assistant (SA) Intelligence
OF-2/3	Flight Lieutenant	SO Intelligence
OR-6	Staff Sergeant	SA Intelligence
OR-7/8	Staff Sergeant	SA Intelligence
OR-2/3	Lance Corporal	Intelligence Analyst
OF-5/6	Sergeant	SA Geographic
OF-3/4	Major	Commander Intelligence Detachment
OF-5	Group Captain	Chief Air Operations
OR-6/7	Flight Sergeant	SA Helicopter Operations
OR-7/8	Flight Sergeant	Air Traffic Controller
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	Chief Operations Cell Ground Liaison Vicenza
OF-4	Wing Commander	Chief Air Operations Control Centre
OF-3/4	Lieutenant Colonel	SO Campaign Plans
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	SO Civil/Military Cooperation Plans
OF-5	Colonel	Chief Engineer
OR-7	Staff Sergeant	Administrative Supervisor Engineer Branch
OR-2	Private	Clerk/Driver Engineer Branch
OF-3/4	Major	SO Infrastructure Plans
OF-3	Lieutenant Commander	SO Liaison with United Nations Mission in Kosovo
OF-3	Major	SO Civil/Military Cooperations Plans
OF-3	Major	Personnel Planning Officer
OF-3	Squadron Leader	Movement Planning Officer
OR-4/5	Corporal	Administrative Assistant Transport Company
OR-7	Staff Sergeant	Communications System Administrator
OR-6/7	Lance Corporal	Communications System Administrator
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	Chief Theatre Contracting Office
OR-3/4	Civilian	Customs Administration Clerk
OR-8	Warrant Officer	Deputy Site Sergeant Major
OR-3	Leading Regulator	Military Policeman
OR-3	Corporal	Military Policeman
OF-7	Air Vice Marshal	Commander Rear and Communication Zone
OF-4	Lieutenant Colonel	Military Assistant to Commander Rear
OR-6	Sergeant	Administrative Assistant to Commander Rear
OR-2	Leading Aircraftman	Driver to Commander Rear
OF-3	Lieutenant Commander	SO Coordinator Joint Visitors Bureau (Rear)
OR-6	Petty Officer Writer	Administrative Assistant Legal Branch
OF-3/4	Lieutenant Colonel	Chief Personnel (Rear)
OF-2/3	Captain	SO Training
OR-7/8	Warrant Officer 2	SA Ranges
OR-7/8	Sergeant	NCO/Driver Real Estate Mobile Team
OF-3	Major	Logistic SO
OF-3	Major	Property Officer
OR-6	Sergeant	Clerk/Driver Joint Logistic Centre
OR-3/4	Leading Wren Writer	Administrative Clerk Billeting
OR-5/6	Sergeant	SA Power Troop
OR-5/6	Petty Officer	Electrical Engineer
OR-3/4	Corporal	Military Policeman
OR-3/4	Corporal	Military Policeman
OR-6	Sergeant	Alternate Cryptographic Custodian
OR-5	Sergeant	Administrative Assistant Communication Zone South
OF-4/5	Lieutenant Colonel	Deputy Commander Communication Zone South

Non-departmental Public Bodies (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137697]

Dr. Moonie: None of the non-departmental public bodies sponsored by the Ministry of Defence have duties which relate specifically to Scotland, but the following have a remit which covers the United Kingdom:

The RAF Museum

The National Army Museum

The Defence Nuclear Safety Committee.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested. General information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annual in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" are available in the Libraries of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on all Government non-departmental public bodies is also available at the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk; information on Ministry of Defence bodies is available at the MOD website www.mod.uk.

Zero-point Energy

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research is being funded by his Department into zero-point energy. [138298]

Dr. Moonie: None.

Mustard Gas (Pigs)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what new research his Department is undertaking in Porton Down on the effects of mustard gas on pigs; and how many pigs were involved in the testing of mustard gas in Government centres in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [138299]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency has been undertaking research on behalf of the Ministry of Defence on the effects of mustard gas on pigs at its Chemical and Biological Defence laboratories at Porton Down as part of its studies into improved methods for the treatment of wounds on the battlefield.

Previous research studies to evaluate the technique of dermabrasion as a treatment for established mustard burns were completed at the end of September 1998. The results of this work have been published in the open technical literature. The current research programme is solely concerned with the evaluation of novel protective creams that have the potential to significantly reduce the severity of mustard burns to the skin following exposure.

The number of pigs that have been used in both phases of these studies for the years in question is as follows: two animals in 1997, six animals per year for 1998 and 1999, and a total of 10 animals in 2000 to the current date.

UK Military Equipment Sales

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions on which defence personnel have attended, as part of their duties, promotional events for UK military equipment sales in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; and what the estimated costs were of such attendance in each year since 1996. [138310]

Dr. Moonie: Within the Ministry of Defence the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO) is responsible for co-ordinating Government support to industry in promoting sales of UK military equipment, with other parts of MOD assisting as required.

Promotional events in the United Kingdom and overseas attended by defence personnel range from major defence equipment exhibitions and Defence Industry Days (DIDs) to demonstrations of individual items of equipment for potential customers. DIDs are held onboard HM ships when in foreign ports as part of the Fleet visit programme.

There is no central record of visits to such events or the associated attendance costs and it is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

Major exhibitions and DIDs at which DESO has been represented in support of the UK defence industry between 1998–2000 include:

1998

Asian Aerospace, Singapore
TRIDEX, Abu Dhabi
FIDAE, Chile
DSA, Malaysia
Aerospace Africa, South Africa
Eurosatory, France
Farnborough International Air Show, UK
Defendory, Greece
MADEX, South Korea
Euronaval, France
Seoul Air Show, South Korea
DEXSA, South Africa
Aero India, India

DIDs

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Valparaiso, Chile
Gdynia, Poland
Baltimore, USA
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
La Guaira, Venezuela

1999

Australia Air Show, Australia
IDEX, Abu Dhabi
LAD, Brazil
IDET, Czech Republic
IMDEX Asia, Singapore
Paris Air Show, France
Aerospace North America, Canada
DSEi, UK
IDEF, Turkey
DEFEXPO, India
Dubai Air Show, Dubai
LIMA, Malaysia

DIDs

Durban, South Africa
Norfolk, USA
Manila, Philippines
Sydney, Australia
Vera Cruz, Mexico
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Athens, Greece

2000

Pacific 2000, Australia
Asian Aerospace, Singapore
TRIDEX, Abu Dhabi
FIDAE, Chile
DSA, Malaysia
SOFEX, Jordan
Eurosatory, France
Farnborough International Air Show, UK
Africa Aerospace and Defence, South Africa
Defence Asia, Philippines
Defendory, Greece
Euronaval, France

DIDs

Alexandria, Egypt
Mumbai, India
Singapore
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Sydney, Australia
Pusan, South Korea
Tokyo, Japan
Istanbul, Turkey

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what industrial action has been taken by Royal Fleet Auxiliary crews in the past six months; which ships were involved; and if he will make a statement. [138431]

Dr. Moonie: Industrial action involving Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary commenced in February this year following their rejection of the 1999 pay offer. The action was initially restricted to two days every fortnight; it then became weekly and, from 28 June, continuous. The RMT suspended the industrial action from mid August until the beginning of October to enable talks to take place at the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

The industrial action involved the refusal by RMT members to undertake certain tasks, such as cleaning officers' cabins, while ships were in port. The most significant measure was the refusal by deck and engineering personnel to carry out unmooring activity thereby preventing the ship from sailing.

Prior to the action becoming continuous on 28 June, no record of the ships affected was kept, principally because it was possible to adjust ships programmes to minimise the impact. Following that date, three ships were affected: RFAs Sir Geraint, Sir Bedivere and Fort Austin were prevented from leaving port for a period of between four to six weeks during the summer.

All operational commitments have continued to be met throughout the period of the industrial action.

While the industrial dispute arose following the rejection of the 1999 pay offer, the focus changed to a demand by the RMT for additional earned voyage leave (EVL). As part of the 2000 pay round, ratings were granted an additional eight days leave per year. Unfortunately, this was not considered by the RMT to be sufficient to resolve the dispute. However, I am pleased to be able to report that, following agreement in principle to the terms of reference of a working group to set in place a timetable for further improvements to leave, the RMT has now suspended the industrial action. I am also advised that the RMT has written to its members recommending that the industrial action is called off.

Meteorological Office

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he made of the strengths and weaknesses of the bid from Norwich research park for relocation of the Meteorological Office; [138555]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 326W, on the Meteorological Office, what account he took of the relative importance of proximity to centres of climatological research in making his decision on the relocation of the Meteorological Office; [138554]

(3) what process for appealing against the decision to relocate the Meteorological Office exists. [138556]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Dr. Ian Gibson, dated 16 November 2000:

I am replying to your three questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the relocation of the Met Office. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Met Office.

As you know, the Under Secretary of State for Defence, Dr Lewis Moonie announced in the House on 9 November that the Met Office has chosen Exeter Business Park as its preferred site for relocation. Exeter was chosen from a shortlist of four sites that also included Beaufort Park in Bracknell, Shinfield Park in Reading and Norwich Research Park. These four sites were those that the Met Office believed could best meet its needs, following a thorough search and careful evaluation of potential sites throughout the United Kingdom.

For Norwich to reach our short list of sites it had performed very favourably against our evaluation criteria. However, only one of the four short-listed sites could be chosen as our preferred site and when evaluating the business benefits and risks, including staff preference, financial appraisals, availability of land with planning consent, local access and other factors, Exeter was the clear choice. It was not an easy decision, but we are certain that Exeter is the best location from which to build a secure and successful future.

In relative terms, the Norwich Research Park site had a number of strengths, notably the opportunities it offered for lower operating costs and improved living standards for our staff compared with the other sites in the Southeast. There would, in addition, have been good opportunities for collaboration with the University of East Anglia (UEA), which would also have been a valuable source of high quality graduate staff. Moreover, there was strong local political support and also from key organisations in the area, including Norfolk County Council, Norwich City Council, the Regional Development Agency and the University.

The site also had some weaknesses in comparison to our preferred site. For example, there were serious doubts, raised at a late stage in the evaluation process, as to whether the site was actually available. We also had some concerns that the site was somewhat isolated on the fringe of the City and would not offer the profile we were seeking as a world-leading science based organisation. Moreover, our staff demonstrated a preference for Exeter. We have offered to give Norwich City Council's Chief Executive and her team a detailed de-brief in order that lessons may be learnt for similar initiatives in the future.

We recognise the UAE's particular strength in the field of climate science and impact analysis and the importance of maintaining and strengthening the close working relationship we have with them. There are, of course, many other organisations throughout the United Kingdom and around the World with whom we have close links on a range of subjects, and others with whom we will develop links as we pursue our strategy of diversification into wider environmental services. With modern communications we are firmly of the view that such relationships can be achieved very well indeed from Exeter.

As a trading fund agency, the choice of preferred site rested with me as Chief Executive and was made with the support of my Management Board, taking full account of the interests of the Met Office's customers—both in the public and private sectors—and our staff. This choice was made in the very best, long-term interests of the Met Office, following a thorough and rigorous evaluation process based on pre-determined criteria. I presented the choice of preferred site to both Dr Moonie and the Secretary of State for Defence who, having weighed all the issues, were content to endorse the decision.

The two consortia with whom the Met Office is negotiating over the provision and ongoing maintenance of the new accommodation will now work up detailed proposals for the Exeter site. Tenders are due to be submitted by the end of February 2001 and a contract is expected to be placed by June 2001.

Homosexuals

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the additional cost to public funds was in *(a)* legal costs incurred by the (i) Government and (ii) applicants and *(b)* damages awarded to the applicants by the decision to continue to contest cases relating to homosexuals in the armed forces (i) between 16 February 1996 and 1 May 1997 and (ii) after 2 May 1997. [138466]

Mr. Spellar: Compensation and legal costs have been paid in the four cases covered by the European Court of Human Rights judgment of 27 September 1999 and the figures are shown in the table. In addition, in light of the ECHR judgment, the Secretary of State for Defence authorised that settlement negotiations commence with those individuals discharged from the armed forces as a result of their homosexuality who had submitted Employment Tribunal applications and whose account is accepted as being substantially factually true. The level of compensation paid to those applicants who settled their cases during the periods in question, together with legal costs incurred by the Minister of Defence, are also shown in the table. Legal costs incurred by Employment Tribunal applicants are not normally recoverable from the Defendant and therefore the Ministry of Defence has no record of such costs. Settlement negotiations on the remainder of the outstanding cases remain ongoing.

£

	16 February 1996 to 1 May 1997	*2 May 1997 to date*
Compensation paid in ECHR cases	0	324,875
Claimants' legal costs paid in ECHR cases	0	81,200
Compensation paid to ET applicants	0	79,000
Legal costs incurred by the Ministry of Defence	12,090	156,507

HOME DEPARTMENT

Petrol Costs (Ministerial Cars)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost was in each of the past three years of petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [134994]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office does not directly manage ministerial vehicles; this function is undertaken by the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I refer the hon. Member to the reply that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, gave on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 552W.

Press Office

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons are currently employed in the Home Office Press Office and at what grades; what has been the total cost to public funds of the recent expansion of the Home Office Press Office following the implementation of the report by Clear Communications; and if he will make a statement. [134973]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The total number of people employed in the press office is 27. This is comprised of five Senior Information Officers, 16 Information Officers, an Assistant Information Officer and a Chief Immigration Officer on attachment. In addition, there is an administrative support team of four people comprised of one Higher Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants.

As I told the House previously, on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 383W, the estimated cost of extra staff will be up to £400,000 in a full year, to bring total costs to around £1.6 million. This expansion has proved necessary to cope with the widened responsibilities and activities of the Home Office since May 1997 (including the larger programme of constitutional and other reforms) and a significant increase in calls to the press office over the last three years.

In addition there has been a one-off cost of refurbishing the press office and the provision of additional equipment and IT support which will be in the region of £200,000.

As I told the House previously, on 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 746, £82,000 was spent on recruitment advertising and the external consultant's report which recommended that the Press Office be restructured and expanded by between eight and 10 press officers.

Seasonal Agricultural Work

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received from *(a)* Concordia and *(b)* other interested parties concerning the number of student permits allowed for assistance and training associated with seasonal agricultural work; what has been his response; and if he will make a statement. [137006]

Mrs. Roche: Representations in support of an increase in the quota of non-European Economic Area (EEA) students participating in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS) have been made on behalf of various interested parties, including the National Farmers Union. Concordia (YSV) Ltd., one of the approved scheme operators, had indicated support for an increase.

The Government have listened to the concerns of the agricultural industry and have agreed to increase the annual quota of students from 10,000 to 15,200 with effect from the 2001 season.

Race-related Offences

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what sentences were imposed on people convicted in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 1998 of incitement to racial hatred. [137891]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database are given in the table.

Number of persons sentenced at all courts for offences[1] under Part III of the Public Order Act 1986, by type of offence and disposal, England and Wales, 1998 and 1999

Offence description	Year	Total sentenced	Conditional discharge	Fine	Compensation	Probation order	Combination order	Fully suspended sentence	Immediate custody
Section 18	1998	4	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
	1999	3	—	1	1	1	—	—	—
Section 19	1998	2	—	—	—	—	—	2	—
	1999	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Section 21	1998	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
	1999	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Section 23	1998	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
	1999	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Data may include persons proceeded against in earlier years or for other 'principal' offences.
Note:
Based on principal offence

Number Plates

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce measures to require that scrap vehicles have number plates destroyed on arrival at scrap yards in order to reduce crime involving the use of false number plates. [137630]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have no plans to introduce such measures. We are, however, looking closely at the recommendations of the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team that the motor salvage industry and the supply and issue of number plates should be regulated by law in order to reduce crime.

European Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress made under the scoreboard to review progress on the creation of an area for freedom, security and justice in the European Union. [138085]

Mrs. Roche: The European Council meeting in Tampere on 15 and 16 October 1999 decided that it would keep under constant review progress made towards developing the Union as an area of freedom, security and justice in line with its own conclusions ("the Tampere milestones"). It called on the Commission to come forward with an appropriate proposal for a scoreboard to that end. The Commission presented its scoreboard at the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on 27 March 2000, at which it was discussed by the Council. The scoreboard was designed to be regularly updated. The Commission produced a revised version of the scoreboard at the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on 29 May 2000. A further revised version is expected for the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on 30 November-1 December 2000.

There has been progress on a wide range of issues covered by the Tampere conclusions over the past year. Developments range from the establishment of the Police Chiefs Task Force to the adoption of the European Refugee Fund. The first ever joint meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs and ECOFIN Councils took place on 17 October to consider measures to combat money laundering to implement Tampere conclusions 51–58.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary regularly reports to the European Scrutiny Committee on the outcome of Justice and Home Affairs Council meetings, in correspondence and in response to Parliamentary Questions. Copies of this correspondence are available in the Library.

EU Immigration and Asylum Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the *(a)* purpose and *(b)* present activities of (i) the Odysseus Programme and (ii) the Robert Schuman legal project. [138081]

Mrs. Roche: The Odysseus programme provides training, exchanges and co-operation in the fields of asylum, immigration and crossing of external borders in the 15 member states of the European Union. The programme provides for the possible involvement of the applicant countries. Other non-member countries may also be associated, provided this is in accordance with the programme's objectives.

The programme is supporting approximately 40 projects during 2000, including:

projects aimed at assisting applicant countries with the accession process, for example presentation of the European Union acquis in the field of immigration, asylum and control of external borders for Turkish officials;

a seminar on the fight against networks in illegal immigration; and

a seminar on liaison officers dealing with migration.

Robert Schuman legal project:

The Robert Schuman programme offers financial assistance to national training schemes in Community law for judges and lawyers. The project falls within the ministerial responsibility of the Lord Chancellor.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason a Council directive on minimum standards on procedure for granting and withdrawing refugee status has been proposed; and what his policy is on it. [138089]

Mrs. Roche: The Treaty establishing the European Community envisages the adoption of minimum standards on procedures for granting or withdrawing refugee status within a period of five years after the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam. The importance of such measures was reaffirmed at the Special European Council

in Tampere in October 1999. The scoreboard to review progress on the creation of an area of freedom, security and justice in the European Union requires the Commission to submit a proposal for minimum standards on asylum procedures with a view to adoption in April 2001.

The Commission presented a proposed directive to the Council on 28 September. The intention of the proposed directive is to establish minimum standards for the fairness and efficiency of asylum procedures in all the member states. This should make a significant contribution to promoting the balance of effort between member states in terms of the receipt of asylum seekers.

The Government's initial view on this proposed directive will be set out in an Explanatory Memorandum which will be deposited shortly.

Grotius Programme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on changes planned for the Grotius Programme in the course of the Treaty of Amsterdam. [138083]

Mrs. Roche: The Grotius programme, which is concerned with incentives and exchanges for legal practitioners, runs from 1996–2000. Following the Treaty of Amsterdam, which provided for judicial co-operation in the field of civil law to take place under the Treaty establishing the European Community and for judicial co-operation in the field of criminal law to take place under the Treaty on European Union, it will be necessary to split the Grotius programme in future. The Commission has proposed the extension of the Grotius programme in the area of civil law for the period of one year only, to enable consideration of its future and its relationship with other programmes, notably the Robert Schuman programme. In the area of criminal law, the Commission has indicated that it is considering proposing the extension of the Grotius programme for a period of two years.

Fire Stations

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent advice he has received from HM Inspectorate of Fire Services on proposals to reduce manning in *(a)* Heswall Fire Station and *(b)* other fire stations from 24 hour to day time manning. [138424]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Advice from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services would not normally be sought until after receipt of an application to reduce a fire authority's establishment under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947. The information is as follows:

(a) To date we have not received an application from Merseyside Fire and Civil Defence Authority regarding fire cover provision at Heswall fire station.

(b) There has been only one such section 19 application this year, on which advice from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services is awaited. This application was submitted by Merseyside Fire and Civil Defence Authority in relation to Formby fire station.

Personal Safety

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to facilitate the establishment of a national centre for studies and training in personal safety from crime. [138645]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are a number of organisations working in this field and the Home Office encourages all initiatives in this area. The Home Office has recently had discussions with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust about how we could assist them with the setting up of their International Personal Safety Centre for the reduction of Crime and Violence against the Person.

City Status

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in the announcement of the result of the competition for city status to mark the millennium [138508]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: At no point was a date set for the announcement of the result of the Millennium city status competition, but as I have indicated on previous occasions we anticipate an announcement by the end of the year.

ADT *v.* UK

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total cost was to public funds of *(a)* defending ADT *v.* UK, including the legal costs of both sides and *(b)* the damages awarded. [138463]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The applicant was awarded £20,929.05 damages in respect of the cost of defending criminal proceedings, travel expenses, prosecution costs, loss for items confiscated and destroyed and non-pecuniary losses. In addition, the applicant was awarded £13,771.28 in respect of costs and expenses.

As regards the Government's legal costs, much of the work involved was carried out by officials and lawyers already employed by Government. We are not therefore able to estimate the total cost of defending the action before the European Court of Human Rights.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what legislative action he proposes to take following the decision in the case of ADT *v.* UK. [138464]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government set up the Sex Offences Review in January 1999. Its terms of reference were to make proposals for reform of the law on sex offences which were among other things compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights.

The report of the review is contained in 'Setting the Boundaries'. The review recommended that the offence of gross indecency should be repealed. It was that offence for which ADT was convicted and which, in the circumstances of his conviction, was found to have been a breach of ADT's private life under Article 8.

The consultation period finishes on 1 March 2001. Following this the Government will consider legislation for a comprehensive reform of the law on sexual offences, including gross indecency, when parliamentary time allows.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what administrative action he intends to take in relation to *(a)* existing and *(b)* future charges of gross indecency in the light of the decision in the case of ADT *v.* UK. [138465]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have made it clear that this area of the law is the subject of recommendations contained in 'Setting the Boundaries'. Until the law is changed it remains in force and enforceable. There is no administrative action which the Home Office can or should take to prevent enforcement of the law.

However, any decision not to prosecute any individual under the Sexual Offences Act 1956 will be a matter for the independent Crown Prosecution Service. In determining whether to proceed with a prosecution the CPS will have regard to the public interest and in doing so will take account of the Court's judgment and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Gambling Review Body

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will implement the recommendations of the Gambling Review Body in full as soon as practicable after its reports. [138719]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Gambling Review Body is due to report next summer. We shall give its report careful consideration, bearing in mind the generally acknowledged need to modernise the laws regulating gambling.

Armed Robberies

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many armed robberies were committed with *(a)* licensed pistols, *(b)* unlicensed pistols, *(c)* other licensed firearms and *(d)* other unlicensed firearms, in each of the years 1998, 1999 and 2000 to date. [138689]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of the legal status of firearms used in offences are not generally available, but it is thought that most, if not all, will be illegally held. The numbers of handguns and other firearms used in robberies are as follows, for the most recently available information:

Firearms used in robberies

Financial year	*Number of handguns*	*Number of other firearms*[1]
1997–98	1,811	1,128
1998–99	1,814	1,159

[1] Including supposed and imitation firearms, and air weapons.

Sapurui Sakalatuala

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Security Service will release files from the inter-war period relating to Sapurui Sakalatuala; and if he will make a statement. [138691]

Mr. Straw: The Security Service is still reviewing and releasing records covering the Second World War and has just made public a fourth tranche of files from this period. The Security Service will, in due course in light of resources, be reviewing its inter-war records in preparation for further releases. Under current plans, I do not expect the Security Service to begin reviewing its inter-war records before the year 2001.

Policing (Cleveland)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Cleveland Police Authority regarding expenditure on Operation Lancet; and if he will make a statement. [138688]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I will be meeting the Chair of the Police Authority and the Chief Constable at their request on 29 November to discuss various matters related to the policing of Cleveland.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Petrol Costs (Ministerial Cars)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost was in each of the past three years of petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [134935]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 552W.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many individuals his Department has recruited from the New Deal for Young People; [134688]

(2) how many staff in his Department are employed under the New Deal for Young People. [137956]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

Adult and Community Learning Fund

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the operation to date of the Adult and Community Learning Fund, with particular reference to *(a)* total expenditure, *(b)* the criteria for scheme selection and *(c)* the monitoring and accountability of schemes funded from the ACLF. [136307]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 6 November 2000]:* The total expenditure on the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) to date is £11.4 million. A further £8.6 million will be spent between now and March 2002.

The Fund supports activities in England which take learning into sectors of the community rarely reached by traditional educational institutions. 309 projects have been

supported to date. The criteria are set out in a Prospectus which provides guidance to applicants. Projects must be innovative, of good quality and sustainable. They must also involve learners in managing project activities and building partnerships. Funding must not duplicate or extend existing provision or organisational support. At least one community or voluntary group must lead on, or be an equal partner in, bids for funding.

ACLF projects are managed on my Department's behalf by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), which are accountable to the Department and its auditors. Progress on each project is monitored by BSA or NIACE as part of their contracted role as joint managers of the Fund.

In his recent Remit Letter to the Learning and Skills Council, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State draws the Council's attention to the need to secure, at local level, imaginative and attractive learning opportunities which will draw in people unused to learning, or who see learning in institutions as not for them.

Student Fees

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will remove parental income as a means of assessing student fees payable; and if he will make a statement. [136979]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* No. The current assessment system is working well and ensures that currently about a third of dependent students from lower income families do not make any contribution to tuition fees, and I expect this to rise to some two fifths from September 2001 as a result of a change to the contribution threshold. This is in the context of over 40 per cent. of all students making no contribution to tuition fees under the present system, rising to about 50 per cent. from September 2001. The new student finance arrangements that we introduced share the cost of higher education fairly between students, their families and taxpayers generally, and provide essential resources for investment in universities and colleges.

Departmental Research Budget

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the budget was for research and consultancy for his Department for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01. [137304]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* Research and consultancy is not generally budgeted for as a discrete item within the Department. Most expenditure of this type is met from wider programme or administrative budgets.

Head Teachers

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools are without permanent head teachers in (i) England and (ii) Norfolk. [137819]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The table shows temporarily filled vacant full-time head teacher posts in maintained nursery, primary and secondary schools in England and Norfolk in January 2000.

	Nursery/ primary	*Secondary*	*Nursery, primary and secondary*
England			
Temporarily filled as a percentage of head teachers in post	2.1	2.3	2.1
Number of posts	390	90	480
Norfolk			
Temporarily filled as a percentage of head teachers in post	3.4	0.0	2.9
Number of posts	13	0	13

Head teachers have a key role in boosting standards in schools. We are establishing a National College for School Leadership to give a focus to school leadership development, and are designing a coherent package of training and development programmes for aspiring, new and serving head teachers.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make extra funds available to fund special needs education in rural areas. [138277]

Jacqui Smith: Resources are distributed to local education authorities through Standard Spending Assessments. These are calculated using information about the demographic, economic and social characteristics of an area. This includes a sparsity factor, which would take account of additional transport costs in areas such as Cornwall with dispersed populations, and consequently higher costs of transporting pupils with special educational needs.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137426]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and all the Ministers in this Department intend to take part in voluntary activity during 2001. My Department also encourages staff to participate in a wide range of voluntary activities, often during working hours, and will continue to do so.

Recycled Computers

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the bidding process will commence for the second phase of the Computers Within Reach scheme. [138490]

Mr. Wills: We shall be extending the scheme in the areas listed in my answer to my right hon. Friend's earlier questions, of 10 November 2000, *Official Report,* column 437W. We are currently looking at opportunities for integrating the scheme with other related initiatives in disadvantaged areas, details of which will be given as soon as possible. We are also awaiting the evaluation of the first weeks of the scheme before we make final decisions on next steps.

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many low cost recycled personal computers have been provided to low income families since 1998; how the recipients have been selected; and what evaluation has been carried out of the programme to date. [138635]

Mr. Wills: I announced the commencement of the Computers Within Reach scheme on 25 October 2000 for those on certain benefits who were seeking to gain or retain employment. The first phase of the scheme will provide up to 35,000 recycled PCs in various areas in England until 31 March 2001. Potential applicants have been asked to contact the free telephone helpline 08080 100 900 in the first instance.

The PCs will be delivered following the applications being processed by the relevant regional contractor. I am writing to all MPs with details of the scheme and the pilot areas to be covered in this first phase. The PCs will be provided in areas where there are locally based groups that made a successful bid to be part of the scheme. The evaluation arrangements are currently being finalised. I will write to my hon. Friend with the outcome of the tender exercise once this has been completed.

The first phase pilots are located in areas within the following locations:

Birmingham
Bradford
Hull
Leeds
Knowsley
Liverpool
London
Manchester
Plymouth
Portsmouth
Sheffield

City Learning Centres

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library a list of the addresses of City Learning Centres. [138634]

Ms Estelle Morris: A list of addresses of those City Learning Centres due to open in the financial year 2000–01 has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Further Centres that will open from September 2001 have been allocated to Excellence in Cities areas and partnerships are currently working on detailed plans on where Centres will be sited and how they will operate.

Internet Safety Guidance

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library a copy of his Department's Superhighways Safety Pack. [138639]

Mr. Wills: Copies of the new version of this comprehensive internet safety guidance have today been placed in the Library. We have produced, and recently updated, the pack for teachers and parents, providing guidance on the wide range of internet safety measures which they can adopt. These range from using "walled gardens" and filtering software, to monitoring and tracking pupil access and providing "user contracts" for pupils, spelling out how they should behave.

The pack is also available on the internet at http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk

Online Learning

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library a list of the addresses of *(a)* UK online learning centres and *(b)* ISI support centres. [138643]

Mr. Wills: I will write to my hon. Friend with a full list of the successful first phase of UK online centres funded through the Capital Modernisation Fund (CMF) by the end of November 2000, along with a list of DTI's UK online for business (formally Information Society Initiative) advisers and their contact details. Copies will also be placed in the Library.

TREASURY

Investors Compensation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what was the average amount of compensation paid by the ICS in relation to the cases referred to the investors' compensation scheme by the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman in each of the last two years, as a result of an award not having been paid due to the offending company having been struck off the PIA Register; [135271]

(2) how many decisions made by the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman in each of the last two years in favour of the complainant did not lead to the payment of compensation because the offending company was struck off the PIA Register before payment was made; and of these cases how many were referred to the Investors' Compensation Scheme; [135273]

(3) what was *(a)* the average amount of compensation paid and *(b)* the average amount of compensation awarded in cases where no payment was made due to the offending company having been struck off the Personal Investment Authority Register in relation to decisions made by the PIA Ombudsman in each of the last two years in favour of the complainant. [135272]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The previous history of cases dealt with by ICS is not centrally recorded, including whether they have been previously dealt with by PIAOB.

The information requested on compensation is not available. Compensation often does not take the form of a cash award to a complainant.

Census

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date the printing of the census forms for Wales and England began. [135154]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Simon Thomas, dated 15 November 2000:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking when the printing of the census forms for Wales and England began. (135154)

The contractual arrangements for printing the forms were agreed in February [illegible]. The contract required printing of the forms for Wales to begin on 7 July. Printing of the Welsh language version of the household forms for Wales subsequently began on that date, followed by the printing of the English language version on 2 August.

Details of the arrangements for the consultation on the 2001 Census in Wales have been widely publicised. The shape and content of the Census has been formulated in consultation with users through a structure of Advisory Committees, working Groups and topic-related sub-groups, Census News, information papers, the Internet and ad hoc public meetings. The assessment of the resulting business cases for census topics culminated in the Government's proposals set out in the White Paper in March 1999. In Wales in particular, formal consultation is carried out through the Welsh Census Users Network Group at which each of the 22 local government authorities in Wales is represented as well as a range of other public bodies and authorities. Additional bilateral consultation is carried out with the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Language Board.

In addition to this extensive programme of consultation a major public rehearsal of the 2001 Census was carried out in April 1999, including coverage of around 7,800 households in Gwynedd and 6,900 households in Ceredigion.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the question tabled by the hon. Member for Ceredigion for reply on 30 October regarding the date upon which the printing of the Census forms for Wales commenced. [137210]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have done so today.

Import Duty

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will increase the limit above which import duty is paid on goods ordered through the internet, post and telephone. [136982]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* UK policy is not to discriminate in favour of certain types of trade.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families he estimates are eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit but not claiming it. [137615]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimating the number of families currently eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit requires, among other things, detailed survey data for 2000–01. These are not yet available.

The number of families receiving WFTC at the end of August is provisionally estimated at 1,123,000, compared to 817,000 families who were in receipt of Family Credit in August 1999.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to measure the level of fraud in applications for Working Families Tax Credit. [137389]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* The Inland Revenue is currently undertaking an exercise to benchmark the level of fraud within Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit. The findings of this exercise will be used by the Inland Revenue to ensure their tax credits compliance work is carried out in the most effective way.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the annual cost to the Exchequer would be of disregarding the widow's maintenance allowance in respect of the Working Families Tax Credit. [137736]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* I am not aware of a widow's maintenance allowance.

EU Budget Lines

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government received itemised expenditure of EU Budget Line B3–301, Information Outlets, for the latest year; what is his policy on the optional targeting of such funds; and if he will identify how much funding went to each recipient, naming the recipients, with particular reference to expenditure in the UK. [138166]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is within the remit of the Commission to decide the criteria for the targeting of such funds.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the European Communities budget lines which the Government are seeking to delete. [138082]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government look for good value for money on all budget lines, and seek to ensure that any spending is within the financial perspective agreed at Berlin in March 1999.

Special Compliance Office

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase the *(a)* number and *(b)* proportion of Inland Revenue personnel working in the Special Compliance Office. [138322]

Dawn Primarolo: Over the next two years, more than £2.5 million will be added to the budget of Special Compliance Office.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the last tax year for which data are available, what was the *(a)* annual budget of the Inland Revenue Special Compliance Office, and *(b)* estimated additional tax revenue which its activities generated. [138321]

Dawn Primarolo: For the year to 31 March 2000, the total budget of Special Compliance Office was £24.3 million. The office brought into charge additional tax, interest and penalties of £371 million during the year. It also concluded criminal proceedings against 40 defendants in respect of revenue-related offences.

VAT (Places of Worship)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Cm 4917, if he will define places of worship in respect of consideration for a reduction in VAT. [138197]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Places of worship are listed religious buildings such as cathedrals, churches, chapels, meeting-houses, synagogues, mosques and temples.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the plans announced in his pre-Budget Statement to reduce VAT on church repairs in the context of EU rules governing VAT. [138738]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are attracted to the idea of offering a reduced rate for the repair of listed buildings which are used as places of worship, such as churches, chapels, synagogues, meeting-houses, temples and mosques. As a first step I have written to the European Commission on 8 November to ask for consideration of early legislative proposals to add repairs, maintenance and improvements to listed places of worship to the list of permissible reduced rates.

Urban Regeneration

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of the proposals for regeneration in his pre-Budget Report will fulfil the recommendations contained in the Rogers report: "Towards an Urban Renaissance". [138246]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* The pre-Budget Report 2000 announced that the following package of measures to promote urban regeneration would be introduced in Budget 2001:

(i) complete exemption from stamp duty for all property transactions in Britain's most disadvantaged communities;

(ii) accelerated payable tax credit for cleaning up contaminated land;

(iii) immediate tax relief to property owners for the costs of converting redundant space over shops and other commercial premises into flats for letting;

(iv) a reduced rate of VAT for the cost of converting residential properties into a different number of dwellings;

(v) an adjustment to the zero rate of VAT to provide relief for the sale of renovated houses that have been empty for 10 years or more.

Of these proposed measures, the first three respond to specific recommendations made in the Urban Task Force report "Towards an Urban Renaissance", chaired by Lord Rogers. The remaining two move some way towards Lord Rogers's recommendations for changes to VAT. In addition, the Government announced that it would continue to monitor the urban regeneration companies, and consider how a tax relief may help, responding to a further recommendation made in the report.

Contaminated Land (Tax Relief)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what tax relief he will provide to property investors for the clean up of contaminated land. [138233]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* The scheme announced in the PBR will give accelerated tax relief for the cost of cleaning up contaminated land. Final details will be included in my right hon. Friend's Budget.

Residential Conversions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who will be eligible for tax relief for creating flats over shops; and if there will be an upper limit to such relief in respect of the *(a)* property and *(b)* property owners. [138235]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Under the proposals announced by the Chancellor in the pre-Budget Report, 100 per cent. capital allowances for the costs of converting vacant and under-used space over shops would be available to property owners who create flats for letting. The scheme will include checks to ensure this enhanced relief does not subsidise high-value properties that require no encouragement. It is not proposed to limit the total relief available to a property owner.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the estimated number of flats over shops which will be created by his proposal for capital allowances. [138234]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* The proposed scheme for 100 per cent. capital allowances for flats over shops is expected to support the conversion of over 1,000 flats each year over the next five years.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what advice he has received from the European Commission on his plans to *(a)* reduce VAT rates on residential conversions and *(b)* remove VAT on developers renovating and selling houses which have been empty for 10 years or more. [138222]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Item 9 of Annexe H to the VAT Sixth Directive allows a reduced rate for alteration and conversion work to houses which is done to further a social policy. The removal of VAT from the sale of renovated houses that have been empty for 10 years is a minor adjustment and updating of the existing zero rate. There is therefore no need to seek the Commission's advice on VAT law.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137423]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Secretary of State for the Home Department on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 531W.

All Treasury staff are allowed one day's extra leave to undertake voluntary work in a private capacity.

Tax Returns (Internet)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 412W, on tax returns, if he will make a statement on the pilot of internet VAT returns. [137850]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* A limited live pilot of internet VAT returns started on 1 March 2000. A number of businesses were invited to participate after registering their interest in the internet VAT return at the early stages of development.

Initial feedback from businesses in the live pilot has been favourable. Customs are continuing to develop the system with a view to making it more widely available during 2001.

Corporation Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Cm 4917, on what basis he expects October corporation tax receipts to be a guide to corporation tax receipts for the October to March period in fiscal year 2000–01. [138460]

Dawn Primarolo: Large companies are now required to pay their corporation tax in quarterly instalments with, during the four year transition period, a subsequent balancing payment. October's receipts of tax were mainly:

instalment payments by companies with calendar or financial year accounting periods and these companies should pay similar amounts in January next year; and

balancing payments by companies with 1999 calendar year accounts and these levels of payments can help estimation of other companies' balancing payments due in the rest of the year.

Commercial Road Vehicles Vignette

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to issue detailed proposals for the vignette for commercial road vehicles in the United Kingdom; and what the daily charge will be. [138287]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* The Chancellor announced the Government's intention to introduce a 'vignette' as part of his package of positive measures for the haulage industry.

We will be consulting with representatives from the haulage industry on the introduction of the scheme. Further details will be announced in due course.

National Insurance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the lower earnings limit *(a)* for crediting towards national insurance benefits and *(b)* for national insurance contribution payments (i) was in April 1997 and (ii) will be in April 2001; and if he will estimate for each local authority in Tyne and Wear the numbers of employees who will be credited with national insurance contributions, but not paying them in April 2001. [138332]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to Inland Revenue press release "IR1—Income Tax Allowances and National Insurance Contributions".

I am afraid that it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate for the number of employees in Tyne and Wear who will be credited with national insurance contributions, but not paying them.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual additional revenue raised by his proposal in the pre-Budget Report to increase the upper limit on national insurance contributions for employed and self employed. [138622]

Dawn Primarolo: In the March 1999 Budget the Chancellor announced a large reform of National Insurance and figures were given in table 1.3 of the "March 1999 Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report". These estimates were updated in the "March 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report" appendix A2.

Widowers

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of paying the bereavement allowance to all men widowed between 6 April 1994 and 5 April 2000; and if he will make a statement. [138103]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* The Inland Revenue does not generally hold information on whether men are widowed and therefore any costing is very approximate. We estimate the cost of extending the widow's bereavement allowance to men retrospectively for the tax years 1994–95 to 1999–2000 would be about £180 million.

The Government recognise that the previous system of tax allowances did not target support fairly on those who needed it most. A new system has now been introduced, which focuses resources on families with children. Most widows and widowers with children under 16 will, from next April, be entitled to the Children's Tax Credit, worth over twice as much as the Widow's Bereavement Allowance. We believe that this will give the right support to those who need it most.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many men were widowed between 6 April 1994 and 5 April 2000 in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* each Scottish local authority area. [138102]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* There are around 80,000 men widowed each year in the UK of whom some 7,500 are in Scotland. I regret that it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate for the number of men widowed in each Scottish local authority area.

Special Advisers (Budget)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what restrictions apply to contact between his special advisers and journalists between publication of the Budget Report 2000 and the 2001 Budget. [136193]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Special advisers carry out their duties in accordance with the terms and conditions of their contract (similar arrangements have applied under successive Governments).

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff his Department employs under the New Deal for Young People. [137951]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 551–52W.

Pensioners

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people who will be of pensionable age in each of the next 10 years. [138045]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* The most recent actual figures relate to mid-1999. They are given in "Population Trends 101", Table 1.5. The Government Actuary's latest projections of the number of people over state pension age, based on the population at mid-1998, are available on the CD ROM accompanying "National population projections: 1998-based" (ONS Series no. 22) or on the GAD website http://www.gad.gov.uk/population/1998/pop98.html.

Disadvantaged Communities

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Cm 4917, if he will list the most disadvantaged communities which will qualify for tax reliefs under his regeneration proposals. [138232]

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which areas of Merseyside will qualify for exemption from Stamp Duty. [138333]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* The Government are working to ensure that the Stamp Duty measure announced in the pre-Budget Report is targeted at the most disadvantaged areas in all parts of the UK.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 8 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 315–27, on the pre-Budget Report, what estimate he has made of the impact of changes in stamp duty to *(a)* property sales and *(b)* other economic variables in deprived areas as defined in Table B4 of the document "Building Long Term Prosperity for All"; and if he will make a statement. [138282]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* The Government will work to ensure that the stamp duty measure announced in the pre-Budget Report is targeted at the most disadvantaged areas.

This is part of a comprehensive package of measures worth £1 billion over five years which will complement and build on measures already in place to revive our most disadvantaged communities.

Individual Savings Account

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the operation of ISAs. [138701]

Miss Melanie Johnson: A review of the operation of ISAs began work in April this year, and changes arising from the review were announced in the recent Pre-Budget Report. These include extending cash ISAs to 16 and 17-year-olds, increasing the use of electronic business for ISAs, and the alignment of the PEP rules on investments, transfers and administrative procedures with the more flexible ISA rules. Further details can be found in the Inland Revenue Press Release "Encouraging Britain to Save" issued on 8 November.

Euro

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost to Government Departments to date has been of the national euro changeover plan. [138725]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Public sector spending on changeover planning to date is set out in the Treasury's Fourth Report on Euro Preparations, published on 6 November 2000. Copies of the report are available in the Library of the House.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost has been to date of euro information campaigns directed specifically at business. [138732]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1016.

Personal Computers

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many personal computers have been provided by private sector employers for use at home by their employees, for which a tax allowance has been claimed; and what the value was of the computers provided. [138686]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available.

Petroleum Revenue Tax

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations his Department received on Petroleum Revenue Tax in relation to the pre-Budget Report. [138515]

Mr. Timms: The Treasury has received a number of representations on Petroleum Revenue Tax.

Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the relationship between his plans to abolish the withholding tax on the payment of interest between companies and the Council of Ministers' plans for an EU withholding tax. [138739]

Mr. Timms: The Budget proposal to abolish withholding tax on international bonds and simplification represents a helpful simplification of the tax system, as does the proposal in the pre-Budget Report whereby, subject to consultation, the requirement to withhold tax on most intra-UK interest and royalties payments between UK companies within the charge of corporation tax will be abolished from April 2001. They are not directly connected with EU proposals on taxation of savings, on which subject I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer my hon. Friend the Paymaster General gave on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 410W.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what his policy is concerning proposals by the Dutch Government for the harmonisation of pension tax systems, to be included in the IGC on institutional reform at Nice; [138734]

(2) if he will make a statement on proposals by the European Commission for the harmonisation of fuel taxes to be included at the IGC on institutional reform at Nice; [138733]

(3) if he will make a statement on plans by the French Presidency to introduce internal market tax harmonisation measures. [138729]

Mr. Timms: The Government will insist on retaining unanimity for decisions on taxation.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when the contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value of each contract is. [137192]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has no current contracts with specialist companies for staff relocation in the United Kingdom.

Dependent Territories Citizens

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what entitlement citizens of *(a)* Gibraltar and *(b)* Ceuta and Melilla have to benefits available to EU citizens; and if he will make a statement. [137379]

Mr. Vaz: The Treaty establishing the European Community applies to Gibraltar as a European Territory for whose external relations the UK as a member state is responsible, subject to various exemptions provided for in the UK's Act of Accession to the Community. Specifically, Gibraltar is not part of the Community Customs Territory and is outside the Treaty rules on the free movement of goods, the Common Commercial Policy, the VAT regime and the Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies.

The EC Treaty applies to Ceuta and Melilla as part of the Spanish metropolitan territory, subject to certain exemptions contained in Spain's Act of Accession to the Community. Ceuta and Melilla are not part of the Community Customs Territory (although goods originating in Ceuta and Melilla have duty-free access to the EC) and are outside the Common Commercial Policy and Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies. VAT is not levied there, but Spain contributes to Community own resources on their behalf.

Gibraltar and Ceuta and Melilla are entitled to the benefits flowing from the EC Treaty except those arising from parts of the Treaty and subsequent legislation which are not applicable to these territories.

Visa Applicants (Islamabad)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the current average waiting time in Islamabad is for applicants seeking leave to enter the United Kingdom having married United Kingdom citizens from the point of application to the issuing of the visa; and what it was on the same count date in each of the last five years. [137368]

Mr. Vaz: At the end of September waiting time in Islamabad for interview for a spouse settlement visa was 18.5 weeks. Waiting times at the same point in the last two years were 40 weeks (1999) and 16 weeks (1998). The monthly data for the years 1995 to 1997 have not been retained. The waiting times at the end of December 1995, 1996 and 1997 were 13.5 weeks (1995), 18 weeks (1996) and 18 weeks (1997). We also know from correspondence with the High Commission that the waiting time for spouse settlement interviews in September 1995 was 18 weeks. All these waiting times are for interview. The time until a decision to issue (or refuse) a visa may be longer, depending on the circumstances of the case. I have today asked Islamabad for weekly information about queue lengths.

Kazakhstan

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will discuss the conclusions of the OSCE reports on the parliamentary and presidential elections in Kazakhstan in 1999, and the issue of freedom and independence of the media, with President Nazarbaev during his forthcoming visit. [137713]

Mr. Vaz: We welcome President Nazarbaev's visit to the United Kingdom from 15–18 November 2000. The Secretary of State will discuss progress on democratisation and media freedom with President Nazarbaev during his visit to the United Kingdom.

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what bearing the Charter of Fundamental Rights will have on verdicts of the European Court of Justice; and if he will make a statement. [137965]

Mr. Vaz: The EU is already obliged to respect fundamental rights, and the ECJ is responsible for ensuring that this happens. The obligation to respect fundamental rights was first given Treaty status at Maastricht. In deciding how to interpret fundamental rights the ECJ is already, and will remain, free to have regard to relevant material. That may include the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The Charter will be adopted at Nice as a political declaration. It will not be legally binding. It will create no new powers or tasks for the EU or the ECJ. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 555W.

European Union Defence Policy

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the treaty base for the development in European Union defence policy in respect of *(a)* CFSP, *(b)* ESDI, *(c)* ESDP and *(d)* CESDP at (i) St. Malo, (ii) Cologne and (iii) Feira. [138209]

Mr. Vaz: The acronyms ESDI, ESDP and CESDP have all been used to refer to the same process: the European defence initiative launched by the Prime Minister at

Portschach in 1998. This initiative has been taken forward through the St. Malo UK-French Summit and the European Councils of Cologne, Helsinki and Feira. The aims of the initiative remain the same: to strengthen the military capabilities of EU member states and European Allies and to enable the Council of the EU to decide to launch and to conduct a military crisis management operation (a Petersberg task) where the alliance as a whole is not engaged. ESDI more correctly refers to the arrangements within NATO for the alliance to support European-led crisis management.

Article 2 and Title V of the Treaty on European Union provide the legal base for the EU's CFSP activity, including military crisis management. The Government are satisfied that the Treaty provides a sufficient legal base for the European defence initiative as defined in successive decisions of the European Council.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the inclusion of defence matters in the proposed Treaty of Nice. [138208]

Mr. Vaz: The Government expect that the European Council at Nice will take decisions on the necessary arrangements to enable the Council of the European Union to decide to launch and to conduct a military crisis management operation (a Petersberg task) where the alliance as a whole is not engaged. The Government are satisfied that the existing Treaty provisions provide a sufficient legal base for the proposals which the French Presidency was mandated to develop by the European Council at Feira.

Iraq

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total list of holds imposed by the UK on humanitarian goods for Iraq on 1 November. [138457]

Mr. Hain: Over US$37 billion has been made available to purchase humanitarian goods under the Oil for Food programme since its inception in 1996. This year alone, Oil for Food revenue is expected to reach more than US$16 billion.

Figures for 1 November are no longer available. However, as at 13 November the UK had 208 contracts placed on hold, valued at approximately US$0.3 billion, which is less than 1 per cent. of the total value of Oil for Food revenue. The UK, as a responsible member of the UN Iraq Sanctions Committee, scrutinises contracts very carefully to ensure that goods are not supplied to Iraq in violation of Security Council resolutions. Holds are normally lifted after assurances have been received about the end-use or in-country monitoring of these goods. Since early October the UK has lifted holds on contracts valued at $200 million following confirmation that the goods will be subject to specific monitoring within Iraq.

It is noteworthy that at the end of October Iraq's bureaucracy was holding back the delivery of US$1.1 billion worth of goods already approved by the Sanctions Committee. Detailed information on the status of individual Oil for Food contracts are available from The Office for Iraq Programme's website (http://www.un.org/Dems/oip.html).

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the European Union's policy on sanctions against Iraq. [138682]

Mr. Hain: The member states of the European Union, in accordance with their international obligations, continue to implement the United Nations sanctions on Iraq imposed by the United Nations Security Council acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

Euro

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the statistical accuracy of recent Eurobarometer opinion surveys concerning attitudes towards the euro. [138737]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes no assessment of the statistical accuracy of such polls. The European Commission produces the six-monthly Eurobarometer poll. For details of the surveys research methodology I refer the hon. Member to the office of the European Commission in London.

IGC

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals by the French Presidency at the IGC on Institutional Reform relating to self-employed people. [138728]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made it quite clear that it will insist on retaining unanimity for Social Security, including for the categories of people covered by the Social Security provisions.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals from the French Presidency at the IGC on Institutional Reform to extend the coordination of national tax systems. [138730]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made it quite clear that it will insist on retaining unanimity for decisions on taxation.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proposals in the progress report on the IGC relating to the WTO and the conclusion of international trade agreements. [138726]

Mr. Vaz: The Presidency's proposals relate principally to the extension of the Common Commercial Policy to include services and intellectual property. This could bring benefits to British industry by improving access to overseas markets, and the Government is therefore looking carefully at the options for change.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proposals for the co-ordination of social security systems contained in the progress report on the IGC on Institutional Reform. [138727]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made quite clear that they will insist on retaining unanimity for social security.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals in the Progress report on the IGC on Institutional Reform relating to *(a)* political parties at the European Union level, *(b)* the European Court of Justice, *(c)* the Court of Auditors, *(d)* the co-operation procedure and *(e)* the Committee of the Regions. [138722]

Mr. Vaz: On the first point, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 513W.

The Government have made clear its position on IGC issues in its White Paper, and most recently in the Government's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report on the intergovernmental Conference (published as a Command Paper on Friday 27 October). I refer the hon. Member to these.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proposals concerning enhanced cooperation in the Progress Report on the IGC on Institutional Reform, with particular reference to the impact on member states not taking part in enhanced cooperation. [138676]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 557W.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what his policy is on the number of votes to be required for a blocking minority under QMV at the proposed IGC on Institutional Reform; [138677]

(2) if he will make a statement on proposals for a double simple majority voting rule to be discussed at the IGC on Institutional Reform. [138678]

Mr. Vaz: The Government set out their position on vote reweighting in the IGC White Paper that they published in February.

I refer the hon. Member to this.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals in the Progress report on the IGC on Institutional Reform relating to *(a)* transport issues and *(b)* economic and financial cooperation with non-EU countries. [138735]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

European Court of Justice

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representation he has made to the Advocate-General of the European Court of Justice's recent legal opinion concerning criticism of the EU. [138684]

Mr. Vaz: In his Opinion in a case brought by Bernard Connelly against the European Commission, the Advocate-General, Ruiz-Jarabo Colomer, concluded that the European Court of Justice should dismiss Mr. Connelly's appeal against the decision of the Court of First Instance. The Court of First Instance had found previously that Mr. Connelly was in breach of his obligations as a Commission official, according to his terms of employment, and that his dismissal was therefore justified. Neither the Court of First Instance nor the Advocate-General found that it was illegal to criticise the EU, as it has been claimed in some sections of the press.

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards *(a)* the number of British commissioners, *(b)* the number of votes allocated to Britain and *(c)* the number of British judges on the European Court of Justice. [138675]

Mr. Vaz: The Government set out their position on Commission size and vote reweighting in the IGC White Paper that they published in February. I refer the hon. Member to this.

Currently each member state nominates a judge for the ECJ. There are no plans to change this.

Acquis Communautaire

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the volume of acquis communautaire applicant states need to adopt before they can join the EU. [138723]

Mr. Vaz: As in all previous enlargements, new members of the EU must be able to implement the acquis communautaire in full on accession. The candidate country's acceptance of the acquis may give rise to technical adjustments, and exceptionally to non-permanent transitional measures. These adjustments and transitional measures are the subject of the accession negotiations currently under way with 12 countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia).

Ballistic Missile Defence Shield

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on American plans for a ballistic missile defence shield designed to protect Western Europe. [138683]

Mr. Vaz: President Clinton announced on 1 September that any decision on the possible deployment of a National Missile Defence system would be deferred to the next US Administration.

The system the current Administration envisage would protect all of the US, but not Western Europe.

French Presidency Proposals

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the French Presidency's proposals for *(a)* a European food safety authority and *(b)* the harmonisation of working hours in the transport industry. [138680]

Mr. Vaz: *(a)* A proposal for a European Food Authority forms one part of the European Commission's proposed Regulation on general food law adopted on 8 November. The UK supports the establishment of such an Authority and will be considering this proposal carefully with wide public consultation. The French

Presidency will be seeking preliminary views on the European Food Authority proposal in an orientation debate at the Internal Market Council on 30 November.

(b) Proposals concerning the organisation of working time for mobile workers in the road transport sector were first published by the Commission in November 1998. Since then, negotiations in the Council have been slow and difficult and several issues have still to be resolved. The French Presidency hope to reach a Common Position at the Transport Council on 20–21 December.

Diego Garcia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department is taking to assist former inhabitants of Diego Garcia to return to all parts of the islands. [138489]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 511W.

HIV/AIDS

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to respond to the request from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for a report on the UK Government's activities concerning HIV/AIDS and human rights. [138561]

Mr. Hain: The HIV/AIDS pandemic is one of the most serious threats to health in modern times. Globally, nearly 34 million people live with HIV/AIDS. And, for many, it is not just their health that suffers but also their economic and social rights.

That is why we see HIV/AIDS as an absolute priority. We are intensifying our support for more effective national and regional action to tackle HIV/AIDS; increasing support for vaccine development and microbicides to prevent infection; and collaborating with national governments, the private sector, civil society, researchers, UNAIDS, UNICEF and WHO in ensuring the most effective global response to the pandemic.

In responding to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights we shall of course highlight these and our other efforts. I expect to issue this response in the near future, once we, in conjunction with DFID, have compiled the necessary information.

Homosexual Rights

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to include reference to homosexual rights in the 'Good Governance and Human Rights' section of his Department's publication 'Focus International, Britain's Overseas Territories'. [138534]

Mr. Battle: Focus International briefings are occasional publications on topics in which Britain has a particular interest. The July 2000 briefing on Overseas Territories was produced in direct response to Overseas and UK public interest in the territories arising from the publication of the White Paper on Overseas Territories in March 1999. It included a reference to our requirement for Overseas Territories to revise legislation to decriminalise consensual homosexual acts in private between adults.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

Mr. Gill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will provide a schedule of the types of legal cases that are eligible for legal aid. [138272]

Mr. Lock: Public funding (formerly legal aid) is available, subject to eligibility criteria, for all civil cases in England and Wales unless specifically excluded by schedule 2 of the Access to Justice Act 1999. Legal aid is available for all criminal cases which are serious enough to meet the interests of justice criteria set out in section 22(2) of the Legal Aid Act 1988.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Domestic Violence

31. **Mr. Rapson:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the policy adopted by the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure effective prosecution in cases of domestic violence. [137167]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service regards violence in the domestic context as a serious matter and will prosecute wherever it is proper to do so.

It is committed to working with others in the criminal justice system to achieve effective prosecutions in this difficult area.

The Crown Prosecutors will consider the full range of prosecution options whether or not the victim is willing to attend the trial as a witness.

Crown Prosecution Service

32. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Solicitor-General what guidance he gives to the Crown Prosecution Service on consultation with victims on decisions about whether to prosecute. [137168]

The Solicitor-General: The Code for Crown Prosecutors was reissued last month. It sets out among other things the relationship between the CPS, victims and the public interest. The Code explains that the CPS prosecutes on behalf of the public at large and not just in the interests of any one individual.

The Code at paragraphs 6.7 and 6.8 makes it clear that Crown Prosecutors should always take into account the consequences for the victim of the decision whether or not to prosecute, and any views expressed by the victim or the victim's family as that is part of the public interest.

Prosecutors should already carry this out in appropriate cases, but additional guidance is being considered to improve this process.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 on the operation of the Crown Prosecution Service. [137165]

The Solicitor-General: The significance of the Human Rights Act on the work of the CPS was recognised at an early stage, and a high priority was given to ensure the CPS was well prepared for the implementation of the Act on 2 October 2000.

In consultation with other prosecuting agencies and leading external human rights experts, the CPS developed a comprehensive training course for CPS prosecutors. The training programme reached nearly 2,500 prosecutors and selected caseworkers before 2 October 2000.

This training programme and the continued guidance and advice that CPS staff receive has ensured that cases giving rise to human rights issues have been dealt with in a professional and effective manner. We had expected that human rights problems would be raised in ordinary cases, and that they would be dealt with in the ordinary way. This has proved to be the case.

The Human Rights Act has meant that the courts are considering many new arguments. A number of cases raising human rights points are already going to the appeal courts. Where such cases have an impact on the criminal justice system as a whole and need to be litigated and resolved urgently they may be fast tracked to the appeal courts.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Solicitor-General what arrangements he has put in place for reviewing the work of the CPS Inspectorate; and how he measures the effectiveness of the Inspectorate. [137161]

The Solicitor-General: My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General and I routinely meet the Chief Inspector to discuss the work of the Inspectorate and the issues emerging. We receive and consider the Annual Report of the Chief Inspector together with reports of each Area inspection and thematic review undertaken. An Advisory Board is at present being established to ensure that the Inspectorate activity is targeted on those matters which most influence the performance of the CPS itself and the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal justice system as a whole.

Criminal Libel

33. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Solicitor-General what impact incorporation of the European convention on Human Rights into UK law has had on his policy on permitting prosecutions for criminal libel; and if he will make a statement. [137169]

The Solicitor-General: CPS prosecution policy is contained in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. The Code outlines the two-stage process in the decision to prosecute. The first stage is the evidential test, which states there must be sufficient evidence to provide a "realistic prospect of conviction". The second stage is the public interest test. The CPS will only start or continue when the case has passed both tests. The Code also states that each case must be considered on its own facts and merits.

The revised Code, which was launched on 11 October 2000, has been amended to reflect the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998. The Code states

> Crown Prosecutors must apply the principles of the European Convention on Human Rights in accordance with the Act.

Cases involving criminal libel will be considered in accordance with the principles outlined in the Code.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Solicitor-General when he notified the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament that he did not intend to refer the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. [138278]

The Solicitor-General: An official in the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers wrote to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament on 22 September 2000 to notify him that I did not intend to refer the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council under section 33(1) of the Scotland Act 1998.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of National Lottery grants has been spent on the Dome during 2000 to date. [135577]

Janet Anderson: Between 1 January 2000 and 31 October 2000, £139 million of Lottery money was paid to the New Millennium Experience Company. This amounts to 10.4 per cent. of the £1,340.5 million which has been paid to all grant recipients during the same period.

Lottery Funding (The Olympics)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the effect of National Lottery funding on Britain's Olympic performance. [134822]

Kate Hoey: The performance of the British Team in Sydney was the best showing since the 1920 Games. This was achieved through the focus, determination and talent of our athletes, harnessed and given a chance by the Lottery funding and other support that they and their coaches receive. Over £80 million has been paid to athletes and their sports from the National Lottery since 1997.

I have met with the Performance Directors of the Olympic Sports, together with the British Olympic Association, to discuss ways of building on the success of Sydney and I shall shortly be having a similar meeting with the Chief Executives of the sports governing bodies.

Fitness Industry

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the economic contribution of the fitness industry, consisting of private health and fitness clubs, public sports and leisure facilities, to the economy. [137044]

Kate Hoey: The Government recognise the contribution that the fitness industry makes to the overall economy and the wider health benefits of increasing participation. There are a number of different independent estimates of the specific economic benefits of the fitness and leisure industry based on estimates of the economic benefits of sport as a whole. However, these estimates tend not to be sensitive enough to give a reliable estimate of expenditure within specific sectors. I understand the Leisure Industries Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University is currently developing a new model which aims to provide a more accurate picture of the economic impacts of different sectors of sport, including the health and fitness markets. Sheffield Hallam University is intending to publish the first results from this work shortly.

Free Television Licences (Scotland)

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many applications for free television licences for pensioners aged 75 years and over have been *(a)* made and *(b)* granted in (i) Glasgow, Pollok, (ii) the city of Glasgow and (iii) Scotland; and what each figure represents as a percentage of the eligible groups in each case. [137770]

Janet Anderson: The information requested is not available. TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as Licensing Authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of applications received and free licences issued. Television licences cover households rather than individuals and there is no accurate information, by area, on the number of households eligible for the concession. However, estimates of the over-75 population based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 5,200 people aged 75 or over in the Glasgow, Pollok constituency, 47,500 in the City of Glasgow and 327,000 in Scotland.

Athletics Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his latest estimate is of the total cost of building an athletics stadium and related development at Picketts Lock. [137839]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The English Sports Council has allocated £1.3 million from the Sports Lottery Fund for detailed feasibility work on the Lee Valley Stadium project. Accurate estimates of the overall project costs will be available once this work has been completed. An initial technical study for a concept athletics stadium capable of hosting the 2005 World Athletics Championships and becoming the long-term home for the athletics in the UK, has been prepared by Drivers Jonas, on behalf of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and UK Athletics. This paper exercise suggests that the cost of such a stadium could be around £95 million, but more accurate figures will be available in due course from the detailed feasibility study.

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if, following receipt of the BBC's consultation paper 'A Digital Curriculum', he will undertake a public consultation on its proposals; and what criteria he will adopt in deciding whether to give his approval to the BBC's proposals. [138550]

Janet Anderson: The BBC has recently carried out a public consultation on its proposed digital curriculum service. If, in the light of the consultation exercise, the Corporation decides that it wishes to proceed with such a service, my right hon. Friend's approval will be required. The Department would at that stage publish the BBC's request and invite representations. Details of the Department's consultation and the criteria we will use in assessing BBC public service proposals are set out in the guidelines "BBC Public Services: Approvals", copies of which were placed in the Library of the House on 21 June. The guidelines are currently being revised and we aim to publish the final version shortly.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137698]

Mr. Chris Smith: Non-departmental public bodies sponsored by my Department with statutory duties relating to Scotland are:

Advisory Committee on Historic Wreck Sites
British Library
British Tourist Authority
Broadcasting Standards Commission
Millennium Commission
National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
National Heritage Memorial Fund
National Lottery Charities Board
National Lottery Commission
New Millennium Experience Company
New Opportunities Fund
Registrar of Public Lending Right
Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art
Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts
Theatres Trust
UK Sports Council

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested, but general information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of the "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk.

NORTHERN IRELAND

New Deal for Young People

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) how many people are employed in his Department under the New Deal for Young People; [136480]

(2) how many staff are employed by his Department under the New Deal for Young People. [137963]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office in his answer on 13 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 551W.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the total cost from 30 June to 30 September of the Saville Inquiry into the events in Londonderry on 30 January 1972; and what sums were spent in that period on the inquiry broken down by *(a)* salaries of staff, *(b)* travel and subsistence, *(c)* accommodation, *(d)* hearing/witness costs, *(e)* fees to solicitors, representing those killed, *(f)* solicitors representing others, *(g)* barristers representing those killed, *(h)* barristers representing others, *(i)* IT/communications and *(j)* miscellaneous, including general office expenditure and also provide the totals of each heading and the total costs since this inquiry began. [136556]

Mr. Ingram: My Department's expenditure on the Bloody Sunday Inquiry is summarised in the table for the period 1 July to 30 September 2000. The figures for moneys paid to solicitors and barristers cannot be readily provided separately, nor can the payments for their professional services be separated from other expenses. However these payments have been split between those to lawyers representing families and those to other lawyers, including Counsel to the Inquiry.

£

	Spend for period 1 July to 30 September 2000	*Spend since 1997–98 to 30 September 2000*
Salaries	290,676	2,069,659
Travel and subsistence	92,743	538,391
Accommodation	174,696	1,937,631
Hearing/Witness Costs	208,142	1,462,955
Payments to lawyers representing families of the dead or wounded	1,118,711	4,170,791
Payments to other lawyers, including Counsel to the Inquiry	291,368	11,149,614
IT/Communications	1,555,032	7,064,818
Miscellaneous including general office expenditure	84,959	1,177,659
Total	3,816,327	29,571,518

WALES

Reservoirs (Wales)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what level of water was held in reservoirs in Wales immediately prior to the heavy rainfall in the second half of October. [138562]

Mr. Paul Murphy: That is an operational matter for the Environment Agency and water supply companies. I understand that the Environment Agency Wales will be producing a report on recent flooding in Wales for the National Assembly for Wales and this will include information on reservoir levels.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Poultry Farming

12. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with poultry farmers concerning the integrated pollution prevention and control directive. [137145]

Mr. Morley: My ministerial colleagues in MAFF have discussed IPPC issues with representatives of the poultry sector as part of our regular discussions on the situation in the industry. Also my officials regularly meet the poultry industry and the Environment Agency to discuss the implementation of the Directive.

Climate Change

13. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what strategic measures he is taking to allow for agricultural changes induced by climate change. [137146]

Mr. Morley: My Department has carried out a detailed analysis of the likely impact of climate change on agriculture. Results are not conclusive but the recent extreme weather means that we must assess long-term affect carefully. Further research is underway.

BSE

15. **Mr. Andy King:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that scientific advice to Ministers relating to BSE is published. [137148]

Ms Quin: Scientific advice to Ministers relating to BSE is provided by SEAC. Public Summaries of the Committee's deliberations including advice and recommendations to Ministers are published after every meeting and placed on the MAFF and DH websites.

21. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the potential incidence of BSE in sheep. [137154]

Ms Quin: BSE has not been found in sheep except under experimental circumstances. Research has shown that in sheep BSE is similar to scrapie, the transmissible spongiform encephalopathy that has been present in British sheep for hundreds of years. MAFF is currently funding experiments to examine some 235 cases of scrapie for evidence of infection with the agent of BSE.

23. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to improve communication and co-ordination between his Department and other Government Departments and agencies on issues relating to BSE. [137157]

Ms Quin: MAFF works closely with other Government Departments and agencies on BSE issues. Departments and agencies meet monthly to review BSE issues. Separate meetings are held as necessary on specific topics.

Common Fisheries Policy

16. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what wildlife conservation measures he is proposing in connection with the review of the common fisheries policy. [137149]

Mr. Morley: We believe that it is important to continue to integrate environmental considerations into fisheries management. The Commission have already indicated that reduction in the bycatch of cetaceans is a priority.

Livestock Farming (Northumberland)

17. **Mr. Beith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the prospects for livestock farming in Northumberland. [137150]

Ms Quin: The Government announced in September 1999 and March 2000 substantial aid to the livestock industry—on top of the £1 billion in normal subsidy payments made to UK livestock producers each year.

£1.6 billion over seven years will also be made available under the England Rural Development Programme and with natural advantages such as an abundance of grass, good breeding stock and a wealth of technical expertise at their disposal, the Government believe livestock farmers—including those in Northumberland—should have a successful future.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

18. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to increase the area of farmed land subject to countryside stewardship agreements. [137151]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Minister announced a substantial increase in the Countryside Stewardship budget last December. As part of the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP), £500 million is being allocated to the Scheme over the next seven years. During this period, MAFF aims to add 525,000 hectares of land to the 210,000 hectares already covered by the Scheme.

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to increase expenditure on the Countryside Stewardship scheme. [137131]

Mr. Morley: Our plans for a major expansion of the Stewardship budget are well known. As part of the England Rural Development Programme, £500 million is being allocated to the Countryside Stewardship Scheme over the next seven years to 2006–07. This means that there will be around £16 million available each year for new agreements and we will be able to offer more than double the number of agreements offered in previous years.

Organic Farming

19. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what help his Department provides to farmers seeking to convert to organic production. [137152]

Mr. Morley: The Organic Farming Scheme provides conversion aid over a five year period to farmers in England. The budget for the Scheme for the period 1999–2000 to 2006–07 is some £140 million.

In addition, the Organic Conversion Information Service (OCIS) funded by MAFF provides free advice to potential organic farmers.

Ms Drown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many successful applications have been made to the organic farming scheme since May 1997; and how many were made in the previous five years. [137147]

Mr. Morley: Aid for conversion to organic farming has been provided since 1994, first under the Organic Aid Scheme and from April 1999 under the Organic Farming Scheme. There were 158 successful aid applications prior to April 1997 and 1,567 successful applications since that date.

Arable Farming

20. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what forecasts he has made for the economic prospects of the arable sector over the coming year. [137153]

Ms Quin: Forecasts of farm incomes in the United Kingdom, for the year ending February 2001, including incomes on cereals farms and general cropping farms, will be published at the end of January 2001. More detailed information will be available in the next edition of "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom" which will be published in March 2001. There is no doubt, however, that UK arable farmers face very difficult trading conditions which is why my right hon. Friend the Minister has announced that a further £34 million in agrimonetary compensation is to be paid to arable farmers, subject to European Commission approval. The extra money will provide valuable assistance to the arable sector at an exceptionally difficult time.

Supermarkets

24. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with supermarkets about their relationships with suppliers of horticultural products. [137158]

Ms Quin: Supply chain relationships are a theme of the Agricultural Forum, where Ministers meet key figures from all points in the food chain including retailers and horticultural producers, among others. The Forum last met on 6 July and will meet again on 23 November, when the food chain will be one of the key issues on the agenda.

As part of the Government's Action Plan for Farming, the major retailers, facilitated by the IGD, have developed a voluntary code of best practice in commercial relationships with trading partners. The Competition Commission has also recommended that a Code of Practice should be established which would put relations between supermarkets and their suppliers on a clearer and more predictable basis. Supermarkets with more than 8 per cent. of the market would have to give legally binding undertakings to comply with the Code. My right

hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked the Director-General of Fair Trading to take this forward.

Illegal Fishing

25. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to combat the illegal landing of fish in the UK. [137159]

Mr. Morley: The Fisheries Departments in the UK spend over £24 million a year on monitoring, control and surveillance. A number of steps have been taken to strengthen enforcement including the introduction of satellite monitoring, prior notification of landings and designated port arrangements for larger vessels and the implementation of more rigorous controls over the landing and sale of fish agreed by the Council of Ministers in 1998.

Flooding (River Roding)

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his Department's response to the flooding of the River Roding. [137155]

Mr. Morley: I visited the area on 1 November and sympathise greatly with all those affected. In common with elsewhere in the Country, the Environment Agency issued timely flood warnings and co-operated with the emergency services and local authorities, in this case the London Borough of Redbridge, to provide all possible assistance. The Agency has been asked to report on the flooding throughout the Country once the immediate effects of the flooding have been dealt with.

Agricultural Wages Board

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what effect the Agricultural Wages Board has had on current rates of pay in the horticulture sector. [137133]

Ms Quin: The Agriculture Wages Board last increased minimum rates of pay for full time standard and casual workers, including those in the horticulture sector, in June of this year. The Government also announced that the Agriculture Wages Board would continue to operate for at least another five years.

Rural Development Plan

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what role the North West Regional Development Agency is playing in the implementation of the Rural Development Plan for England. [137156]

Mr. Morley: The North West Regional Development Agency is a member of the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) Regional Programming Group (RPG) for the North West. RPGs for each region have a strategic role in guiding the implementation of the regionally targeted schemes in accordance with the aspiration and goals in the Regional Chapters of the ERDP.

Advisory Bodies

Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all the *(a)* task forces, *(b)* action teams, *(c)* policy reviews and *(d)* other temporary advisory bodies with external members currently in existence within his Department; and on what date each body (i) was set up and (ii) is expected to terminate. [131460]

Mr. Morley: I refer to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 799W.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list each group that is responsible to his Department, with significant and plural membership from outside the Civil Service, and to which the Nolan rules on non-departmental public bodies do not apply; and for each such group if it *(a)* is a private company, *(b)* is a charity, *(c)* has no formal legal basis and *(d)* has some other legal basis, giving details; [131173]

(2) if he will list the reports submitted to his Department, by bodies that were created after May 1997 and that include significant and plural membership from outside the Civil Service, stating in each case the body writing the report, the date the report was submitted, how many recommendations were made, the number of those recommendations that have been implemented to date and the number of recommendations that have been rejected; and if he will make a statement. [133571]

Mr. Morley: *[holding answer 18 July 2000]:* I refer to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office, 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 799W.

I also refer the hon. Member to the first central list of information that was published on 11 January 2000. Copies of the list are available in the Libraries of the House.

The detailed information requested about the number of recommendations made and the number rejected is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate costs.

Organic Imports

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what checks are made on imported foods labelled as organic to ensure that they do not include residues which would not be allowed in UK-produced organic foods. [135673]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The authentication of organic foods is achieved on the basis of production standards rather than residues checks. Under Regulation (EEC) 2092/91 all food produced within the EU for sale as organic must comply with the production requirements of the Regulation and be produced by an operator certified by a recognised organic certification body and subject to annual inspection by them.

In the case of imports from outside the EU, the European Commission has listed six countries which have demonstrated to the Commission that they have equivalent standards and controls: Argentina, Australia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Israel and Switzerland. Imports may take place freely, although the imports must be registered with an organic certification body. For other countries

outside the EU, registered EU importers may make application to the authorities in their member state providing full details of the standards and control procedures to be used. An authorisation to import will be issued only if it can be shown that these are equivalent to the EC Regulation. The UK Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS) is the body that undertakes the issue of such authorisations in the UK.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 176W, on relocating civil servants, which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when these contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value is of each contract. [137095]

Mr. Morley: No relocation companies hold contracts with my Department. Contractors are invited to tender on an ad-hoc basis when the need arises.

Flooding (Insurance)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make funds available to local authorities to compensate individuals whose homes have been flooded but who were not insured. [138687]

Mr. Morley: On 4 November the Government announced significant improvements to the Bellwin Scheme to assist local authorities in dealing with the current flooding. However, such help does not extend to individuals or businesses affected by flooding as it is an insurable risk.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Compensation Recovery Unit

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many certificates issued by the Compensation Recovery Unit have resulted in payments received; and what is the total of those payments; [136432]

(2) how much money has been recovered from damages awarded to miners by the Compensation Recovery Unit; [136433]

(3) what was the original estimated amount claimed by the Compensation Recovery Unit from the damages awarded to those miners whose cases the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney brought to his and his Department's attention; and what is the latest estimate claimed by the Compensation Recovery Unit in these cases. [136431]

Mr. Bayley: Since the current compensation recovery scheme came into effect during the 1996–97 financial year, 3,898,582 certificates have been issued, and £684,430,905 has been recovered.

The total amount recovered to date by the Compensation Recovery Unit from damages awarded to miners by the Department of Trade and Industry is £14,868,340.07.

The breakdown of the certificates issued and amounts recovered

Financial year	*Certificates issued*	*Benefits recovered (£)*
1997–98	720,546	166,906,114
1998–99	1,265,104	201,468,600
1999–2000	1,232,304	202,105,188
1 April 2000 to 31 August 2000	680,628	113,951,003
Total	3,898,582	684,430,905

It should be noted that, first, more than one certificate may be issued in relation to a given recovery, and, second, because payments may be received some time after the Compensation Recovery Unit issues a certificate, payments received during a given financial year may relate to certificates issued during the previous financial year. The figures for certificates issued and benefits recovered are therefore not necessarily coterminous. In respect of the five cases brought by my hon. Friend to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Department in February of this year, both the original estimated amount and the latest estimated amount are shown in the following table. For reasons of confidentiality, the identity of particular cases has to remain anonymous.

Cases	*Original certificate* (£)	*Date of issue*	*Latest certificate* (£)	*Date of issue*
1	21,787.59	8 January 2000	0	27 October 1999
2	21,707.54	16 November 1999	6.38	18 October 2000
3	24,238.75	24 July 1997	22.02	2 October 2000
4	14,302.01	21 December 1999	413.08	6 June 2000
5	5,858.35	27 October 1999	674.46	8 August 2000

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 73–76W, on ministerial directions, if he will place in the Library the text and supporting documentation of the directions made by Ministers in his Department in 1998 and 1999; and if he will make a statement. [137295]

Mr. Rooker: In accordance with the rules of Government accounting, the Comptroller and Auditor General has been notified of all ministerial directions.

We have considered this request under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and concluded that providing this information would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion within Government. The request therefore falls within the terms of exemption 2 of the Code of Practice.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the local authorities in Scotland which have been inspected by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, together with the dates when *(a)* these inspections began and *(b)* reports were issued. [137775]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Local authority	*Start date*	*Publication date*
East Dunbartonshire	19 January 1998	18 March 1999
Inverclyde	4 May 1998	12 February 1999
East Lothian	18 May 1998	18 March 1999
South Ayrshire	6 July 1998	18 March 1999
Dundee	2 November 1998	1 July 1999
Angus	28 June 1999	16 May 2000
Borders	5 July 1999	22 June 2000
Stirling	30 August 1999	22 June 2000
Edinburgh	30 November 1999	2 November 2000

Notes:

1. The start date shown is when the local authority is contacted with a request for information to assist with future planning of the inspection. The inspection start dates for inspections begun earlier than 1999 have been calculated as records did not hold actual start dates.

2. The current Benefit Fraud Inspectorate programme includes another two Scottish local authorities which are currently being inspected and a further four inspections of Scottish authorities that are due to be carried out by autumn 2001.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list those reports by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate which have had sections completely blanked out. [137726]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 November 2000]:* The information is in the list, which gives all the reports that have been published so far by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, where a paragraph or more has been blanked out.

It should be noted that when the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate publishes reports it blanks out material which would be of assistance to fraudsters, unnecessarily identifies individuals, or is confidential. All reports so far have had some material blanked out, except the Securing Child Support (Child Support Agency) report published in July 1999.

Local Authority Reports

Blackpool
East Dunbartonshire
Eastbourne
Broxbourne
Teesdale
Burnley
Leicester
Croydon
East Lothian
Elmbridge
Oldham
Thanet
Tower Hamlets
South Ayrshire
Telford and Wrekin
Trafford
Gateshead
East Devon
Stoke on Trent
Kirklees
Dundee
Richmond upon Thames
Swansea
Oxford
Bournemouth
Lichfield
Macclesfield
Angus
Borders
Epsom
Berwick
Windsor and Maidenhead
Braintree
Camden
Tower Hamlets
Croydon
Sandwell
West Wiltshire
Powys
Wigan
Shrewsbury
Norwich
York
Calderdale
Rotherham
Ellesmere Port
St. Helens
South Lakes
Babergh
Barnet
Northampton
Sunderland
Gloucester
Rochford
Derbyshire Dales
Swale
Hart
Blyth Valley
Allerdale
Southwark
Congleton
Neath and Port Talbot
Brighton and Hove
Stirling
Eden
Lancaster
Harrow
Nottingham
Rochford
Bristol
Westminster

Agency Reports

BA: Area Directorate 3 (London South) Contributions Agency

Vaccine Damage Payment Act

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes have been made in the rules for eligibility for payments under the Vaccine Damage Payment Act 1979 in each year since 1979; and if he will make a statement. [137776]

Mr. Bayley: The Vaccine Damage Payment (VDP) Act 1979 provides a single, tax-free payment for people who have suffered severe mental and/or physical disablement of 80 per cent. or more as a result of vaccination against one or a group of specified diseases following a claim made within six years of the date of vaccination or of a child reaching the age of two whichever is the later. The only changes to the eligibility rules which have been made since 1979 are the addition of mumps in April 1990 and haemophilus influenza type b (Hib) in May 1995 to the list of specified diseases.

On 27 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 719–20, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced a number of changes to the VDP scheme. In addition to increasing the level of the one-off payment for £40,000 to £100,000, these changes included proposals to amend the time limits for claiming a payment to age 21 in the case of children, and to reduce the disability threshold from 80 per cent. to 60 per cent.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further plans he has to increase the take-up of the minimum income guarantee. [135755]

Mr. Rooker: We are determined to ensure that pensioners on low incomes claim what they are entitled to. The minimum income guarantee take-up campaign is still in progress.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners he estimates are *(a)* eligible for and *(b)* claiming the Minimum Income Guarantee for each parliamentary constituency in Wales. [136646]

Mr. Rooker: It is only possible to answer part *(b)* of the hon. Member's question.

Minimum Income Guarantee claimants by parliamentary constituency, May 2000

Thousand

Parliamentary constituency	*Number of claimants*
Aberavon	2.4
Alyn and Deeside	1.8
Blaenau Gwent	2.6
Brecon and Radnorshire	1.8
Bridgend	2.1
Caernarfon	2.0
Caerphilly	2.8
Cardiff, Central	2.5
Cardiff, North	1.5
Cardiff, South and Penarth	3.7
Cardiff, West	2.7
East Carmarthen and Dinefwr	2.4
West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire	2.4
Ceredigion	1.1
Clwyd, South	2.3
Clwyd, West	3.0
Conwy	2.5
Cynon Valley	2.2
Delyn	2.2
Gower	2.2
Islwyn	2.3
Llanelli	3.4
Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	1.6
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	2.4
Monmouth	1.7
Montgomeryshire	1.4
Neath	3.1
Newport, East	1.9
Newport, West	2.5
Ogmore	1.6
Pontypridd	1.9
Preseli Pembrokeshire	2.2
Rhondda	3.2
Swansea, East	3.0
Swansea, West	3.5
Torfaen	2.4
Vale of Clwyd	2.7
Vale of Glamorgan	2.3
Wrexham	2.3
Ynys Mon	2.2

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
3. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or their partner are aged 60 or over.
4. Cases have been allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 of the Postcode Director. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe) of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 573W, if he will list the percentage of each five year age group above the age of 60 years who are in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee, broken down by gender. [137387]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 9 November 2000]:* The information is in the table.

Minimum Income Guarantee pensioners aged 60 or over by age, gender and as a percentage of the population in the relevant age group, Great Britain, May 2000

Age	*Number (Thousand)*	*Percentage*
All claimants	1,615	13.6
All males		
60–64[1]	184	13.5
65–69	93	7.7
70–74	72	7.0
75–79	61	7.4
80 or over	112	16.0
All females		
60–64[1]	122	8.6
65–69	119	9.0
70–74	141	11.3
75–79	193	16.3
80 or over	517	33.3

[1] 60–64 age band includes claimants aged under 60 where there is a partner aged 60 or over.

Notes:

1. Figures are based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.
3. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
4. "Percentage of the population" is based on ONS population estimates for mid-term 1999, and represents Income Support claimants in each age band as a proportion of the population of the same age and gender.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000.

Population estimates unit—ONS mid-term estimates for 1999.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement regarding the level of complexity of the form that needs to be completed by pensioners wishing to claim the Minimum Income Guarantee and its impact on the numbers of people making a claim. [137617]

Mr. Rooker: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has said in his statement on 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 451–55, the Department is examining measures which will reduce the complexity of the current system and encourage pensioners to claim their correct benefit entitlement.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a geographical breakdown of the number of pensioners who are estimated to be entitled to the Minimum Income Guarantee but do not claim it. [138311]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the rate of Minimum Income Guarantee per week from April 2001. [138432]

Mr. Rooker: In April 2001, the Minimum Income Guarantee will be set at £92.15 for single pensioners and £140.55 for couples.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate, making no allowance for behavioural change, of how many pensioner households will benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050. [138349]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 November 2000]:* Making no allowance for behavioural change, the figure remains at one in four—the same as given in the Pensions Green Paper "Partnership in Pensions" (Cm 4179).

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many retired people who qualify for payment of the Minimum Income Guarantee are receiving it. [138522]

Mr. Rooker: Some 2 million pensioners either as singles or couples receive the Minimum Income Guarantee. Figures for those who might be entitled but are not claiming were based on a 1 per cent. sample. We shall have a better estimate of those entitled but not claiming when the present take-up campaign is concluded, during which we are making direct contact with 2.3 million pensioners.

"Voices"

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department spent on advertising space in the recent Government publication, "Voices". [135584]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The total cost of advertising space was £5,477.85 including VAT. In addition we spent £1,395.90 on design and production.

"Voices" magazine represents a good opportunity for us to make women aware of information available on a number of issues that may affect them. The pack that women are sent when they respond to the advert contains information about: pension options; changes to the state pension age and Inherited SERPS; help available for new mothers and support in times of bereavement.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the income ratio is between the top fifth and the bottom fifth of pensioners; and what it would be if the link between the basic pension and average earnings had been retained. [136046]

Mr. Rooker: In 1998–99, the ratio of average (median) incomes in the top fifth compared to the bottom fifth of the pensioners' income distribution was 3.1 for single pensioners and 3.5 for pensioner couples. The other information requested is not available.

Notes:

1. pensioners are defined as single people aged over state pension age (65 for men, 60 for women) and couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

2. Income is defined as net income before housing costs. The income distribution has been calculated separately for single pensioners and pensioner couples.

Source:

The Pensioners' Income Series 1998–99, published on 26 October 2000.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 122–29W, on pensioner incomes, if he will provide estimates on the same basis for 1998–99. [138030]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Pensioner units' median gross income excluding means-tested benefits, by age and an marital status, 1998–99

Marital Status	*60–64*	*65–69*	*70–74*	*75–79*	*Age 80+*
Single male pensioners	n/a	133	124	114	112
Single female pensioners	123	114	102	100	99
Pensioner couples	n/a	268	233	192	182

Notes:

1. All amounts are in £ per week at July 1998 prices. They are rounded to the nearest £1, although estimates are not necessarily accurate to this level.

2. Estimates are for pensioner units. A pensioner unit is defined as a single (non-cohabiting) person over state pension age (65 years or above for men and 60 years or above for women), or a couple (married or cohabiting) where the man, defined as the head, is over state pension age. Estimates for pensioner couples are broken down by the age of the man.

3. Estimates marked 'n/a' are not applicable. Single men and couples are only defined as pensioner units if the man is aged 65 years or above.

4. Means-tested benefits are defined as Income Support, Family Credit, Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit and Social Fund Grants.

5. Levels of means-tested benefit may be particularly affected by mis-reporting by survey respondents, as it is thought that receipt of State Retirement Pension and receipt of Income Support are often confused in the FRS.

Source:

The Pensioners' Incomes Series dataset, based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) 1998–99.

Numbers of pensioner units by age and marital status, 1998–99

Marital Status	Age 60–64	65–69	70–74	75–79	80+
Single male pensioners	n/a	200,000	250,000	210,000	280,000
Single female pensioners	370,000	560,000	690,000	740,000	880,000
Pensioner couples	n/a	1,010,000	810,000	520,000	330,000

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 pensioner units
2. Estimates are for pensioner units. A pensioner unit is defined as a single (non-cohabiting) person over state pension age (65 years or above for men and 60 years or above for women), or a couple (married or cohabiting) where the man, defined as the head, is over state pension age. Estimates for pensioner couples are broken down by the age of the man.
3. Estimates marked 'n/a' are not applicable. Single men and couples are only defined as pensioner units if the man is aged 65 years or above.
4. Estimates are not controlled to independent population estimates by the age bands used.

Source:

The Pensioners' Incomes Series dataset, based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) 1998–99.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have been newly awarded *(a)* Income Support and *(b)* the Minimum Income Guarantee in each quarter since 1997. [138309]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Minimum Income Guarantee pensioner claims, 1997 to 2000

Quarter	New claims
1997	
February	49,000
May	64,000
August	52,000
November	47,000
1998	
February	49,000
May	50,000
August	48,000
November	49,000
1999	
February	50,000
May	64,000
August	56,000
November	52,000
2000	
February	44,000
May	66,000

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.
3. As inquiries are taken at a point in time, no account can be taken of claimants who flow on and then off again, and visa versa, between the dates of the inquiry. Therefore, the numbers will underestimate the true level of inflows and outflows although the net combined effect will be correct.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Inquiries, February 1997 to May 2000.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Slough are eligible for *(a)* the Winter Fuel Allowance, *(b)* a free television licence to over 75-year-olds and *(c)* the Minimum Income Guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [138717]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Statistics on pensioners in Slough, May 2000

Category	Thousand Number
Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) pensioners	2.6
Pensioners over 75	5.5
Winter Fuel Payments total claimants paid	13.4

Notes:

1. All except Winter Fuel Payment data are based on 5 per cent. samples, therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
3. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 Version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.
4. MIG Pensioners are defined as Income Support benefit units where either the claimant and/or the partner is aged 60 or over.
5. Number of pensioner households who will receive free TV licences is not directly known, but from the statistical samples it is possible to produce data on the number of pensioners receiving one or a combination of Retirement Pension, MIG, Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance by parliamentary constituency and are aged 75 or over.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000
Statistical samples held by ASD Information Centre, May 2000
Matching Intelligence Data Analysis Service Winter Fuel Payment 1999–2000 exercise

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Chatham and Aylesford are eligible for the *(a)* winter fuel allowance, *(b)* free television licence for over 75-year-olds and *(c)* minimum income guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [138720]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Statistics on pensioners in Chatham and Aylesford, May 2000

Category	Thousand Number
Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) pensioners	1.6
Pensioners over 75	5.0
Winter Fuel Payments total claimants paid	12.8

Notes:

1. All except Winter Fuel Payment data are based on 5 per cent. samples, therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
3. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 Version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.
4. MIG Pensioners are defined as Income Support benefit units where either the claimant and/or the partner is aged 60 or over.

5. Number of pensioner households who will receive free TV licences is not directly known, but from the statistical samples it is possible to produce data on the number of pensioners receiving one or a combination of Retirement Pension, MIG, Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance by parliamentary constituency and are aged 75 or over.

Sources:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000
Statistical samples held by ASD Information Centre, May 2000
Matching Intelligence Data Analysis Service Winter Fuel Payment 1999–2000 exercise

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Sittingbourne and Sheppey are eligible for *(a)* winter fuel allowance, *(b)* free television licence for over 75-year- olds and *(c)* minimum income guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [138718]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Statistics on pensioners in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, in May 2000

Category	*Number (Thousand)*
Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) pensioners	2.1
Pensioners over 75	5.9
Winter fuel payments total claimants paid	14.7

Notes:
1. All except Winter Fuel Payment data are based on 5 per cent. samples, therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
3. Cases are allocated to each Parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 Version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.
4. MIG Pensioners are defined as Income Support benefit units where either the claimant and/or the partner is aged 60 or over.
5. Number of pensioner households who will receive free TV licences is not directly known, but from the statistical samples it is possible to produce data on the number of pensioners receiving one or a combination of Retirement Pension, MIG, Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance by Parliamentary constituency and are aged 75 or over.

Sources:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000.
Statistical samples held by ASD Information Centre—May 2000
Matching Intelligence Data Analysis Service Winter Fuels Payment 1999–2000 exercise.

Payroll Administration

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the costs of administering the payroll in his Department and associated agencies in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [135995]

Mr. Rooker: *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The annual cost of administering the Department's integrated pay, personnel and expenses system was £8.3 million 1999–2000. This will reduce to £4.9 million per annum from January 2001 due to restructuring of payroll and expenses services as part of the Department drive to refocus resources on the front-line services.

NIRS2

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what the level of the average payment made to date is to pensioners to make up for income lost as a result of the NIRS2 computer problems, broken down into *(a)* outstanding benefit payments and *(b)* compensation; [137516]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that pensioners who may have received a lower income than they are entitled to as a result of the NIRS2 computer problems are informed of their correct entitlement; [137514]

(3) which benefits, apart from state pensions, are still affected by the problems with NIRS2; and how many claimants of each benefit are still awaiting their correct benefit entitlement as a result. [137515]

Mr. Rooker: The contract for NIRS2 was signed in 1996 and there have been problems with the system from the start, which we are trying to resolve.

Pensioners who have been affected by the NIRS2 problems and who are entitled to compensation under the Departmental Special Payments Scheme receive an average amount of arrears of £377 and an average amount of compensation of £11.77.

To receive compensation under the scheme, all the following conditions must be satisfied. These are that the:

final rate of pension was put into payment more than eight months after the date from which the pension is payable,

amount of arrears due is at least £100,

amount of compensation payable is at least £10.

Any change to a pensioner's National Insurance account that affects the rate of pension in payment is notified automatically to the Benefit Agency. This allows both the new rate and any arrears of pension to be paid.

Claims for Widows Benefit, Ineapacity Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance are also affected by the NIRS2 problems. At 15 September 200, Benefits Agency offices had 12,402 Incapacity Benefit claims waiting to be reviewed and 2,255 Jobseeker's Allowance claims. The exact number of Widows Benefit claims waiting to be reviewed is not known but the combined total of Widows Benefit and Retirement Pension claims outstanding at 15 September was 96,776.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will estimate the number of pensioners who are currently receiving incorrect payments in respect of *(a)* the state retirement pension and *(b)* SERPS that have been caused by problems with the NIRS2 computer system; [138250]

(2) if he will estimate the average number of newly entitled pensioners who are receiving incorrect payments in respect of *(a)* the state retirement pension and *(b)* SERPS that are caused by problems with the NIRS2 computer system; [138251]

(3) if he will estimate the average weekly *(a)* underpayment and *(b)* overpayment in respect of (i) the state retirement pension and (ii) SERPS caused by problems with the NIRS2 computer system at the latest date for which figures are available. [138252]

Mr. Rooker: The contract for NIRS2 was signed in 1996 and there have been problems with the system from the start which we are trying to resolve.

The number of pensioners not receiving their full rate of pension and the number of newly entitled pensioners who do not receive their full rate of pension in time for their first pension pay day specifically because of NIRS2 problems is not available.

Separate figures are not held for SERPS, which is a component of the overall State Retirement Pension. At 30 September 2000, NIRS2 problems had caused 128,000 pensioners to be underpaid a total of £43.5 million. At 31 August 2000, NIRS2 problems had caused 5,300 pensioners to be overpaid a total of £920,000. The average underpayment is £340 and the average overpayment £174.

Widowers

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the implications of the Crossland case for the claims of widowers for equality of treatment. [138316]

Angela Eagle: The ECHR case of Christopher Crossland, which was resolved by friendly settlement, concerned only the Widows Bereavement (Tax) Allowance, and therefore has no implications for Widows Benefits.

In introducing Bereavement Benefits from 9 April 2001, we will, for the first time, introduce specific benefits for widowers on the death of their spouse. These benefits will be available equally to men and women.

Fathers who are widowed before these benefits are introduced will be able to claim Widowed Parent's Allowance from 9 April 2001 as long as they satisfy the qualifying conditions.

State Pensions Liabilities (EU)

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on EU and British state pensions liabilities. [138736]

Mr. Rooker: UK state pension liabilities are a matter for the UK Government. EU state pension liabilities are a matter for the individual member states.

Pension Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has for the body that will administer the pension credit to share data relevant to the pension credit with *(a)* the Benefits Agency, *(b)* local authorities, *(c)* banks and building societies, *(d)* pension providers and *(e)* the Inland Revenue; [138505]

(2) what plans the Inland Revenue has for data-sharing with local authorities and the Benefits Agency on the pension credit. [138502]

Mr. Rooker: We will consider carefully administration issues as part of our detailed programme to take forward the pension credit. As part of this, we will endeavour to reduce barriers to the claims process.

SCOTLAND

Graduate Unemployment

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many, and what percentage of, first degree full-time graduates from higher education institutions in Scotland were unemployed six months after graduation in the last year for which figures are available. [137777]

Dr. Reid: Higher Education in Scotland is a devolved matter.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Field: To ask the President of the Council how many questions have been *(a)* tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead since 23 October and *(b)* given holding answers. [138503]

Mrs. Beckett: The following information has been provided by the House of Commons Library (POLIS database) and covers the period from 23 October to 14 November:

(a) Questions tabled: 51

(b) Questions which have received a holding reply: 1

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

EU Employment Directive

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the President of the Council how many letters have been received by the Government alleging that there was a threat to religious freedom posed by the EU directive on employment agreed between the Governments of the EU on 17 October. [135064]

Mrs. Beckett: My Department has received no such letters.

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities gave on 6 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 39W.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 17 November 2000

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Non-departmental Public Bodies (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the non-departmental public bodies responsible to him which have duties relating to Scotland, indicating their budget and staffing in Scotland, the number of Scottish board members and their emoluments. [137695]

Mr. Morley: A list of the non-departmental public bodies that are sponsored by my Department and which have a remit covering Great Britain or the United Kingdom is set out in the following annexe.

The remaining information is not held centrally in the form requested but general information on expenditure, staffing, board members and levels of remuneration is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" have been placed in the Libraries of the House and "Public Bodies 2000" is due to be published next month. Information on board membership and remuneration can also be downloaded from the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Directory website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

Non-departmental public bodies with duties relating to Scotland

Executive NDPBs:

British Potato Council
Horticultural Development Council
Food From Britain
Home-Grown Cereals Authority
Meat and Livestock Commission
Milk Development Council
Sea Fish Industry Authority
UK Register of Organic Food Standards
Wine Standards Board of The Vintners' Company

Advisory NDPBs:

Advisory Committee on Pesticides
Farm Animal Welfare Council
Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee
Veterinary Products Committee

Tribunals:

Plant Varieties and Seeds Tribunal.

Flood Defences

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to make available extra moneys for river dredging flood defence works in East Sussex. [137545]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 November 2000]:* Additional funding of £51 million over four years has already been announced for, inter alia, an accelerated programme of river flood defence capital works in England. The Environment Agency's staff in East Sussex are reviewing options for flood defence of communities on East Sussex rivers in the light of experience of the recent floods. They plan to meet local residents in the near future to explain those options. It is therefore too early to say what plans there are for river dredging flood defence works in East Sussex, whether it would be effective, or the extent to which such work would attract funding from this Department.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to strengthen and enhance the flood defences at York. [138545]

Mr. Morley: I understand that the flood defences at York have operated to their design standard or better in the recent flooding. The Environment Agency will be checking the necessity for urgent repairs and reviewing the need for strengthening and enhancing the defences once the immediate work of dealing with the floods is completed. No doubt they will consider if advantage can be taken of the Government's additional funding over the next four years, a major element of which is aimed at accelerating the programme of river flood defence works.

Thames Barrier

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment has been made of the impact of global warming and sea level rise on the risk of the Thames Barrier being unable to withstand future storm surges. [138498]

Mr. Morley: The Thames Barrier is the largest component of the complex system of gates, walls and embankments which form the tidal barrier to London and the Thames Estuary. The Barrier is a robust and flexible installation with a design based on rates of sea level rise predicted in the 1970s which were higher than those currently anticipated. It provides London with a high level of protection from tidal flooding and with normal care and maintenance should continue to do so until at least the latter half of this century. Even then, although the Barrier may need to be closed more frequently, it will continue to fulfil its primary function.

The Environment Agency is currently developing its tidal defence strategy for the next 100 years, with several studies already in progress.

Rivers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to regulate flows of water in the *(a)* River Severn, *(b)* River Derwent, *(c)* River Ouse, *(d)* River Aire and *(e)* River Don. [138560]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* I have asked the Environment Agency, in conjunction with their partners, to produce a full report on the flooding, its effects, how flood warning and emergency response worked and what lessons we can learn. The Agency will initiate this when the immediate work of dealing with the floods has been completed; the report should be available by Easter. In the meantime there are no new plans for these rivers.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the river improvement schemes that will be funded from the new money he has announced for the Environment Agency. [138559]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* The additional funding of £51 million over the next four years is primarily for the Environment Agency, but some may be allocated to local authorities and Internal Drainage Boards as well. A major element of the package is designed to accelerate the programme of river flood defence works. The Ministry is approaching all the operating authorities to establish their plans with a view to determining the content of the enhanced national river works programme.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Guided Tours (Summer Recess)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what operational and financial assessment she has made of the arrangements for guided tours of the Palace of Westminster during the 2000 summer recess with special reference to the effectiveness of *(a)* these arrangements and *(b)* the previous practice of using the same guides in the recess as in the parliamentary session. [139138]

Mrs. Roe: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my answer of 14 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 589W.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police Service

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 19W, what the perceived community background is of members of the Chief Constable's Change Management Team. [135824]

Mr. Ingram: As I indicated in my earlier reply, I do not consider it appropriate to comment on the perceived community background of members of the Change Management Team.

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions and on what dates the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has given him advice with respect to taking measures to create rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights; and what advice was given which was not supplementary to the European Convention. [136706]

Mr. George Howarth: One of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's statutory duties is to provide advice to the Secretary of State on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights. The Commission is currently undertaking an extensive consultation exercise and will submit a preliminary report to the Secretary of State next March.

Compensation Agency

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements he has made to carry out a quinquennial review of the Compensation Agency. [139442]

Mr. Ingram: I have agreed that a review should be undertaken. The Compensation Agency was previously reviewed in 1995. Accordingly it should, like other agencies, now be subject to a quinquennial review. The review will commence immediately and should be completed by 30 May 2001.

The review will be directed by a Steering Group under the Chairmanship of the Director of Resources in my Department.

The Steering Group will be supported by a Project Team led by a member of the Senior Civil Service from outside the Agency. The leader of the Project Team will report to the Steering Group on a regular basis.

The review process will provide extensive opportunities for consultation with internal and external stakeholders and will follow the procedures recommended in the guidance for the review of agencies and non-departmental public bodies published by the Cabinet Office.

Forensic Science Agency

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements he has made to carry out a quinquennial review of Forensic Science Northern Ireland. [139443]

Mr. Ingram: I have agreed that a review should be undertaken. Forensic Science Northern Ireland completed five years of operation as an executive agency on 31 August 2000. Accordingly it should, like other agencies, now be subject to a quinquennial review. The review will commence immediately and should be completed by 30 April 2001.

The review will be directed by a Steering Group under the Chairmanship of the Director of Resources in my Department.

The Steering Group will be supported by a Project Team led by a member of the Senior Civil Service from outside Forensic Science Northern Ireland. The leader of the Project Team will report to the Steering Group on a regular basis.

The review process will provide extensive opportunities for consultation with internal and external stakeholders and will follow the procedures recommended in the guidance for the review of agencies and non-departmental public bodies published by the Cabinet Office.

PRIME MINISTER

Lord Birt

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 442–43W, on Lord Birt, if he will list the activities undertaken by Lord Birt in his capacity as his adviser on crime; how many meetings he has had with Lord Birt on crime since Lord Birt's appointment; what reports on crime he has

been presented with by Lord Birt; and what has been the total amount to date claimed by Lord Birt for out-of-pocket expenses. [137320]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 8 November 2000]:* Lord Birt is looking at criminality and long-term social trends. The focus of his work to date has been analysing existing data on offenders, offences and victims. As part of this work, Lord Birt has met Ministers and officials from relevant Departments and practitioners. I understand that he has claimed just over £300 in out-of-pocket expenses.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Chambré Hardman

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has held concerning the retention of Chambré Hardman's photographs, negatives and house in Liverpool; and what was the outcome of those discussions. [138749]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We acknowledge that the Chambré Hardman collection is of national importance and support the wish to ensure its conservation and presentation to the public. My Department has had discussions with a number of interested parties, including the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, the National Museum of Film, Photography and Television, and the North West Museum Service, to ensure the preservation of the collection and the house.

There are a number of potential solutions for the long-term care and public presentation of both the collection, and Chambré Hardman's house in Liverpool. It is now for the Trustees of the Chambré Hardman Trust to assess all of the available options; to determine which of these is the most realistically able to meet its objectives; and to develop a viable business case for the preferred solution.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Payments

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds, Central constituency have been in receipt of (i) Income Support, (ii) Disability Living Allowance, (iii) Incapacity Benefit, (iv) Unemployment Benefit and (v) Housing Benefit in each of the last 10 years. [138261]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Hilary Benn, dated 16 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people in (a) the City of Leeds and (b) the Leeds Central constituency have been in receipt of (i) income support, (ii) disability living allowance, (iii) incapacity benefit, (iv) unemployment benefit, and (v) housing benefit in each of the last 10 years.

The data is not available in the requested format, however, the information that is available is supplied in the attached tables.

I hope this is helpful.

(i) Income Support claimants

Year	Leeds local authority	Leeds, Central constituency
May 1990	59,500	—
May 1991	61,100	—
May 1992	68,100	—
May 1993	74,600	—
May 1994	75,500	—
May 1995	71,000	—
May 1996	69,300	—
May 1997	48,500	—
May 1998	47,700	—
August 1998	—	10,500
May 1999	46,900	10,300
May 2000	47,300	10,800

Notes:

1. Constituency information represents constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
2. Parliamentary constituency data are only available from August 1998 onwards. These data were collated in the quarterly statistics as quoted in source, but data prior to August 1998 could not be collected as there was no methodology to collate the information at this time.
3. The numbers are based on either 1 per cent. or 5 per cent. sample data and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
4. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred.
5. Income Support Figures prior to 1997 include unemployed cases.
6. Jobseeker's Allowance replaced Unemployment Benefit and Income Support for the unemployed from October 1996.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1990-May 1994 (1 per cent. samples)

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1995-May 2000 (5 per cent. samples)

(ii) Disability Living Allowance recipients

Year	Leeds local authority	Leeds, Central constituency
May 1993	15,800	—
May 1994	17,300	—
May 1995	19,900	—
May 1996	21,500	—
May 1997	23,300	—
May 1998	24,705	4,543
May 1999	24,997	4,567
May 2000	26,054	4,702

Notes:

1. Constituency information represents constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
2. Parliamentary constituency data are only available from 1998 onwards.
3. Incomplete regional data also means that local authority or constituency estimates are not available for DLA prior to 1993. Reliable postcodes were held on the DLA computer system but the postcodes held on the Mobility Allowance and Attendance Allowance computer systems were unreliable and missing for many cases. The quarterly sample is drawn from all three computer systems and therefore the postcode data was incomplete.
4. Figures up to 1997 are rounded to the nearest hundred, based on either 1 per cent. or 5 per cent. sample data and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
5. The years 1998 onwards which are based on 100 per cent. data and are not rounded.

Source:

Information Centre sample data (DLA)

(iii) Incapacity Benefit recipients

Year	Leeds local authority	Leeds, Central constituency
May 1995	21,100	—
May 1996	20,900	—
May 1997	19,800	—
May 1998	18,700	3,300
May 1999	17,600	2,900
May 2000	16,600	2,800

Notes:
1. Constituency information represents constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
2. Parliamentary constituency data are only available from 1998 onwards.
3. Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness and Invalidity Benefits on 13 April 1995. Prior to this local authority information is not available, as postcodes were not present on the data sets.
4. The numbers are based on 5 per cent. sample data and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred.
6. Incapacity Benefit figures exclude a small number of cases held clerically.
7. For Incapacity Benefit a rating factor has been used on figures for the Leeds Local Authority from May 1996 to May 1999, to account for missing postcodes.
Source:
Incapacity Benefit: Figures are taken from 5 per cent. samples of the benefit computer system

(iv) Unemployment Benefit/Jobseeker's Allowance claimants by parliamentary constituency/local authority

Year	Leeds local authority	Leeds, Central constituency
November 1996	23,500	—
May 1997	20,600	—
May 1998	16,800	—
August 1998	—	4,900
May 1999	16,300	4,400
May 2000	14,900	4,300

Notes:
1. Constituency information represents constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
2. Parliamentary constituency data are only available from 1998 onwards.
3. Jobseeker's Allowance numbers include claimants receiving either Income-based and/or contribution-based JSA and claimants receiving no benefit, but sign for National Insurance credits only.
4. Jobseeker's Allowance replaced Unemployment Benefit and Income Support for the unemployed from October 1996. The Benefits Agency does not hold figures for Unemployment Benefit by either parliamentary constituency or local authority.
5. Estimates for local authority areas or parliamentary constituency are not available for Unemployment Benefit.
6. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred.
7. The numbers are based on 5 per cent. sample data and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
Source:
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, November 1996 to May 2000 (5 per cent. samples)

(v) Housing Benefit recipients

Year	Leeds local authority
May 1992	71,970
May 1993	72,760
May 1994	72,910
May 1995	73,550
May 1996	72,500
May 1997	69,950
May 1998	67,590
May 1999	65,720
May 2000	62,840

Notes:
1. Parliamentary constituency data are unavailable for Housing Benefit.
2. Housing Benefit figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
3. Housing Benefit figures are based on 100 per cent. data.
4. Housing Benefit data refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
5. Housing Benefit figures exclude Extended Payment cases, which were only available from May 1997.
Source:
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit quarterly 100 per cent. case load counts taken on the second Thursday in May of each year quoted.

Duplicate Benefit Payments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 346–47W, what conclusions the Benefits Agency internal audit came to regarding the role of EDS in the duplication of income support payments on 17 and 18 January. [138338]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefit payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 17 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your Parliamentary Question asking what conclusions the Benefits Agency (BA) internal audit came to regarding the role of EDS in the duplication of income support payments on 17th and 18th January.

The report concluded that responsibility for the error lay with DSS Information Technology Services Group (ITSG), Benefits Agency (BA) and EDS. The report did not apportion levels of responsibility; it identified errors on the part of all parties. The report concluded:

'Following a technical problem, incorrect (re-start) action by ITSG led to the creation of the £10.5m Income Support file with an incomplete number of records. The EDS automated system to transfer files to BACS had limited in-built validation and reconciliation checks and this allowed the £10.5m file to be forwarded to BACS . . . Reconciliation checks undertaken within the BA identified a problem but the incident handling and escalation procedures were inadequate'.

As mentioned in my response on 30 October, Official Report columns 346–347, the report contained a series of thirteen recommendations. EDS is a key stakeholder, working with DSS in the programme of activity to implement these recommendations, which include improvements to validation and reconciliation checks to prevent a reoccurrence of the original incident. My previous response provided more detail.

I hope this additional information is helpful.

Climate Change

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what strategic measures he is taking to allow for environmental changes induced by climate change. [137183]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Environment on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 469–70W.

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 2 May 2000, *Official*

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Report, column 37W, on relocation of civil servants, which relocation companies hold contracts with his Department for the relocation of civil servants; when these contracts were last renewed; where the contracts were advertised; and what the length and value is of each contract. [137096]

Mr. Rooker: This Department has a contract with Cendant Relocation plc. The contract was advertised in *Official Journal* European Communities (OJEC0) on 13 August 1997. The contract was renewed in May 1998 for three years with a possible two-year extension and has an estimated annual value of £800,000.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what information he collects on the minimum incomes required by different categories of pensioner households to afford a minimum acceptable standard of living; and what proposals he has to improve its *(a)* flow and *(b)* accuracy. [137270]

Mr. Rooker: A number of research studies have been conducted in this area. The range of methods which can be used to explore questions of absolute and relative adequacy of benefits include budget standards methodology, deprivations studies, expenditure studies and consensual studies. All these research methods are considered when assessing benefit levels; however, no single method can be used to calculate an "adequate" income. What people need to live on varies greatly depending on their needs, age, proximity to friends and relatives—it is not possible to produce figures showing what is adequate for all pensioner families.

Pensioner Statistics

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women will reach the statutory retirement age in each of the next five years. [138521]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Population attaining state pension age in year shown, United Kingdom

Thousand

Year	*Men*	*Women*	*Total*
2001	269	294	563
2002	273	319	592
2003	276	341	616
2004	275	347	622
2005	266	348	614

Notes:

1. State Pension age is currently 65 for men and 60 for women.
2. Population projections for the United Kingdom and its constituent countries are carried out every two years by the Government Actuary's Department in consultation with the Registrars General. The latest projections, based on the population at mid-1998, were published in November 1999.
3. Population projections provide estimates of the number of people by age last birthday at the middle of each year. The figures in the table have been derived from these estimates.
4. Not everyone starts to receive State Retirement benefits on reaching the State Pension age.

Source:

Government Actuary's Department

Minimum Income Guarantee

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners who are entitled to the Minimum Income Guarantee there are in the constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East. [138857]

Mr. Rooker: There are around 2,800 recipients of the Minimum Income Guarantee in the parliamentary constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East.

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are, therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. The figure is rounded to the nearest hundred.
4. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 ONS Postcode Directory.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 2000

NIRS2

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Benefits Agency will have fully recovered from the effects of the delayed implementation of the NIRS2 computer; and if he will make a statement. [139571]

Mr. Rooker: The contract for NIRS2 was signed in 1995 and there have been problems with the system from the start, the full effects of which we are still trying to resolve.

We are sorry to report that the Benefits Agency (BA) will not complete its review of benefit claims affected by the delayed implementation of NIRS2 by the end of this year as had been expected. Although good progress has been made with outstanding cases in BA offices, full completion of the necessary benefits reviews is dependent on the clearance of work arrears in the Inland Revenue's National Insurance Contributions Office (NICO) that result in a change to the contribution record.

NICO is urgently looking at when it expects to have completed its own recovery from the late implementation of NIRS2. BA recovery cannot be achieved until after the NICO recovery has been achieved and this will not be by the end of this year.

As contribution records are brought up to date, BA offices will be prompted by NIRS2 to review an old or existing benefit claim if the change to the record has affected the previous benefit rate. Many of these prompted reviews however will not require the rate in payment to be revised because the contingency arrangements deployed by the Benefits Agency will have ensured the new NIRS2 rate is already in payment.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my regret and apologise to those pensioners and other benefit claimants who have been adversely affected by these delays. Although most benefit reviews have been completed and in the great majority of cases the rate in

payment found to be correct because of the contingency measures deployed by the Benefits Agency, my hon. Friend will wish to know that:

140,153 people have been underpaid a total of £58 million;

of that number and amount, 123,924 are pensioners with underpayments amounting to £41 million;

267,590 people have received compensation amounting to £3.6 million comprising £2.7 million under the special £10 scheme announced in February 1999 and £900,000 under the Departmental Special Payments Scheme;

6,564 people have been overpaid benefit amounting to £2 million;

there were at 15 September 111,433 cases waiting to be reviewed by BA offices, of which 96,776 were pensioners and widows.

There are still a small number of new benefit and pension claims for which NIRS2 cannot provide all or some of the amounts payable. For these cases, contingency arrangements such as manual calculations remain in place. The priority is to ensure that benefit or pension is paid on time. Where this is not possible, however, payment of compensation is available either within the normal rules of the Department's Special Payments Scheme or by way of the special £10 scheme we announced on 1 February 1999.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 526W, on pension expenditure, if he will provide corresponding estimates for each year from 1992–93 to 1995–96 inclusive. [139074]

Mr. Rooker: By 2002–03 GDP is forecast to reach a level 32 per cent. higher in real terms than it was in 1992–93.

Expenditure as a percentage of GDP

	Retirement pensions[1]	*Means-tested benefits for pensioners*[2]	*Other benefits paid to pensioners*[3]	*Total*
1992–93	4.35	1.19	0.02	5.56
1993–94	4.34	1.25	0.02	5.62
1994–95	4.18	1.22	0.02	5.42
1995–96	4.14	1.18	0.02	5.35

[1] Includes Retirement Pension basic and earnings-related components.
[2] Includes Income Support, Social Fund Payments, Housing Benefit paid to people aged 60 and over.
[3] Includes non-contributory Retirement Pension and Christmas Bonus.
Note:
Excludes special needs benefits such as Attendance Allowance.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on how many occasions he has used his powers to require local authorities to take specific measures to tackle housing benefit fraud; and if he will list in each case the date those powers were exercised and the local authority concerned. [139072]

Mr. Rooker: To date we have made one such Direction, to Northampton Borough Council, in August 2000.

DEFENCE

RAF Aircraft

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many RAF aircraft, and of which types, have been *(a)* retired from service and *(b)* put into reserve, in each of the past three years. [138426]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested in the table.

	Number withdrawn from service[1]			*Number placed in storage*[2]		
Aircraft Type	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Bulldog T1	0	0	21	0	0	0
Gazelle HT Mk3	12	11	0	0	0	0
Nimrod MR2	0	[3]1	[3]1	0	0	0
Tornado GR1	0	0	0	0	0	0
VC10	0	1	2	0	0	0
Wessex	0	2	0	0	0	0

[1] Aircraft withdrawn from service during the year prior to disposal or transfer to an upgrade programme. Excludes aircraft lost in crashes.
[2] Aircraft placed in storage during the year. Excludes aircraft withdrawn from service and awaiting disposal.
[3] The Nimrod MR2 fleet is being reduced prior to the introduction of the Nimrod MRA4. These airframes have been transferred to the Nimrod MRA4 programme.

Tucano Aircraft

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the Tucano aircraft to be returned to service; and if he will make a statement on the airworthiness of the Tucano fleet. [138428]

Mr. Spellar: Following the temporary cessation of Tucano flying on 4 September 2000 the first Tucano aircraft were returned to service on 29 September 2000. There is a rolling programme under way to bring the entire fleet back into service and the full training fleet of aircraft should be available by the end of February 2001.

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of repairs to the faults recently identified in the RAF's Tucano aircraft. [138427]

Mr. Spellar: The cost of repairs to the rudder controls on aircraft currently in the Tucano training fleet is estimated at around £250,000. Modified parts with a greatly extended service life will subsequently be fitted across the Tucano fleet. The total cost of the repair and subsequent modification programme to all RAF Tucano aircraft will be in the order of £1 million.

Harpoon Missiles

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the service life is of the Royal Navy's stocks of Harpoon missiles; and what upgrade and refurbishment work is planned. [138430]

Mr. Spellar: Ship launched stocks of Harpoon missiles are planned to provide offensive anti-ship capability to the Royal Navy until 2025. Submarine-launched stocks of Harpoon missiles are currently planned to go out of service in 2003.

Regular maintenance and minor modification is carried out as required; there are presently no plans for a major missile refurbishment programme. Some modification work is being undertaken on Type 22 and Type 23 frigates

to enhance the missile system capability within coastal waters. Other options for increasing the Royal Navy's offensive capability are being considered, which may lead to an upgrade of some of the existing missile stock.

RN Personnel

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to what extent Royal Navy personnel are capable of diving in conditions other than shallow and benign waters; and if he will make a statement. [138995]

Mr. Spellar: RN personnel divers can dive in sea conditions up to sea state five and to depths of up to 80 m. In extremis RN divers can operate in poorer sea states to prevent loss of life.

Condoms

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will give a substantive reply to the question from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead, to which he gave a holding answer on 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 554W. [139150]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend shortly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Arms Exports (Israel)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those arms and components for military or security equipment licensed for sale to Israel since 1997. [135470]

Dr. Howells: Details of export licensing decisions between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 have been set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; copies are in the Library of the House. The reports list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued and refused in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted. They also set out the value of defence exports to each country.

As regards the period 1 January to 31 October 2000, 153 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 12 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Israel. The information is as summarised broken down according to the entries in the Military List under which the goods on each licence are controlled (known as their rating). It could not be broken down in the manner requested as the equipment covered by most entries in the Military List could be used for military or security purposes.

Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings (and OIELs may also cover a range of countries). Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issued between 1 January and 31 October 2000 covering the export to consignees or end-users in Israel of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML1	1	2
ML2	3	1
ML3	9	0
ML4	9	2
ML5	24	1
ML6	6	2
ML9	8	2
ML10	38	4
ML11	21	2
ML13	1	0
ML14	1	1
ML15	9	0
ML16	14	0
ML18	4	0
ML21	4	0
ML22	0	3
PL5017	6	4
PL5006	0	1

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists when working in areas of conflict.

In addition, Israel is a permitted destination on certain Open General Export Licences covering the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences are placed in the Library of the House.

Post Office Closures

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the factors underlying the rate of post office closures since 1997. [136710]

Mr. Byers: Post office closures remain below past peak levels. In 1991–92, 478 offices closed and in 1984–85 395 closed. The number of rural office closures in the first half of the current financial year is running at a lower level than in the same period last year. I have asked the Post Office for an analysis of the factors underlying Post Office closures. This analysis is to include age of person moving out of the business, property sold, location and reason. In addition, we are implementing in full the recommendations of the Performance and Innovation Unit report to modernise the post office network and strengthen its future viability.

Consumer Protection

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the representations received in connection with consumer protection legislation. [138514]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* We have had 31 representations from members of the public, including nine coupons from the National Consumer Council's campaign in the Daily Express. We have had nine joint representations from the National Consumer Council and the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, as well as a further representation from the

National Consumer Council and representations from individual Citizens Advice Bureau. In addition we have had representations from the Consumer's Association with the Federation of Small Business, the Welsh Consumer Council and Direct Line Insurance plc.

Many of the representations were forwarded to us by Members of Parliament. In addition we have received representations from my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), and for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane), and two from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell).

SmithKline Beecham/Glaxo

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the reasons for the delay in the merger of SmithKline Beecham and Glaxo. [138553]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* The European Commission approved the merger of Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham on 8 May. The US Federal Trade Commission are considering the competition implications of the market in smoking cessation products relating to Glaxo Wellcome's prescription drug Zyban and SmithKline Beecham's over-the-counter products Nicorette and Nicoderm. This is a matter for the US authorities.

Fuel Prices

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer the retail pricing of petrol products to the Competition Commission. [139100]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, it is for the Director General of Fair Trading to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour and if appropriate make a reference to the Competition Commission under the Fair Trading Act 1973 or take action under the Competition Act 1998.

Steel Industry

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what recent discussions he has had with the senior management of Corus regarding the future of the steel industry in Teesside and research and development in Corus; [138854]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with the senior management of Corus on the future of the steel industry. [138856]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has had discussions with senior executives from Corus on several occasions in recent months to discuss a range of matters affecting UK operations. From time to time we also visit Corus plants for discussions with local management and my officials maintain a regular dialogue with the company.

MOX Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent communications he has had from the European Commission in respect of the adequacy of data provided to the Commission in regard to the applicability of Euratom Treaty Article 37 to the MOX demonstration facility at Sellafield. [137871]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

Acting on a complaint, the European Commission has asked what general data have been provided under Article 37 of the Euratom Treaty, covering the operation of the MOX Demonstration Facility, and requested other information relevant to the issue of whether such data should have been submitted. The Government's response confirmed their view that, on the basis of current guidance and of discussions with the Commission in 1996, no submission of data is necessary in respect of the MOX Demonstration Facility. Notwithstanding this view, the Government have offered to provide the Commission with comprehensive background information in order to assist it in replying to the complainant.

Deregulation Orders

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many deregulation orders have been passed in each of the last three years. [136407]

Mr. Stringer: I have been asked to reply.

The deregulation orders passed in each of the last three years are as follows:

1997—12

The Deregulation (Casinos) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/950)

The Deregulation (Employment in Bars) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/957)

The Deregulation (Gaming on Sunday in Scotland) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/941 (S. 83))

The Deregulation (Betting Licensing) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/947)

The Deregulation (Validity of Civil Preliminaries to Marriage) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/986)

The Deregulation (Occasional Permissions) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1133)

The Deregulation (Provision of School Action Plans) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1142)

The Deregulation (Football Pools) Order 1997 (SI no 1997/1073)

The Deregulation (Betting and Bingo Advertising etc.) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1074)

The Deregulation (Casinos and Bingo Clubs: Debit Cards) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1075)

The Deregulation (Non-Fossil Fuel) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1185)

The Deregulation (Public Health Acts Amendments Act 1907) Order 1997 (SI no. 1997/1187)

1998—5

The Deregulation (Licence Transfers) Orders 1998 (SI no. 1998/114)

The Deregulation (Deduction from pay of Union Subscriptions) Order 1998 (SI no. 1998/1529)

The Deregulation (Methylated Spirits Sale By Retail) (Scotland) Order 1998 (SI no. 1998/1602 (S.87))

The Deregulation (Exchangeable Driving Licences) Order 1998 (SI no. 1998/1917)

The Deregulation (Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles) Order 1998 (SI no. 1998/1946)

1999—4

The Deregulation (Weights and Measures) Order 1999 (SI no. 1999/503)

The Deregulation (Pipe-lines) Order 1999 (SI no. 1999/742)

The Deregulation (Casinos) Order 1999 (SI no. 1999/2136)

The Deregulation (Millennium Licensing) Order 1999 (SI no. 1999/2137).

HOME DEPARTMENT

European Refugee Fund

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements he has put in place to deal with applications for financing under the European Refugee Fund. [139444]

Mrs. Roche: The European Refugee Fund (ERF) is intended to support three categories of project: (i) conditions for reception; (ii) integration of persons whose stay in the member state is of a lasting and/or stable nature; and (iii) voluntary return and reintegration. The ERF is administered in European Union member states by Responsible Authorities. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) is the Responsible Authority for the United Kingdom.

IND is issuing a public call today for proposals for financing under the ERF in 2000 and 2001. The public call notice summarises the criteria for financing, how to obtain detailed guidelines and an application form, and arrangements for submitting applications. Applications must be submitted by 29 December. The public call notice can be found on the IND website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind) and a copy has been placed in the Library.

DNA Testing

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the reliability of DNA testing *(a)* in convicting the guilty and *(b)* in exonerating the innocent. [137936]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The reliability of DNA evidence is assured through the internal quality assurance measures adopted by the Forensic Science Service (FSS) and through external accreditation by the British Standards Institute (BSI) and United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) to the BS EN ISO 9000 and M10 National Standards. This independent accreditation of the DNA process involves regular audit to ensure the standards are maintained.

The more advanced SGMplus technique was introduced by the FSS in September 1999. A statistical assessment, to be published in the International Journal of Legal Medicine, showed that when using this process the probability of a chance match between a full DNA profile obtained from a suspect's sample and another one from a crime scene stain left by another person was less than one in a billion.

Prisons

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the ratio of staff to inmates is in *(a)* each prison holding 18 to 21-year-olds and *(b)* each institution holding juveniles. [137724]

Mr. Boateng: This information is given in the table. Information about Doncaster prison was not readily available and I shall write to the hon. Member about this.

Establishment	*18–21*	*Under 18*
Ashfield	1:2.27	1:2
Askham Grange	1:4	—
Aylesbury	1:6	—
Brinsford	1:5	1:3
Brockhill	1:1.5	—
Bullwood Hall	1:2.2	—
Castington	1:3.24	1:1.37
Chelmsford	1:13	—
Deerbolt	1:3.14	—
Dorchester	1:1.5	—
Dover	1:2.15	—
Drake Hall	1:2.7	—
Eastwood Park	1:2.4	—
Exeter	1:11	—
Feltham	1:1.27	1:0.94
Forest Bank	1:6	—
Glen Parva	1:1.4	—
Gloucester	1:15	—
Guys Marsh	1:2	—
Hatfield	1:3	—
Hindley	1:2	—
Hollesley Bay	1:7.6	1:8
Holloway	1:1.5	—
Hull	1:6	—
Huntercombe	—	1:1.4
Lancaster Farms	1:2.3	1:6
Lewes	1:2.6	—
Low Newton	1:1.9	—
Moorland	1:1.7	—
New Hall	1:1.24	—
Northallerton	1:2	—
Norwich	1:4.7	—
Onley	1:3.1	1:2.6
Portland	1:3.7	1:2
Prescoed	1:1.4	—
Reading	1:1.1	—
Rochester	1:4.2	—
Stoke Heath	1:5.8	1:3.5
Styal	1:2.5	—
Swansea	1:8.75	—
Swinfen Hall	1:1.4	—
Thorn Cross	1:2	1:2
Werrington	—	1:0.7
Wetherby	—	1:6.8
Woodhill	1:2	—

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 611W, if he will *(a)* list the categories of offence for which the 1,756 people were sentenced and *(b)* the action taken following the breaches of the conditions of their release. [137993]

Mr. Boateng: An analysis of the index offences of the 1,756 prisoners who were placed on the home detention curfew scheme and who breached the conditions of their licence is contained in the table.

Where a breach is notified to the Prison Service, consideration is given to the most appropriate course of action, in the light of the available legal powers and the circumstances of the individual case. Where an offender breaches his licence conditions, the presumption is that the Prison Service will always revoke the licence unless there are legal considerations which prevent this or make it impracticable, or other exceptional circumstances. Of the 1,756 cases referred to, 1,294 had their licences revoked by the Secretary of State pursuant to

section 38A(1) or section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. In a further 46 cases, the breach was reported to the police or probation service to consider initiating breach action through the courts under section 38(1) of the Act. In addition, those prisoners who were convicted of committing a further offence during the currency of their licence, and therefore were in breach of their licence conditions, would have been liable, under section 40 of the Act, to an additional sentence of imprisonment.

In 416 cases legal considerations prevented revocation action. The majority of these were cases where the breach of licence was notified to the Prison Service only after the licence had expired; as my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) of 22 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 360W, indicated, a significant proportion of cases involving further charges brought against curfewees have not been notified to the Prison Service by the police. Action is currently being taken to improve reporting arrangements.

Breakdown of the original offences of those curfewees who breached the conditions of their licence

28 January 1999 to 30 September 2000	*Number*
Total	1,756
Manslaughter	2
Other homicide and attempted homicide	6
Attempted murder	0
Making threats to kill	5
Conspire, aid, incite murder	0
Death by reckless driving	3
Wounding	180
Wounding (inflicting GBH)	115
Assault occasioning ABH	61
Assault with intent to cause GBH	4
Assaults	46
Assault with intent to resist arrest	4
Other assault	34
Obstruct/resist constable	0
Assault on police officer	8
Cruelty to children	4
Other violence against the person	14
Cause explosion, place explosive	0
Possess firearms with intent	8
Possess offensive weapon	6
Other violence against the person	0
Buggery	0
Indecent assault	1
Unlawful sexual intercourse	0
Abduction	0
Bigamy	0
Burglary	307
Robbery	95
Taking and driving away	27
Other theft	149
Handling stolen goods	50
Fraud	82
Forgery	9
Drugs offences	192
Production	4
Supply	63
Possession with intent	57
Possession	54
Unlawful import/export	14
Other drugs offences	0

Breakdown of the original offences of those curfewees who breached the conditions of their licence

28 January 1999 to 30 September 2000	*Number*
Arson	11
Criminal damage	11
In charge or driving under the influence of drink or drugs	55
Reckless driving	26
Other motoring offences	117
Drunkenness	11
Blackmail	3
Kidnapping	3
Affray	48
Violent disorder	9
perjury/libel/pervert the course of justice	18
Threat/disorderly behaviour	9
Breach of Court Order	67
Procuration	0
False imprisonment	4
Bail Act offences	2
Assisting illegal immigrant	1
Minor firearm offences	0
Vagrancy Act offences	0
Cruelty etc to animals	0
Escaping lawful custody	0
Making off without payment	0
Criminal attempts	2
Other indictable offences	44
Held under Immigration Act 1971	1
Other non criminal offences	0
Offence not recorded	148

Detention and Training Orders

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will issue guidelines on mobility programmes for young people serving sentences on a detention and training order. [138436]

Mr. Boateng: The detention and training order was implemented on 1 April 2000. It is the new main custodial sentence for juveniles aged 12–17.

The rules for mobility programmes (which can involve escorted absences or temporary release for training and rehabilitation) vary between types of institutions.

We are looking at the policy and arrangements, with a view to issuing guidance over the next few months.

European Public Prosecutor

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will provide a substantive reply to the question from the hon. Member for Ludlow tabled on 23 October (ref. 134594) relating to the European Public Prosecutor. [138859]

Mrs. Roche: The question to which the hon. Member refers raises a difficult issue which is being considered. I shall provide a substantive reply shortly.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued since April 1999 in the boroughs of *(a)* Middlesbrough, *(b)* Stockton, *(c)* Hartlepool and *(d)* Redcar and Cleveland; and if he will make a statement. [138855]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A breakdown of the number of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) issued by borough is not held centrally. However, Cleveland Police inform me that seven ASBOs have been issued so far in Cleveland—two in Middlesbrough, two in Hartlepool and three in Stockton on Tees.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the average cost is of issuing anti-social behaviour orders; [137599]

(2) how many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued since April 1999 in *(a)* England and Wales, *(b)* the Greater London area and *(c)* the Royal Borough of Kingston. [137598]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[Pursuant to the reply, 13 November 2000, c. 531W]:* At least 10—rather than 30 as previously stated—anti-social behaviour orders issued since the measure was implemented have been made in the Greater London area.

Cleveland Police

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of ethnic minority *(a)* officers and *(b)* civilian staff in Cleveland police force in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [138853]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures are as follows:

	Officers	*Civilians*
March		
1998	18	5
1999	9	5
2000	17	4

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set every police force in England and Wales minority ethnic employment targets which are intended to ensure that forces are representative of the communities which they serve by 2009. Cleveland police's target for minority ethnic officers is 29, and for civilians is 12.

CABINET OFFICE

E-government

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the last meeting of the Cabinet Office Central IT Unit on e-government took place; and when the next meeting will be. [138740]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Central IT Unit (CITU) has not existed as a separate Division within the Cabinet Office since it was subsumed into the Office of the e-Envoy in July this year. At the same time it was renamed the "e-government group".

The Central Information Technology Unit (CITU) was set up in November 1995. CITU's remit was to advise Ministers on the development of their strategy for the use of IT by Government.

Current activities include taking forward the Information Age Government agenda of the Modernising Government White Paper including the follow up work to "e-government: a strategic framework for public services in the Information Age". This work includes advising Departments on the development of their own e-business strategies and monitoring progress on the Prime Minister's target that by 2005 100 per cent. of dealings with Government should be available.

This work now sits within the Office of the e-Envoy, a group comprising approximately 75 people organised in three groups:

e-government

e-commerce

e-communication.

The website contains full information about all of their work: www.e-envoy.gov.uk

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the regulatory impact assessments published in the last six months. [139137]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are committed to ensuring that regulations are necessary, give effective protection, balance cost and risk, are fair and command public confidence. In accordance with this, we require Departments to produce and publish RIAs for all regulatory proposals likely to have an impact on business.

I have presented to Parliament today a Command Paper listing 107 RIAs published between 1 January and 30 June 2000. Copies of those listed have been placed in the House Libraries. This is the thirteenth such Command Paper.

TREASURY

E-commerce Consultation Forum

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times the Electronic Commerce Consultation Forum has met; on what dates; if he will publish their deliberations and recommendations; and if he will list the sub-groups of the forum. [135899]

Mr. Timms: The Electronic Commerce Consultation Forum has met three times since its establishment in June 1999. The dates and minutes of these meeting and details of the sub-groups can be found on the Inland Revenue website at www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/e-commerce/ecom4.htm.

Beer and Cider Excise Duty

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to Table B11 of his pre-Budget Report, what the assumptions are behind the increases in projected beer and cider excise duty revenues between the financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02 in respect of *(a)* the measure of inflation used, *(b)* the rate of inflation projected, *(c)* the month and year in which inflation is projected and *(d)* the increase in pence per pint of (i) beer and (ii) cider, will such an increase give rise to in financial year 2001–02. [138660]

Mr. Timms: The measure of inflation used is the all-items PRI in the 12 months to September 2001, as published in Table B3 of the pre-Budget Report. Estimates of the effect of duty changes on the price of

beer and cider are published by HM Treasury in the "Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs, November 2000", copies of which are in the Library.

Parliamentary Questions

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will provide a substantive reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle for answer on 6 November (ref. 135972). [138851]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Shortly.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to amend the Inland Revenue Departmental Expenditure Limit and running costs limit for 2000–01. [139445]

Dawn Primarolo: Subject to parliamentary approval of the Supplementary Estimate for Class XVI, Vote 6 the Inland Revenue Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01 will be decreased by £14,800,000 from £2,245,371,000 to £2,230,571,000. The Inland Revenue running cost limit will also be reduced by £3,500,000 from £2,377,079,000 to £2,373,579,000. This is needed to offset a reduction in anticipated receipts within the Valuation Office Agency.

The reduction arises from a £15 million transfer to the Cabinet Office for the Department's contribution to the Government IT gateway project offset by Valuation Office Agency award of £0.2 million from the Civil Service Modernisation Fund.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Policies (Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Manchester, Gorton constituency, of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [136169]

Ms Armstrong: The Gorton constituency has benefited from a range of Government initiatives since 2 May 1997 including:

Regeneration (including Housing Initiatives)

The capital receipts initiative in Manchester has allowed a greater degree of flexibility in investment in the council stock. The investment in the Gorton constituency in public sector housing is

	£ million
1997–98	6.3
1998–99	8.0
1999–100	6.9
2000–01[1]	8.9

[1] Projected

Northmoor Road Renewal Area

This was declared in 1998 and is an integrated regeneration programme including social, environmental, and physical elements and has received approximately £3 million in funding from Single Regeneration Budget funding, Housing Capital Programme, and significant additional investment from the Housing Corporation and the private sector.

Gorton Renewal Area

This was declared in 1992, and was one of the first new-style housing "Renewal Areas". It has had approximately £2.8 million investment from Housing Capital Programme since 1997.

A6 Corridor

Longsight and Levenshulme form part of this Single Regeneration Budget scheme which also includes Ardwick. It has been allocated £9 million over the 1997–2004 period (to date £4 million has been spent by the partnership) to improve social and economic regeneration in the area.

The North West Development Agency have also spent £850k on a mixed use (residential and industrial) development in south Levenshulme.

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund

Manchester will receive an estimated £41 million over the next three years as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund announced recently. The fund will help local authorities meet their Public Service Agreement targets in areas such as raising schools standards, and reducing unemployment—reducing burglary, narrowing the health gap between deprived areas and the rest of the country and improving the standard of social housing.

New East Manchester Ltd.

New East Manchester Ltd. one of three Urban Regeneration Companies in the country, has the responsibility to encourage development and improve demand across the whole of East Manchester.

Transport

The recent opening of the final section of the M60 Manchester Outer Ring Road (Denton to Middleton) will improve communications to the constituency.

Expansion of the Metrolink will provide new links between Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Ashton and Manchester Airport. Total cost is £500 million of which £250 million will be provided by Government. While the constituency will not be directly served by a new line, new stations on the extensions to Ashton and Manchester airport will be accessible to the constituency.

The South East Manchester Multi Modal study which covers the constituency in its study area will make recommendations for a long term strategy, and a plan of specific interventions, to address the transport problems in the study area.

Local Government Finance Settlement

The following table shows the Government Grant to Manchester as part of the Local Government Finance Settlement. A statistical analysis of what proportion was spent in the Gorton constituency is not available.

	£ million
1997–98	362.47
1998–99	375.62
1999–100	390.57
2000–101	401.97

European Funding

Objective 2 1997–99

The City Pride Action Plan area covers the Gorton constituency. The Plan has been allocated £36 million of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund grant to support a range of project activity from broad business support and innovation and technology to investment in the tourism and cultural sector.

In addition, the constituency overlaps 3 of the 6 Community Economic Development Action Plans that cover the city of Manchester. The 3 Action Plans—Princess Road Corridor, Stockport Road Corridor and East Link—have been allocated over £5.5 million and among the projects being supported in the Gorton constituency are:

Rusholme Environmental and Physical Improvements (£70,000 ERDF)

Longsight Millennium Recycling Action (£75,000 ERDF)

Levenshulme Block Improvement Scheme (£100,000 ERDF)

Monastery of St. Francis and Gorton Trust (£13,000 ERDF).

Local Transport Plans

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been applied for by each local authority in their local transport plans for *(a)* maintenance of principal highways, *(b)* maintenance and strengthening of bridges, *(c)* individual schemes costing over £5 million and *(d)* integrated transport measures costing less than £5 million for each year from 2001–02 to 2005–06. [138068]

Mr. Hill: I have placed a copy of the information requested in the Libraries of the House.

Volunteers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will mark next year's International Year of Volunteers by spending a day working as a volunteer. [137427]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 531W. I fully support the aims of the International Year of Volunteers and will consider any request to participate nearer the time.

Climate Change

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the UK's climate change programme [139109]

Mr. Prescott: I have today laid before Parliament, "Climate Change: The UK Programme (Command Number 4913)". Our programme sets out how we will deliver the UK's Kyoto target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2008–12 and move towards our domestic goal to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010. We estimate that the policies and measures set out in the programme could cut the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by 23 per cent. by 2010 and carbon dioxide emissions by 19 per cent. Further non-quantified measures could achieve the domestic goal.

I am also publishing the following documents alongside the programme, copies of which will be placed in the Libraries of the House:

Projections of non-CO_2 greenhouse gas emissions for the United Kingdom and constituent countries;

Energy Efficiency Commitment 2002–05—The Government's Provisional Conclusions;

Climate Change and UK Nature Conservation: A Review of the Impact of Climate Change on UK Species and Habitat Conservation Policy;

Summary of Responses to the Draft Climate Change Programme; and

An information and activity pack on global warming for 7 to 11-year-olds.

HEALTH

Armed Forces (Medical Services)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent reports he has received on the availability of medical services in the armed forces; and what advice he has received on increasing their availability; [136008]

(2) if he will make a statement on trends in the availability of medical services in the armed forces over the last three years. [136007]

Ms Stuart: Defence Medical Services (DMS) is responsible for providing medical services in the armed forces. The Department of Health is aware of the report issued by the Ministry of Defence in December 1998 entitled, "Defence Medical Services: A Strategy for the Future" which explained that there are serious workforce shortages in DMS.

At present workforce levels are stabilising and the MOD are exploring new ways of meeting the regular and reserve medical manpower requirements. This work is being undertaken in close consultation with the Department and the National Health Service. For example, the NHS will in future be including DMS' requirements in medical student numbers.

The future strategy for DMS identified a gap at the higher 'strategic' level and closer links have now been established between the MOD and Department with NHS representatives being appointed to the two DMS top management boards. To supplement this activity and to direct work a Joint Steering Group has been established by the MOD and Department with the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Office also represented.

Wheelchair Voucher Scheme

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future of the wheelchair voucher scheme. [136270]

Mr. Hutton: We have asked all wheelchair services to continue to operate a voucher scheme, which offers users a choice of wheelchair to meet their needs. In making the funding for the wheelchair initiatives recurrent from 1 April 2000, we have removed the distinction on what should be spent on National Health Service indoor/outdoor powered wheelchairs and or vouchers. We have asked health authorities and provider services to consult with service users and take a flexible approach to ensuring the money meets local wheelchair needs and priorities.

Prosorba Column

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 86W, on the Prosorba Column, what reports he has received on the effectiveness of the Prosorba Column as a treatment for arthritis. [137086]

Mr. Denham: The Department has not received any reports on the effectiveness of the Prosorba Column as a treatment of arthritis.

Electronic Database

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress of the Electronic Record Demonstrator Implementation Programme and progress towards achieving a national electronic health record database; what timescale he is working to; and if he plans to fund the chosen programme from *(a)* NHS funds, *(b)* a public-private partnership and *(c)* other sources. [137273]

Ms Stuart: The Electronic Record Development and Implementation Programme (ERDIP) was launched in November 1999. Following the selection exercise the names of the successful Electronic Health Record (EHR) and Electronic Patient Record (EPR) demonstrator sites were announced in April and June 2000 respectively. These have been placed in the Library.

The NHS Information Authority (NHSIA) is currently finalising deliverables, timescales and associated release of funding with each of the individual sites. Detailed Project Initiation Documents will be available on the NHSIA website at http://nww.nhsia.nhs.uk once the Project Briefs have been approved.

The work of the demonstrator sites is being supported by three projects managed centrally by the NHSIA:

Definition of level 3 EPR for acute hospitals for integrated care pathways and electronic prescribing. The total cost of this work will be around £39,000, which will be met from the NHSIA's central budget;

Definition of the components of the first generation EHR that will need to be in place by 2005 to support 24-hour emergency care access to patient records. This year the NHSIA will spend around £62,000 against this activity, with further work being commissioned in years 2001–03. The cost of all of this work will be met from the NHSIA's central budget;

The development of an evaluation programme to ensure the sites will deliver solutions that can be applied on a national basis (£1.7 million from the Modernisation Fund has been set aside for this programme).

The management costs of ERDIP are being funded from the NHSIA's central budget.

In total, (including the £1.7 million), up to £13.1 million from the Modernisation Fund will be used to support the cost of the two-year demonstrator programme. These funds will be used to deliver solutions earlier to the NHS and are in addition to the £132 million allocated for local investment in the implementation of the Strategy in 2000–01. Further sums will be made available to the Service as part of the spending review settlement for the period 2001–04. These will be announced in the autumn as part of the three-year allocations for health authorities.

Departmental Employees (New Deal)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff are employed by his Department under the New Deal for Young People. [137961]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 13 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 551–52W.

Assaults on Staff

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department about measures to protect NHS staff from assault. [137933]

Mr. Denham: Our campaign to tackle violence against NHS staff, the "NHS zero tolerance zone", has been developed by the Department working with colleagues in the Home Office, Lord Chancellor's Department and in the Crown Prosecution Service.

This cross-Government approach is also reflected in the new national sentencing guidelines which were issued to magistrates courts in September for a wide range of offences. The guidelines now include as aggravating factors, to be taken into account when sentencing, whether the offence occurred in hospital or medical premises and whether the victim was serving the public.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also met recently with the Home Secretary and other Ministers to discuss the role of the National Health Service in local crime and disorder reduction partnerships.

PACT data

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when PACT data were last published; and if he will make a statement. [138031]

Ms Stuart: PACT data are not published but are made available quarterly to health authorities, primary care groups and primary care trusts for their internal use. Data covering the period January to March 2000 were issued in September. The next report covering the quarter April to June is expected to be available by the middle of December.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has commissioned into the causes and treatment of myalgic encephalomyelitis. [138168]

Mr. Denham: The most recent project commissioned by the Department is a systematic review to determine the clinical effectiveness of treatments and interventions for chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis. The review was commissioned for a working group which is looking at the efficacy of available treatments and interventions for chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME). The results of this review will inform the final report produced by the CFS/ME Working Group. In addition the National Health Service Health Technology Assessment Programme has recently commissioned a study on the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy in chronic fatigue syndrome.

Prescription Pricing

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the performance of the Prescription Pricing Authority in giving accurate and up-to-date information to primary care groups. [138313]

Ms Stuart: There are currently delays of three months, resulting from the large number of prescriptions which fell within Category D of the Drug Tariff last year. The Prescription Pricing Authority has now begun to clear the backlog and will have completed this task by September next year. Meanwhile the authority is providing monthly forecasts for the availability of Prescription Pricing Authority information reports for the next two-month period to every health authority chief executive and professional adviser, and to every primary care group/trust.

Dental Treatment

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the need for NHS dental treatment in South East Cornwall; and if he will make a statement. [138276]

Mr. Hutton: Demand for National Health Service dentistry remains high throughout Cornwall. We have invested £436,431 for 12 Investing in Dentistry grants, generating up to 37,500 extra registrations with dentists in Cornwall. In addition the personal dental services pilot scheme treats emergency and urgent patients at 20 sites across Cornwall.

On 28 September 1999 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that within two years there would be access to NHS dentistry for everyone who wants it via NHS Direct. The dental strategy, "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan", published on 19 September 2000, shows how that pledge can be met. The strategy focuses on the areas of access, quality and oral health and is supported by £100 million new funding. Responsibility for dentistry is devolved to health authorities, which will be performance managed on service provision in their area.

Training Costs

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of training a *(a)* doctor, *(b)* nurse, *(c)* occupational therapist, *(d)* physiotherapist and *(e)* speech and language therapist; and if he will make a statement. [138404]

Mr. Denham: In the period between entry to medical school and full registration, it is estimated that training a doctor costs between £200,000 and £250,000. Doctors generally continue training after full registration. As the duration and nature of post-registration training varies greatly and as service and training costs are closely related it is not possible to provide a meaningful estimate of the total cost of training.

The latest year for which figures are available show that in 1999–2000 the national average estimated cost of training a nurse was £11,000 per annum; an occupational therapist £7,000 per annum; a physiotherapist £7,200 per annum and a speech and language therapist £7,000 per annum. These costs are inclusive of tuition, bursary and salary support costs. Most courses are of three years duration.

Secure Units

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent evaluation he has made of methods of control and restraint in local authority secure units for young people; [138434]

(2) when he will decide on a national standard of accredited methods of control and restraint in local authority secure units for young people. [138435]

Mr. Hutton: The methods of control and restraint adopted in each local authority secure unit are monitored and evaluated as part of the continuing inspection programme of secure establishments for children carried out by the social services inspectorate.

Guidance on permissible forms of control in children's residential care was issued in 1993.

Residential and Nursing Homes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish regulations for residential and nursing homes under the Care Standards Act 2000; what the timescale is for the implementation of the regulations; and if he will make a statement. [138422]

Mr. Hutton: We will be consulting on regulations for care homes under the Care Standards Act 2000, soon. The regulations will be implemented in time for the start of the National Care Standards Commission in April 2002.

NHS Trusts (Market Testing)

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has given to NHS trusts on market testing of *(a)* laundry, *(b)* cleaning and *(c)* catering services. [138448]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 November 2000]:* The abolition of compulsory market testing of laundry, cleaning and catering services in the National Health Service was announced in September. Under new guidance to be published in due course NHS trusts will be required to demonstrate value for money in terms of quality, cost and patient satisfaction across all their support services.

Euro

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost to the NHS to date has been of the national euro changeover plan. [138731]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* Public sector spending on changeover planning to date is set out in the Treasury's Fourth Report on Euro Preparations, published on 6 November 2000. Copies of the Report are available in the Library.

Cancer Research

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the Government response to the Science and Technology Committee 6 report of Session 1999–2000, HC723, on Cancer Research; and if he will make a statement. [139648]

Yvette Cooper: We have published the Government Response today, as Cm 4928, and copies are available in the Library. We welcome the thorough inquiry into all the research and related issues that the Committee has conducted. We accept many of the recommendations in the report.

When the Committee published its report, we decided that an essential first step in improving cancer research and, through this, cancer care in this country, was to create a NHS Cancer Research Network. By 2003, we will be investing an additional £20 million each year on this new initiative.

The NHS Cancer Research Network will have a direct impact on the quality of cancer care by integrating research and cancer care; improving the quality, speed and co-ordination of cancer research; and increasing the number of NHS organisations, health care professionals, and patients participating in cancer research studies. The initial target for the NCRN will be to double the number of cancer patients entering trials within three years. The first step in establishing the NHS Cancer Research Network is to commission a Co-ordinating Centre and an appointment has now been made, following an open competition.

The Co-ordinating Centre will be a joint enterprise. Two groups will work together to achieve the overall aims of the NHS Cancer Research Network. A consortium involving the universities of Leeds and York and the MRC Clinical Trials Unit, led by Professor Peter Selby will concentrate on operating a network for controlled trials, especially of new approaches that have shown promise in diagnosing, treating and caring for patients with cancer. Professor David Kerr will lead the NHS's contribution to early studies translating advances in basic science into promising new treatments for cancer through a network of centres.

In relation to further action, we agree with the Committee that a new 'bricks and mortar' institute for cancer research is not the best way forward in this country. We need a different type of mechanism to plan and co-ordinate the drive on cancer research in general. We have asked the Department's Director of Research & Development (Professor Sir John Pattison) and the National Cancer Director (Professor Mike Richards) to consult all those involved in the funding and delivery of cancer research, and then to come forward with definitive proposals for a National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI).

Through these and other measures outlined in our response, the Government will be taking a major step forward in the benefits cancer research can bring to patients. We thank the Committee for their work and their contribution to the debate on improving cancer research and care in this country.

Correspondence

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 19 June from the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire regarding the Director of Social Services of Hampshire County Council, Mr. Butler. [138904]

Ms Stuart: I shall let the right hon. Member have a reply as soon as possible.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Competitive Sports

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment he has made of the role of competitive sports in secondary education. [134936]

Jacqui Smith: Competitive sports in schools play an important role in providing extra-curricular physical activity for schoolchildren. They are a compulsory part of the National Curriculum for Physical Education for pupils aged between 5 and 14 and are one of the options for pupils aged 14 to 16. HMCI's Annual Report looked at a sample of 115 primary schools and 53 secondary schools, and without exception, all secondary schools provided opportunities to participate in extra-curricular sports, and three quarters of primary schools provided similar opportunities for the older range of pupils. As part of the Government's Sports Strategy, the first phase of School Sports Co-ordinators has just been established. They will work with families of primary and secondary schools in areas of greatest need to provide children with even more opportunities to compete and participate in a wide range of school sports, and will also promote school team competitions.

Payroll Administration

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the costs of payroll administration in his Department and associated agencies and non-departmental bodies in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [135994]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost, as the elements of the payroll administration costs for the Department and its agencies and non-departmental bodies are not available in aggregated form.

Student Loans

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how the receipt of a London weighting

allowance in a salary is treated by the regulations governing the repayment threshold and liability under the student loan scheme. [136534]

Mr. Wicks: Borrowers with mortgage style loans may apply to defer repayment of their student loan for a year at a time if their income is not more than 85 per cent. of national average earnings. London weighting is treated as part of the borrower's income. Borrowers with income contingent loans are liable to repay 9 per cent. of gross income (taxable or liable to national insurance) over £10,000 a year. London weighting is treated as part of gross income.

Higher Education Students

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, in respect of each of the last five years, by *(a)* age category, *(b)* mode of study, *(c)* gender, *(d)* ethnic origin and *(e)* socio-economic group, the total number of students (i) applying to enter higher education and (ii) entering higher education. [137372]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available data, covering students applying to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), are shown in the following tables *(a)* to *(d)*. Final figures for autumn 2000 entry will be released by UCAS in January 2001. UCAS does not cover applicants or accepted applicants to part-time courses. The available data, collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, on entrants to part-time undergraduate courses is shown in table *(e)*. The figures show that, for example, the numbers of students from ethnic minority and working class backgrounds have remained unchanged or increased a little since the introduction of fees, comparing 1996 (the year before fees were announced) with 1999. Applications generally rose in 1997 after the changes in university finance from 1998 were announced in July 1997.

UK domiciled applicants and accepted applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses in the UK via UCAS Institutions in the UK

(a) By gender — *Thousand*

	Year of entry				
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Applicants					
Men	179.6	175.5	190.0	184.1	182.4
Women	190.1	189.4	208.3	205.5	206.3
Total	369.7	364.9	398.3	389.6	388.7
Accepted applicants					
Men	132.1	131.3	146.5	142.8	143.6
Women	133.4	137.0	156.9	155.4	159.4
Total	265.5	268.3	303.3	298.2	303.1

(b) By age group

	Year of entry				
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Applicants					
Under 21	272.1	274.2	300.9	303.8	306.8
21 and over	97.6	90.7	97.4	85.9	81.8
Total	369.7	364.9	398.3	389.6	388.7
Accepted applicants					
Under 21	204.5	209.1	237.5	239.6	245.6
21 and over	61.1	59.2	65.8	58.6	57.4
Total	265.5	268.3	303.3	298.2	303.1

(c) By ethnic group

	Year of entry				
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Applicants					
Asian Bangladeshi	2.2	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.9
Asian Chinese	3.0	3.1	3.5	3.6	3.6
Asian Indian	13.3	14.1	15.3	15.9	16.6
Asian Pakistani	7.8	8.5	9.1	9.5	9.9
Asian Other	4.4	4.2	4.6	4.6	4.6
Black African	7.2	7.1	7.7	7.1	7.1
Black Caribbean	4.7	4.5	4.8	3.5	4.5
Black Other	2.0	1.9	2.3	2.4	2.5
White	303.4	293.5	315.1	300.9	299.6
Other	5.4	5.7	6.4	6.3	6.7
Not known	16.5	20.1	27.0	32.4	30.6
Total	369.7	364.9	398.3	389.6	388.7
Accepted applicants					
Asian Bangladeshi	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.8	2.0
Asian Chinese	2.2	2.4	2.7	2.7	2.9
Asian Indian	9.5	10.3	11.7	12.1	13.0
Asian Pakistani	5.1	5.7	6.4	6.6	7.1
Asian Other	3.0	2.9	3.3	3.3	3.4
Black African	4.1	4.3	4.8	4.5	4.7
Black Caribbean	2.7	2.8	3.2	2.9	3.0
Black Other	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.6	1.7
White	221.4	219.4	243.6	234.6	237.2
Other	3.7	3.9	4.6	4.6	5.0
Unknown	11.2	13.9	19.8	23.4	23.0
Total	265.5	268.3	303.3	298.2	303.1

(d) By social class

	Year of entry				
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Applicants					
Professional	50.2	49.9	48.4	47.0	46.5
Intermediate	140.1	139.0	150.3	147.3	144.8
Skilled non-manual	42.4	43.0	49.6	47.1	47.1
Skilled manual	61.9	58.2	60.7	58.9	58.5
Partly skilled	28.8	28.3	32.2	31.0	30.8
Unskilled	7.6	7.0	7.9	7.3	7.5
Unknown	38.6	39.4	49.2	51.0	53.5
Total	369.7	364.9	398.3	389.6	388.7
Accepted applicants					
Professional	38.7	39.3	39.6	38.5	38.9
Intermediate	103.4	105.0	117.4	115.6	115.7
Skilled non-manual	30.3	31.3	37.3	35.6	36.3
Skilled manual	42.5	40.9	44.8	44.2	44.5
Partly skilled	19.8	19.9	23.5	22.7	23.1
Unskilled	5.0	4.9	5.6	5.3	5.5
Unknown	25.8	27.1	35.0	36.6	39.1
Total	265.5	268.3	303.3	298.2	303.1

(e) UK domiciled entrants to part-time undergraduate courses in the UK[1]

Thousand

	Entrants
1995–96	259.2
1996–97	271.9
1997–98	265.6
1998–99	266.3
1999–2000	272.8

[1] Including undergraduate courses in HE institutions, FE institutions and the Open University

Schools Inspectorate

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what restrictions exist on the future disclosure of material held in his Department's files on former members of the Schools Inspectorate. [137914]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department's policy is that personal information will be disclosed only where there is a legal duty to do so or where the individual concerned has given their consent.

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of appointees *(a)* to the National Learning and Skills Council and *(b)* to local learning and skills councils have declared recent political activity, broken down by involvement in their respective parties. [137853]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 November 2000]:* Appointments to the Learning and Skills Council are still being made. Once this process is complete I shall write to the hon. Member with this information and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Engineering Degrees

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students were studying for engineering degrees in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; and what proportion this represents of those studying for degrees in each year. [138306]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Number and percentage of full-time students enrolled on engineering/technology first degrees in publicly funded higher education institutions in the United Kingdom: 1996–97 to 1999–2000

Thousand

	All students on first degrees	*Of which those on engineering/technology courses*	
Academic year	*Number*[1]	*Number*[1]	*Percentage*
1999–2000	908.3	74.7	8.2
1998–99	906.3	77.3	8.5
1997–98	899.7	80.0	8.9
1996–97	875.1	81.3	9.3

[1] Headcount of full-time students on first degree courses

Source:

Higher Education Statistics Agency—individual student record

Schools (Suffolk)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* pupils and *(b)* teachers there were in Suffolk in (i) primary, (ii) middle and (iii) upper schools for (A) the latest period for which figures are available, (B) 12 months previously, (C) 24 months previously, (D) 36 months previously and (E) 48 months previously. [138541]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Full-time equivalent (FTE) number of pupils and teachers[1] *in Suffolk LEA*

January	*FTE pupils*[2]	*FTE teachers*[3]
Maintained Primary[4]		
2000	45,813	2,074.1
1999	45,899	2,082.9
1998	45,678	2,062.0
1997	45,561	2,046.0
1996	45,084	2,022.1
Middle Deemed Primary		
2000	—	—
1999	—	—
1998	—	—
1997	—	—
1996	—	—
Middled Deemed Secondary		
2000	17,833	942.1
1999	17,562	927.6
1998	17,203	913.5
1997	16,637	886.2
1996	16,283	884.6
Maintained Secondary[4]		
2000	34,117	2,129.0
1999	33,378	2,132.6
1998	32,905	2,119.0
1997	32,970	2,109.3
1996	32,757	2,083.4

[1] Qualified teachers only

[2] This is all pupils on the school registers (counting each part-time pupil as 0.5)

[3] FTE teachers includes full-time teachers and full-time equivalent of part-time teachers. For the purpose of reckoning the full-time equivalent of part-time teachers (FTE), each teachers part-time service is evaluated as a proportion of a full school week (32.5 hours).

[4] Excluding middle deemed primary

Age Discrimination

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has held with the insurance industry about measures to prevent age discrimination in employment. [137623]

Ms Hodge: The Government have to date had no direct discussion with the insurance industry about measures to prevent age discrimination. However, our Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment has been widely disseminated and promoted across all sectors including the financial services sector.

We are supporting the Code with a series of research projects, which are looking in more depth at specific areas of age discrimination. A recently commissioned project will look at ageist barriers to employment, including insurance measures. This research will provide firm

information on which to base our future discussions with the insurance sector. Findings from this research will be published during 2001.

Ballots (Grammar Schools)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what has been the cost to public funds of grammar school petition and ballot procedures which have been implemented to date; [138443]

(2) what costs have been incurred by his Department in respect of retaining Electoral Reform Society services during grammar school *(a)* petitions and *(b)* ballots. [138444]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 15 November 2000]:* On the matter of Departmental staffing costs in relation to the grammar school ballots policy, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 1 November 2000, *Official Report,* column 504W.

The Department has paid Electoral Reform Services £292,391.09 for services undertaken in relation to grammar school petitions and ballots from March 1999 to date. This breaks down as follows:

Financial year	*Total payments to ERS (£)*
1998–99	14,599.94
1999–2000	217,705.86
April-October 2000	[1]60,085.29

[1] Of this, £1,780.07 was for printing, postage and administration costs relating to the Ripon ballot.

Footballers (Work Permits)

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many work permits have been granted to date to professional footballers *(a)* from non-EEA countries for the 1999–2000 season, *(b)* that had played for their country in at least 75 per cent. of the competitive, 'A' team matches for which they were available for selection during the two years preceding the date of the work permit application and *(c)* from countries whose FIFA ranking was at or above 70th place in the official rankings list when averaged over the two years preceding the date of the work permit application. [138626]

Ms Hodge: For the 1999–2000 football season:

(a) the Department granted 80 work permits to professional footballers from non-EEA countries for the 1999–2000 season;

(b) 71 met the criteria of having played in at least 75 per cent. of their country's competitive 'A' team matches for the two years preceding the date of work permit application;

(c) 73 met the criteria of the player's country having a FIFA ranking of at or above 70th place in the official rankings list when averaged over the two years preceding the date of the application.

Overall of the 80 permits issued, 65 met both of the published criteria—*(b)* and *(c)* in the question asked. The additional 15 permits were issued on the positive recommendations made to the Department by the independent football review panels.

Higher Education

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from organisations in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Scotland concerning proposals by the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education on the nomenclature of higher education qualifications; and if he will make a statement. [138352]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 November 2000]:* The need for greater clarity and consistency in the use of higher education qualification titles is recognised by both higher education institutions and employers. The Quality Assurance Agency has published its proposals for a qualifications framework for higher education together with a position paper on the nomenclature of qualifications. A further revised consultation paper was issued on 14 November. My officials have received a small number of comments on the framework and these have been addressed in the revised consultation paper. A separate framework for Scotland is being introduced and questions on this should be addressed to the Scottish Parliament.

Computers Within Reach Scheme

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost has been of phase 1 of the Computers within Reach scheme. [138860]

Mr. Wills: Phase 1 of the Computers within Reach scheme has just been announced. The first phase of the scheme is intended to provide 35,000 recycled computers and printers, and will attract funding of £5,250,000 to the contractors operating the pilots.

In addition, the individuals who receive each PC (except a small minority in a linked scheme, Wired Up Communities) will be asked for a £60 contribution towards the cost. For those individuals who have special needs that require further adaption of the computer or software we have a further budget available. The Department has also bulk purchased software from a software company to run on the recycled computers. There will be further costs in relation to the operation and evaluation of the scheme. These costs have not been fully finalised at present.

National Grid for Learning

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the future development of the National Grid for Learning. [139409]

Mr. Wills: I can today announce that we have commissioned a study to look at the future development and financing of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). It will include an analysis of the full range of options for future progress and will produce recommendations about the best way forward.

New technology in schools is changing all the time. When we started the national drive to get all our schools connected to the internet three years ago, very little had been done to prepare our schools, teachers or pupils for new technology.

In the last three years we have achieved a tremendous amount. Today, 98 per cent. of secondary schools and 86 per cent. of primary schools are online. That is a total of 20,200 schools connected to the internet compared with around 6,500 in 1998. The Prime Minister recently announced a further £1 billion investment to step up the drive to use new technology to raise standards in schools.

However, we must renew and re-invigorate the National Grid so that it moves with the times. It is critical that it provides accessible, high-quality, interactive content and that schools have the fast internet access that will enable them to make the best use of it. The study we have commissioned will look at the best options for securing these outcomes and the best ways of financing them, including making the best use of the private sector.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

REFERENCES

- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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